

“Just treat young people with respect.”

The School Exclusion Campaign’s response to the Department for Education’s call for evidence on behaviour management strategies, in-school units and managed moves

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Who we are

We are a group of young people who are using our lived experience of school exclusions to create change. We tell our stories to raise awareness, support each other, and hold people in power to account. We’ve produced this response with support from Just for Kids Law after a workshop to discuss the consultation and share our views.

Why we campaign on school exclusions

The right to education is crucial for children and young people’s development, happiness, and future outcomes. But for some children this right is not being realised. The use of exclusions is still increasing. And some groups of young people are more affected than others. We need to change that.

How schools should respond to ‘disruptive behaviour’

Schools need to do more to listen to young people and understand the reasons behind their behaviour. One campaign group member said:

There’s so much missing. Especially when it comes to understanding the effects that different things can have on people – especially

when they may not be neurotypical. Having gone through a lot of things in my life, the way I responded wouldn’t have made sense to people who don’t have any kind of conditions. For me it would have helped so much more if they understood my condition and how it affects me. Something as small as the lights could really affect me and nobody understood that. It’d really affect me I wouldn’t be able to do my work at all. Schools need to get people who understand. They’re missing so much on the way that, by the time they get the behaviour they want, they’re doing so much damage in the process.

Another said:

There could be a student who is very disruptive and making jokes when the teacher’s trying to teach. But there could be something going on - they’re not getting enough attention at home, and so they like it when people laugh at their jokes. No-one behaves the way they behave for no reason. When my brother was diagnosed with autism, anxiety, ADHD, depression, and anxiety – I understood why his behaviour was the way it was. I don’t think there’s such thing as a bad child or a bad person, people go through bad or difficult situations. There’ll be times when I’m on my period and I can’t be bothered to

be in class and listen to the teacher – something like that could be taken into consideration. Just a couple of minutes to take your medication, breathe and then come back into class.

A lot of the time teachers are too busy or overworked to ask young people how they're doing or get to know why they're behaving in a certain way. One campaign group member said:

I think it's really important to understand the situation with teachers. Because we know they're overworked, and I think that's important and should be reflected. Teachers just don't enjoy what they do. They might think their work is useful and good, but they don't enjoy it. And they don't have the free time to listen and to understand. Because they don't enjoy it, they don't try – they're sick of having more work shoved on them and more children who need help. But it's a systemic issue and it's an issue about funding. I think people don't look at that, but it directly affects children. Both sides need to be fixed.

Another said:

Teachers should take into consideration the different reasons for what they call bad behaviour. There should be more teacher training. I don't think having a teaching degree is enough, you need to know how to deal with young people. Just treat young people with respect.

We think that schools need to offer more support for young people to talk about the things going on in their lives, as well as mentoring opportunities:

The badly behaved kid is a special one who just needs some extra attention. Something that I would do is have every child who is deemed to be behaving badly to have a mentor or a pastoral teacher. I was on report, but I'd report to a deputy head. It would have been better to have a report system where I reported back to a mentor or pastoral lead. They'd be trained and they could build a personal relationship. A mentor could help build up a child. And maybe just sit down with a child and ask them, 'what do they enjoy doing'? They could make them participate in extracurricular activities. Because not every kid enjoys Maths and English. They might like something else, and they can still come out of school and make a success for themselves. It's all about intervention – so that exclusion is a last resort. When it comes to behaviour reports, teachers should have to say what they've done and what interventions they've tried.

How schools should deal with mobile phones

Most of us think there are good reasons why teachers might want to ban phones from the classroom. One member said:

A phone is not really necessary when you're going to school unless you have safeguarding issues, or you need to care for someone outside of school. Phones are just a distraction.

Another said:

There's much more opportunity for people to be bullied, especially when it comes to social media. You have access to the internet and once something goes on there, you can't erase it. Even though you might say it's unfair to remove the phones of everyone, it's so detrimental for people who are bullied in that way. You can't stop it from happening, even if you run anti-bullying sessions, they don't really stop anything. But if you take away the ability to do it, then it means that people won't be bullied in that way.

But some of us thought that schools need to accept that it's not realistic or right to ban phones:

There have been situations where I've been in school where a friend of mine has recorded a teacher being racist to her, and her phone was confiscated, and she was suspended. I don't think taking phones away makes sense. There'll be times when computers aren't running, and we'll be asked to use our phones. If there's an emergency, I can call my mum and ask her to come pick me up, but without my phone I'll have to go to the office, and they get to decide if it's an emergency. Phones aren't necessarily a distraction, it's only a distraction if you make it.

All of us think it's never right for schools to keep a young person's phone overnight. The phone is the young person's property and taking it away might make them unsafe.

In some schools they confiscate your phone for more than a day when you're caught with it. It is your personal property. Schools

shouldn't be able to hold it for longer than a day or make your parents collect it. Especially if you have to contact your parents or carers to come pick you up. A phone is needed as part of everyday life.

Even if a teacher has a good reason to take away someone's phone, they should understand that sometimes people have reasons why they need to use them. Using your phone shouldn't lead to you being punished or excluded.

It's important not to remove phones in every situation. I've had times where I've gone on my phone because there was nothing else for me to do. At the time I was being bullied I had nothing to do or no-one to talk to, so I'd go on my phone and listen to music so I could have peace of mind, but I'd always get in trouble for that. Sometimes there's a different reason for why someone's doing something.

Why schools need to ban isolation rooms

No child or young person should ever be taken to isolation as a punishment. One campaign group member said:

If children have to be removed from a classroom it shouldn't be to go to an isolation room which looks exactly like a prison. You're setting a young person up for jail time. There are cubicles on either side, and you can't see anyone and you're just facing the wall all day. That is not healthy. We've all experienced lockdown for who knows

how long and how many people have come away with mental health issues? What do you think that's doing to young people in schools?

Another said:

At the same time [when you're there] you'd have to learn something which wasn't even what everyone else was learning in the classroom, even when exams were coming up. I think it affected me more than I thought. Someone could go in for the whole day and have break inside the room. At lunch you'd have to bring your food back to the room. It was difficult for a lot of people in there. The way they were treated and spoken to wasn't right. We'd have to write apology letters to teachers and write 'I won't do this again' one hundred times on paper. It was like a prison.

We think that if a young person has to be removed from the classroom it should be to go to a place where they can talk to someone about how they are doing, and where they can continue to learn:

I think there should be more safeguarding opportunities, and people to talk to you and ask you what's on your mind. In lessons teachers won't ask you how you're doing, they might have no idea what you're going through. They should be easy to talk to and express your feelings to. And when you're ready to go back you should be able to go back to class. What's the point of sitting in silence the whole day? Aren't you just going to turn up to school again the next day with the same emotions?

How schools need to handle managed moves

We think schools should do everything they can to help young people avoid being excluded so that they can stay in mainstream education:

Exclusions should be a last resort. Young people should get a say and be listened to because young people are rarely heard in these situations. Exclusion stays with you. If you go to another school or if it's in your CV, those questions will be asked. It's not a nice thing to experience. I have experienced PRUs, and I wouldn't wish that on any young person to go to those institutions.

We think for some young people managed moves might be the right option. But schools need to be better at explaining how they work and giving people the right help to transition. One campaign group member said:

If there's a way to avoid a permanent exclusion and get a child into mainstream education that'd be better. It's another environment which might be better for them. But my managed move failed. A school can easily say they don't want this child without any decision or meeting. Literally one day the guy just said, 'Oh I think you should maybe go back to your school'. And then I was back the next week. If the school does make a decision, there should be a meeting, or they should have to justify that. Managed moves need to help keep kids in another mainstream environment.

Another said:

Schools can exclude children, but children can exclude school too. Having a managed move doesn't make sense if the students are carrying their same problems to a different school. It just didn't make sense. I ended up being excluded from the new school too. I ended up getting passed around like I was a statistic. I don't think managed moves should happen. Some kids want to move but some want to stay in a school with their friends and the teachers that they like.

What we want to see changed

On behaviour policies

- The Government should make sure that schools have the funding to employ enough staff so that teachers have time to listen to and understand what children and young people are going through.
- Schools should make sure that there are dedicated mentors and pastoral leaders that young people can go to for help and support. They should be specific members of staff who are empathetic and able to understand young people's needs.

- Schools should make sure that all teachers are trained in understanding the needs of young people, including young people with special educational needs.

On mobile phones:

- Schools can ban phones from the classroom, but they should never take a young person's mobile phone overnight.
- Schools should use behaviour policies to say when they will take a pupil's phone and how that person can get it back.

On isolation rooms:

- Schools should never put young people into isolation.
- If a school removes a young person from a classroom, they should make sure there is somewhere they can go where they can talk about how they're feeling and get help. They should be able to carry on with their usual learning and return to the classroom as soon as they feel ready.

On managed moves:

- Schools should do everything they can to avoid young people being permanently excluded and sent to a Pupil Referral Unit.

- Schools should understand and address the reasons why a young person might need to move schools in the first place.
- Schools should always explain to young people how a managed move works and involve them in the decision about whether they can stay at the new school.
- Schools should do as much as they can to help a managed move be a fresh start for young people. They should only share the information that the new school definitely needs to know.

Contact details: If there's anything in this response you'd like to discuss further, please get in touch with Ayaz (ayazmanji@justforkidslaw.org) or Michaela (michaelarafferty@justforkidslaw.org) at Just for Kids Law