Youth Voice: SEND and school exclusions

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The Children's Society


'Everyone has
the right to learn.'

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Introduction

One of the most important drivers of systems change is understanding the needs of young people and the assets they have that can help. This is why young people are at the heart of the Disrupting Exploitation Programme – their voices and experiences shape our systems change work and priorities.

The Disrupting Exploitation programme (DEx) launched in 2018 as a strategic partnership between the National Lottery Community Fund and The Children's Society. It is a national programme that makes children impacted by exploitation safer, gives them a better understanding of exploitation, and improves their relationships with family and friends. It delivers this through a combination of one-to-one interventions with young people and their parents or carers, as well as our ambitious systems change work that focuses on working with contexts, policies, procedures, and societal norms and attitudes to improve responses to young people who are exploited. School exclusions, and how they relate to exploitation, are one of the DEx systems change priority areas.

Exclusions, special educational needs, and disability

Throughout the report the term 'school exclusions' refers to being removed from mainstream teaching experiences, such as temporary and permanent exclusions, managed moves, alternative provision (APs) and pupil referral units (PRUs). 'Sanctions' refer to a phone-call or letter to parents, removal from a class, detentions, and isolation.

Additional information regarding the school exclusion process and a definition of terms can be found in the appendices at the end of this document.

Young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) who have an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) are more likely to be excluded from school compared to those who do not have SEND. This figure is even higher for young people with social, emotional, and mental health needs (SEMH) or those with SEND but without an EHCP,[1] who are five times more likely to be excluded. Under the Equality Act 2010, schools have a duty to put reasonable adjustments in place to ensure no child is ever unlawfully excluded because of their additional needs. The SEND code of practice clearly states that young people and their families should be consulted, and local authorities should aim for 'effective participation' when reviewing provision.[2]

There is a strong link between young people being excluded from school and exploitation,[3] and many young people who contributed to our previous DEx report told us that exclusions made them more vulnerable to exploitation.[4]

Child exploitation is characterised by an imbalance of power between the perpetrator(s) and victim(s), as young people may not have the capacity to understand situations in the same way as an adult would. Those with a learning disability may be even easier to exert power over, to influence and control, and ultimately to exploit.[5]

Listening to young people

In 2021 the DEx Programme, working in partnership with The Children's Society Youth Engagement team, began consulting with young people with SEND on their experiences of school exclusions. Our aim was to better understand the experiences of young people with SEND as their voices are often marginalised and too many young people that are excluded from school do not feel listened to. The young people were invited to talk about their experiences of school exclusions in a focus group or a bespoke one to one setting and could choose what and how much they wanted to disclose.

Young people were told why we were seeking their views, the purpose of their contributions and that they would remain anonymous and unidentifiable. A description of the cohort of young people in the sample is below:

- This project engaged with two schools in Enfield, North London – West Lea, which educates children and young people aged 4 to 19 with special educational needs and Orchardside, an alternative provision school for students aged 11 to 16.

[1] GOV.UK. (2022). Permanent exclusions and suspensions in England, Academic Year 2020/21.
[2] Department for Education & Department of Health. (2015). Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years.
[3] Just for Kids Law. (2020). Excluded, exploited, forgotten: Childhood criminal exploitation and school exclusions.
[4] The Children's Society. (2021). Youth Voice on School Exclusions.
[5] The Children's Society. (2019). Counting lives.

- We spoke to 22 young people, identifying as male (18) and female (4). We are unaware of other gender identities within this group/cohort. Participants were aged between 12 and 16. Some were identified by professionals as at risk of exploitation.
- We did not collect data on ethnicity during this project. However, there
was a mixture of ethnic identities within the group.
- The young people we spoke to have a range of SEND including communication and interaction needs, cognition and learning needs, social, emotional, and mental health needs, and physical and/or sensory needs.
- Many of these young people did not receive a diagnosis or have access to an EHCP until attending these schools.

The young people shared their experiences of school exclusions and their lives, and what might help to improve this. However, given the limited number of participants and schools involved, it is important to note that views expressed may not be representative on a larger scale.

What young people told us

This report amplifies the collective voice of the young people who took part in the project. The quotes shared have been anonymised to protect the identity of those who took part.

The report is arranged according to three key themes which have emerged when analysing what young people told us:

- unfair contributors to exclusions
- communication
- behaviour management.

Young people talked about both positive and negative experiences of exclusions and shared solutions and ideas about how to improve the system. Their thoughts are the focus of the recommendations section at the end of this report.

The Children's Society shares these findings to raise awareness of this systemic inequality that exists in our education system. Our aim is for the insights from young people to be shared widely in order to influence and affect change towards a more inclusive education system.

Unfair contributors to school exclusions: young people's focus

When it comes to exclusions, behaviours are often labelled rather than the child's needs being assessed. Responsibility is often put on the child to control their behaviour rather than creating the right conditions for a child with additional or unidentified needs to thrive.

It can be the case that a student's presenting behaviour is misunderstood by school staff. In the absence of proper assessment, these behaviours attract a punitive approach rather than a supportive one, which can contribute to decisions to permanently exclude a child from school. The long-term influence of trauma on behaviour is not always considered. Rather, children are understood to make conscious choices about their behaviour. 'Persistent disruptive behaviour' remains the most common reason for permanent exclusions, despite the fact that the persistence of certain behaviour may indicate a need which remains unmet or a trauma which remains unresolved.

In sharing their experiences of exclusions, young people spoke about external factors that they felt contributed to their exclusion. They highlighted experiences of racism, the negative effects of having a 'reputation', and how mainstream schools held unrealistic expectations of their maturity or development.

Racism

Current research indicates that racism is present in school structures within the UK. Contributing factors include an overwhelmingly white teaching workforce, a lack of diversity in school curricula, and unclear anti-racism policies.[7]

'My old school, one teacher even got excluded for saying the n word as well.'

A YMCA poll conducted in 2020 found that 95% of black children had heard racist language at school and 49% of black children felt racism was the main barrier to academic achievement.[8] Half of those children cited teacher perception as a major form of racism they had experienced. Government statistics corroborate these perceptions, showing that some groups of children from the Global Majority[9] experience higher rates of exclusion than their white peers. The exclusion rate was highest for Gypsy and Roma children who were permanently excluded from school at nearly four times the rate of white children, followed by mixed white and black Caribbean children.[10]

The young people we spoke to were from the London borough of Enfield, one of the most diverse parts of London, with pupils in Enfield schools speaking over 189 languages and dialects, including Turkish, Somali, Polish, Albanian, and Bengali.[11] Despite diversity being one of Enfield's greatest assets, many children experience inequality in housing, education, employment, health, and the criminal justice system, particularly those from ethnic minority groups.[12] The young people we spoke to in this cohort represented a diverse range of ethnicities and spoke directly about experiences of racism within school.

Much racism experienced in schools is from other students, so it is vital that schools have measures in place to deal with peer-on-peer abuse. Schools should adopt a zero-tolerance approach to all forms of peer-on-peer abuse, particularly racial abuse.[13] However, young people told us that teachers in their mainstream schools did not acknowledge racism as a form of abuse or take experiences of racism seriously when incidents were reported.

[7] Runnymede Trust. (2020). Race and Racism in English Secondary Schools.

[8] YMCA. (2020). Young, discriminated, and Black: the true colour of institutional racism in the UK.

[9] 'Global Majority' is a collective term that speaks to and encourages those so-called to think of themselves as belonging to the global majority. It refers to people who are black, Asian, dual-heritage, indigenous to the global south, and/or have been racialised as 'ethnic minorities'.

[10] GOV.UK. (2022). Permanent exclusions and suspensions in England, Academic Year 2020/21.

[11] Enfield Council. (2022). Enfield Borough Profile 2022.

[12] Enfield Council. (2022). Equality and Diversity Annual Report 2021/22.

[13] Department for Education. (2022). Keeping children safe in education 2022.

Young people spoke about school policies disproportionately impacting young people from the Global Majority, with consequences for poor behaviour escalating much more quickly for Global Majority children – particularly young, black boys.

'Other people in my school that are way worse. They used to take all types of drugs and that. After that when they get caught all they get is a two-day exclusion, come back to school do their ting again, get excluded for two weeks and then yeah. But me for the first time I got excluded it was perm - I got permanently excluded.'

Other young people spoke about being racially profiled in school and highlighted stereotypes that teachers hold against black students.

'It's low-key racist innit, cause like it's, you'll probably think like "how how's that?" It's like for example yeah, before someone got in trouble innit and then they pick- ah we need to pick some boys like, to see if they know anything innit and I was like "oh they all - they only picked the black boys names", never picked no other people, it's only black boys and then if you say "yeah there's no involvement yeah", they'll automatically think you're lying.'

Young people also described teachers lacking understanding because of generational differences which has impacted their ability to keep informed of the changing discourse on systemic racism.

'There's older people, they're not from our generation, so they don't understand how racist certain stuff is now, d'you understand? And it's like they will never understand that because of the way they grew up and that's what I mean, this generation it's like people are starting to understand more and more and more how bad certain stuff is.'

By highlighting unfair policies and discriminatory practices, young people describe wider institutional racism. They told us that their mainstream schools had a culture of prejudice and produced unfair outcomes for children from the Global Majority and advantages for white people. Overall, young people talked about racism directly affecting their experience at school and contributing to more severe sanctions.

Reputation

> 'I have a bad reputation. Cause I'm like the troublemaker they'll pick on me and not anyone else.'

One of the most common concerns that young people raised was that they felt they were not given space to understand and change their behaviour. Many young people expressed that they felt they were not given a fresh start following behaviour incidents at school. Several children said they felt they had developed a negative reputation early in their school life, which they then struggled to escape.

> 'In my most recent school they just saw I got kicked out of two schools before, then cause my behaviour got- it dropped a bit they were like "no we don't want you" and they kicked me out.'

Some students talked about their reputation as a direct contributor to their permanent exclusion, feeling that they were unwelcome as soon as school staff saw their behaviour record. Other young people talked about staff responses to their reputation or past behaviour as an escalating factor in the conflicts they experienced while still in their mainstream schools.

> 'They'll be much stricter on me than any other student. That's not really like, that's not really helpful, it's not really gonna get me anywhere.'

'The teachers never used to come up to me just by themselves. Used to be either two teachers, three teachers which is like. Whenever I see other students get told off it's always one teacher. So, I don't know if they felt scared, whatever.'

Some of the most positive comments we heard from young people related to strong relationships with school staff. Young people offered recommendations for how school staff could relate to young people, telling us how much difference these positive relationships made to their school experiences. Some young people offered more specific suggestions on how these positive relationships could be established. They told us that they felt that school staff kept an artificial distance and power imbalance in place to maintain authority – particularly in insisting on being referred to by their titles. Young people recommended that schools prioritise relationship building over maintaining this established hierarchy.

'I think that's another thing they could do with mainstream. Have people call them by their teacher's name. When you're calling someone by their name, it's like you know them more. If you keep calling someone "miss" or "sir" like whatever it's like they have a higher power over you.'

'That's one thing here cause we call teachers by their first name, you get to know them a lot better. Cause then you can actually relate to those people.'

Young people also spoke of the impact a negative reputation might have on their ability to build and maintain these strong relationships with staff.

'If there's a teacher in that room which doesn't like you, he'll do anything he can to get you excluded.'

As well as this negative impact on relationships, some young people told us that their reputations were directly related to their additional needs, particularly if these included social, emotional, and mental health needs.

'I used to get in trouble all the time in primary [...] they used to make fun of me. It's not a nice thing. I used to get upset.'

Another young person explained the pressure they experienced to try and manage their emotional needs without getting into trouble.

'When I was in school, like back in mainstream, I was stressing every single day. Literally, homework, every second I'm getting detention, I had to be like a robot literally.'

Many of those young people who brought up reputation felt that their behaviour improved in a new setting where they were supported with their emotions – for example, by mentors or school staff who listened. Some described feeling that their good points could be noted and praised in their new school without their old, negative reputation weighing on them.

'Even [name of headteacher] today she's like "ah you don't act like the way that the report says you're way better".'

The number of comments young people made about the reputations they felt they had in their various educational settings established 'reputation' as one of the strongest factors in the breakdown of an educational placement. Young people told us that they felt their negative reputation prevented them from developing within a school, as they would be judged based on their past actions, even if they tried to change their behaviour. The way that logs of past behaviour and exclusion records are passed from school to school meant that young people felt they could not escape their negative reputations even when they changed schools. Staff letting go of their assumptions and allowing children to move on from past actions or attitudes was described by young people as one of the best results of moving to a new specialist provision.

Maturity

Research into child development has been clear in pointing to adolescence as a time of significant change in brain structure and function. These changes are often highlighted as a factor in heightened vulnerability in adolescence and can contribute to behaviours labelled as 'problem' in young people, which may ultimately lead to exclusion.[14] This is especially relevant when there is consideration of the high impact of external factors such as trauma on social cognition during adolescence.[15] Given the significant overlap of SEND and social and cognitive developmental delays,[16] it was interesting to note that many of the young people we spoke to talked about unrealistic expectations of maturity as a factor in the problems they experienced in mainstream schools. While social and emotional maturity develop at different rates in all children, multiple additional learning needs link to developmental delays, highlighting how unrealistic expectations of maturity can be for children with SEND in mainstream schools.

'I think a lot of people are getting kicked out, before they're able to mature enough to the point where they're like "cool, I might need to chill out a little bit".'

'They need to understand like maturity and that, so when- from year 7 to year 9 I know like a lot of people don't actually care what they're doing because nothing's close enough for them to work towards.'

[14] Albert, Dustin et al. (2013). "The Teenage Brain". Current Directions In Psychological Science, 22(2), pp. 114-120. SAGE Publications.

[15] Fuhrmann, Delia et al. (2015). "Adolescence As A Sensitive Period Of Brain Development". Trends In Cognitive Sciences, 19(10), pp. 558-566. Elsevier BV.

[16] Department for Education & Department for Health. (2015). Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years.

As noted in the quote above, young people spoke of a perception that learning in their earlier years at school felt less important than later years, and that it felt more acceptable to be distracted or distracting in lessons during key stage 3,[17] or at primary school.

> 'I remember when I was in year 8, year 9, year 7, I was doing anything I was bunking I was doing anything. But like when I'm in year 11 now I'm like oh I have to focus.'

Young people we spoke to referenced the need for time and space to grow and learn from their experiences. Many of the older students talked about GCSEs, further education and career prospects as a motivating influence when it came to improving behaviour and focus in lessons. Some talked about the emphasis on exams, even early in school life, suggesting that it was difficult to fully understand their importance with the buffer of several years' distance.

This distinction between being told something and the moment that they genuinely 'realise' was also broached when young people talked about behaviour – both in terms of understanding the behaviour itself and the consequences of that behaviour. Emotional maturity is linked to a full understanding and realisation of consequences, so when children tell us that they did not fully realise the consequences of their behaviour, they are identifying that their level of emotional maturity had not yet developed enough to allow for this understanding.

[17] Key stage 3 is the part of the national curriculum taught to children between the ages of 11 and 14 in the first three years of secondary school.

'If a teacher says "you're gonna get permanently excluded" young people think "oh yeah, I'm not gonna get excluded, this this that" that's what I thought as well, "I'm not gonna get excluded". Next thing you see I get excluded.'

'Back in the day when I was younger, I used to think teachers were just strict and had something against me and I wouldn't understand properly.'

These reflections highlight the importance of this growth and experience for young people to fully understand and fulfil the expectations placed upon them at mainstream school. With the benefit of months and years of development, young people were able to reflect on their behaviour and responses during their time in mainstream schools. Some suggested, though, that at the age and moment of those experiences, the expectation of maturity and responsibility may have been unrealistically high. Again, given the link between SEND and delayed emotional development, these expectations may have been even less realistic for those children with additional needs.

The young people gave examples of times they felt they were given a level of responsibility that they were not yet mature enough to manage. This was particularly frequent when it came to how to access help and support. Many young people told us that in their mainstream schools they felt that they had to take responsibility for communicating this need, rather than staff taking responsibility to offer support.

These comments link to concerns that young people raised related to communication. Not only can communication be especially difficult for young people with SEND, but the initiative required for children to raise concerns unprompted may require an unrealistic level of maturity, especially for those children whose SEND includes delayed development.

'No one offered support, we had to go to them. They never asked [name of student] do you have a problem, what's going on?'

What young people said about communication

> ‘They don’t make it clear enough.’

Explanations

One strong theme that emerged throughout our conversations with young people was the impact of poor communication with education staff. According to the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapy, two-thirds of children excluded from school have language difficulties.[18] Young people we spoke to told us they had often struggled to understand what was being communicated in their mainstream schools and did not feel that enough explanation was offered to enable them to reach their potential.

> 'When I didn't get it once or didn't know how to do it once they actually were like "ok I give up I'm not gonna help her anymore".'

Some young people spoke about communication in a broad sense, indicating that unclear explanations in the classroom impacted their ability to learn and contributed to the behaviour problems which led to their permanent exclusion. Many more told us that they had been confused and surprised by the behaviour system itself, feeling that education staff had not fully explained the reasons behind their sanctions or even what those sanctions were likely to be. This is explored in further detail in the behaviour management section of this report.

> 'I think they should tell us what's gonna happen if you don't fix up or something.'

Other young people said they had not always understood the seriousness of their behaviour and felt it would have helped them to hear an explanation before they were sanctioned.

> 'They could support them more innit without putting them in detentions and all of them, just have a chat with them let them know the situation before taking things further.'

[18] Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists. (2020). EOTAS 31 Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists.

Some young people told us that their exclusions had been a shock to them, and that they had not known they were likely to be excluded until too late.

> 'When I got excluded in year 7, they literally just sent me a letter.'

> 'If they'd had told me say like before summer holidays so I would have known er I think it probably would have been a lot easier. Whereas the fact they told me the day before I was meant to start year 10...'

Young people had different experiences of how much explanation they had received before finding themselves permanently excluded from their mainstream schools. Despite inconsistencies between schools, most children felt that clearer communication would have helped them to make positive changes in school or even come to terms with their permanent exclusion.

The young people we spoke with had a variety of additional needs and not all were diagnosed specifically in relation to speech, language, and communication. The high proportion of excluded children with speech, language, and communication needs, however, only strengthens the need for appropriate and accessible explanation for children at risk of permanent exclusion.

Listening

> 'They don't really listen to be honest they just do what they wanna do basically. They don't hear what you have to say, or your point or what you've done.'

As well as telling us of their struggles to understand explanations about their exclusions, young people talked about feeling that they were not listened to when they tried to communicate with staff in their mainstream schools. They told us about the importance of feeling listened to, and how it helped them when they felt people cared how they were feeling. Young people also underlined the importance of school staff listening to them when they were in trouble and considering all different perspectives within a behaviour incident. When asked what strategies teachers could have used to help her in her mainstream school, one young person told us:

> 'Giving the child or like the pupil a chance to explain and speak because they just don't do that.'

Another child told us that if he had felt teachers would listen to him, this may have prevented some of his behaviour incidents, as many of these were triggered by his social, emotional, and mental health needs. This is particularly relevant given that students with social, emotional, and mental health listed as their primary need have a higher rate of exclusion than those with any other form of SEND.

> 'If you say you're in a bad mood the teacher will just say, "just go to your lesson". [...] They won't even talk to you for like 15 minutes or 10 minutes not even 5.'

The importance of listening was not isolated to the context of behaviour and sanctions. Some students also told us about problems they faced when they tried to report bullying or problems with other students in their school.

'I always kept saying to them er a girl or a guy's being mean to me I want to talk about it and stuff. Instead of like talking about it with me and letting me explain to them or like talking about my problems, they just said report it or write it down in the paper and when like I reported it, they didn't really say anything.'

Many young people did highlight individuals within both their mainstream schools and their alternative provisions who did take the time to listen to them. These students were clear about the benefits they felt when they had someone to speak to in their school. Several young people made an unprompted connection between feeling listened to and feeling cared for by school staff.

'There were certain teachers that actually did used to listen to you, like certain teachers cared. Like some of the teachers that would take on behaviour, they would actually care about what you're talking about, and they would listen to you.'

This connection is a striking one and shows the importance of clear communication to the well-being and self-esteem of children and young people. Even without making that connection, young people were clear about the support they needed from staff. When asked what was good about his current provision, one student responded:

'They got erm them therapy people, teacher, mentor you can chat to.'

Another student talked specifically about the importance of dedicated mentors without additional professional responsibilities such as teaching lessons or managing behaviour.

'For mainstream schools and other schools, I think they need to put in place like other stuff, like mentoring stuff, or other stuff. So, they actually understand what's going on.'

'I need someone here I can talk to cause sometimes they're all busy.'

This theme of school staff being busy or not always having time to listen was echoed by several of the young people we spoke to and was highlighted as a reason that they found the additional support provided by PRUs or specialist provision effective. Particularly in a classroom environment, young people said that they felt there were not enough staff available and able to listen to each student, especially when staff were also trying to teach.

'How do you expect one teacher by themselves to teach 30 people? In this school, there's two teachers for five students.'

It is clear that effective two-way communication is vital for young people at risk of exclusion and particularly those who process information differently due to SEND. Those young people who identified a lack of explanation or listening on the part of their teachers and pastoral staff in mainstream schools tended to equate this with a feeling that teachers did not care about them or their needs. Feeling that communication has not been effective links to a feeling that support is not there for a young person. Conversely, having a mentor or key support worker is equated to having a person who will listen and explain. Children we spoke to have been clear that appropriate communication is support, and that feeling unsupported in school is intrinsically linked to a lack of communication.

What young people said about behaviour management

During our conversations, young people told us about both helpful and unhelpful responses to behaviour. Young people highlighted a difference in the way behaviour was managed in their mainstream school, compared to West Lea (SEND specialist) and Orchardside (AP). Often young people recognised the need for behaviour sanctions but disagreed with the approach to behaviour management in their mainstream schools.

We have separated behaviour management into four sections:

1 Sanctions

2 Isolation

3 Exclusions

4 Positive behaviour management techniques

Sanctions

When discussing their mainstream school, young people talked about how quickly behaviour sanctions were given out. Overall, young people told us that they did not feel that the behaviour sanctions in their mainstream school were proportionate, nor did young people feel that sanctions helped them to improve their behaviour.

> 'In mainstream consequence, consequence, detention, "get out of here", dis, dis, dat, shouting, no point.'

Young people also shared how stressful these sanctions could be, affecting their well-being and their relationships with family and in some cases making them not want to come into school at all.

> 'For example, you're on your last warning, like you're scared and like you don't wanna do something wrong, like you're getting stressed. That's what like happens at school like, you get stressed out.'

However, young people found the way in which sanctions were given in their specialist schools to be more useful. Here, the sanctions helped them to learn from their behaviour and there was more of an emphasis on rewards which they found motivating. Young people highlighted that their AP put a big focus on relationship building. They felt that having a connection with teachers and being treated 'like a young adult' improved their behaviour. While this is in the young person's words, it reflects their need to be treated with respect, not necessarily as an adult.

'Well, they understand me more and if I do kick off, they give me time to calm down. They just don't go "oh you're going straight home or you're getting this or that".'

Overall, young people felt that their behaviour did not escalate as much in their specialist schools, as they felt better understood by their teachers.

Isolation

There is minimal research on the effectiveness of isolation units. Young people described being put into isolation in their mainstream school as a harmful experience. This is backed by current research which shows that experiences in isolation units have a negative emotional toll on young people.[19] They shared how challenging isolation units were and described the environments as being very small, overpopulated, and with blank walls, making them feel trapped. This ties into the findings from DEx's previous Youth Voice report on exclusions,[20] where young people similarly described isolation as having a negative impact on their well-being.

'Isolation inside other mainstream schools usually it will be like a very pale room. Like it will be white or something, all white, not a single splash of colour [...] there'll be like little walls where you can't turn around and interact with other people.'

'Isolation just gets you stressed out more. Cause you're in a little room trapped with so many people.'

Rather than being used to support behaviour management or improve behaviour, young people described isolation in their mainstream schools as a place to be sent when teachers did not know what to do with the student.

'They didn't know what to do, they put you in there and they think that's it, it's solved.'

[19] Reynolds, A. (2021). A mixed methods study exploring whether referral to the Internal Inclusion Unit results in change to pupil behaviour and exploring the student's perceptions of the facility.

[20] The Children's Society. (2021). Youth Voice on School Exclusions.

Young people suggested that being put into isolation did not always solve the problem, as the reasons for being put in there were not always clearly understood. They said that the responses to their behaviour often quickly escalated to placing them in isolation, and that they felt the time period spent in isolation was not always proportionate to the behaviour in question.

However, young people described being given a lot more chances in their specialist school. They said that when they were put into isolation, they were with a teacher who could help them to reflect on their behaviour, sometimes they were given a book, and in general they felt much more supported.

'When I was in isolation I would come up with like a plan or like a timetable of like where's my mistakes? What am I doing? And sometimes I do recognise how I can change those.'

Overall, young people describe their specialist schools as more likely to make reasonable adjustments for them, compared to their mainstream schools. They also highlighted that their specialist schools made sure their voices were meaningfully included when making plans.

Exclusions

'Everybody has the right to learn. How you gonna get an exclusion and then not go to school and try and qualify for that work?'

When asked how fair they thought school exclusions were, young people gave mixed responses. They highlighted the damage of missing out on a lot of education, the difficulties in transitioning into a new school, and the negative impact exclusions had on their families.

'I didn't go school for like nine months. My whole year 9 was wasted basically like there was like one month left of school and I came here.'

'I went to like three schools. It's crazy, it's not easy. It's not easy fitting in.'

Young people highlighted that behaviour management often escalated to exclusions too quickly, without enough warnings. They felt that the communication around behaviour was not always clear and often felt unwanted or rejected by their mainstream school.

'First, they excluded me only for five days then after they sent me a letter, they sent me a letter saying you're going to have a meeting on this day. And then on that day they didn't want me, they just kicked me out straight away."

Young people felt that the use of exclusions should depend on how serious the behaviour is and the impact of the behaviour. They justified fixed-term exclusions as an opportunity to reflect on their behaviour but emphasised the need for strong evidence before making this decision.

'I think they should have a chance to go back to their old school so that erm fix what they did wrong.'

'It really depends on what the case is cause if the case is serious then someone got really, if they got injured in a really severe way kick them out, they're bad to the school. But you can't kick people out for something they haven't done just cause you assumed they done it.'

However, some young people described not liking school at all, so they appreciated the opportunity to not be in the school environment. For some, they recognised that exclusions impacted their families and that they got less work done, but still preferred to be at home

'Basically, some kids actually get stressed out when they go school. I know that cause from my generation, social media, Snapchat and that, people are actually stressed out from stuff like that, and trust me getting kicked out sometimes, it might sound like a bad option but it's not that bad.'

Other young people felt that exclusions served a purpose reminding them of the importance of good behaviour. They also felt that it created an opportunity for reflection.

'You're learning from your mistakes and you're also thinking about what you could have done better.'

Overall, young people recognised that fixed-term exclusions sometimes helped to give them and others a chance to pause and learn from the behaviour. However, most young people felt that permanent exclusions were not fair, were not always backed by evidence, and the communication leading up to the exclusion was unclear. Young people highlighted that exclusions created a lot of stress and for some they preferred to avoid school completely.

Positive behaviour management techniques

Young people talked about taking responsibility for poor behaviour, but many told us they thought school staff should praise and reward positive behaviour, as much as punishing poor behaviour.

> 'Obviously it feels good to be like, when you actually try do something and someone actually rewards you, like "well done, you're doing good". Of course, you're gonna feel like "ah I wanna do more now", of course it's gonna carry on.'

> 'Here, they actually praise me like if I do good work they will praise me like see I got "ah [child's name] done good in lesson", they'll probably give me like a lickle, like a coupon innit.'

This was especially important when it came to contact with home, especially given that when discussing the worst things about exclusion, many young people immediately jumped to the negative impact this had had on their familial relationships

> 'It feels horrible, seeing your mums face like or your parents or guardian's face.'

To help counter this, young people recommended that schools dedicate time to contacting parents and carers with positive feedback. This would not only motivate children but also help to repair some of the damage that exclusion may have caused to relationships with parents and carers.

Conclusion

School exclusions have a long-term and detrimental impact on children and their families. Not only do they disrupt children's participation in education and thus impact future life chances, they also make children more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, including for criminal exploitation purposes.

One key learning from this project involving children is that children's voices and experiences are rarely heard when exclusion decisions are being made. This project aimed to expose this by centering on the experiences of young people with SEND.

The voices and experiences of young people captured in this report highlight a number of issues that impact on children's behaviour in school and on professional responses to children. Behaviour management policies in schools are needed to make sure that all children can take part in education without disruption, but the national statistics and children's experiences shared in this report suggest that these policies do not always take into consideration a wider range of factors before opting for a punitive approach.

SEND and unmet needs

The issues that young people highlighted include the lack of understanding and support for children who have SEND. Children explain that they need support to understand behaviour policies and time and understanding to adjust their behaviour. Instead, the lack of professional understanding of the impact of SEND on behaviours and training on how to identify children with SEND and support them accordingly results in punitive responses to children without time and effort allowed to explain the school policy and develop behaviour that is expected.

Unmet need was regarded by young people in our conversations as a 'behaviour issue' (as defined by schools). This was then met with punishment, such as warnings and isolation, which were detrimental to well-being and did not lead to restorative outcomes. Young people spoke about communication barriers, especially the lack of support in understanding behaviour policies.

Most young people quoted did not have an EHCP prior to exclusion, highlighting a potential need for early intervention and assessment as part of behaviour management.

> 'No one offered support, we had to go to them. They never asked "[name of student] do you have a problem, what's going on?"'

Trauma

Experiences of trauma such as bullying and being racially abused also impact children's behaviour, which staff did not always acknowledge. One young person spoke of not being listened to when reporting being bullied.

'I always kept saying to them er a girl or a guy's being mean to me I want to talk about it and stuff. Instead of like talking about it with me and letting me explain to them or like talking about my problems, they just said report it or write it down in the paper and when like I reported it, they didn't really say anything.'

When children did feel like they could discuss traumatic experiences and felt listened to, they often connected this with feeling cared for by staff.

Children's behaviour must be considered in the wider context of what is happening in their lives, and they must be given the space to express this with a trusted staff member. Behaviour is not always a conscious choice, and the persistence of certain behaviours could indicate a trauma which remains unresolved.

Discrimination

A link between behaviour management and race was highlighted, with children from the Global Majority in the study experiencing disproportionate and inconsistent sanctions. Young people felt that racism was not addressed appropriately in behaviour policies, further creating a feeling of marginalisation in mainstream schools, and spoke of being racially profiled by teachers.

'It's low-key racist innit, cause like it's, you'll probably think like "how how's that?" It's like for example yeah, before someone got in trouble innit and then they pick- ah we need to pick some boys like, to see if they know anything innit and I was like "oh they all- they only picked the black boys names", never picked no other people, it's only black boys and then if you say "yeah there's no involvement yeah", they'll automatically think you're lying.'

Young people also felt that teachers lacked an understanding of the changing discourse on systemic racism and therefore failed to understand how young people's education was affected by racism.

'There's older people, they're not from our generation, so they don't understand how racist certain stuff is now, d'you understand? And it's like they will never understand that because of the way they grew up and that's what I mean, this generation it's like people are starting to understand more and more and more how bad certain stuff is.'

The lack of relationship building opportunities between children, parents, and staff

Significantly, young people felt they were not given the opportunity to explore their feelings in relation to behaviour incidents. This had a negative impact on the relationships young people were able to build with staff as they felt they were labelled with a reputation and their needs were overlooked.

> 'If there's a teacher in that room which doesn't like you, he'll do anything he can to get you excluded.'

Relationships were a recurrent theme throughout the conversations, with young people highlighting strong relationships as crucial for educational well-being. Effective communication and trusted relationships are important for all young people, but especially to those with SEND who may need additional support. When young people were supported with their emotions and not judged on reputation by teachers, it had a positive effect on their behaviour and education.

> 'Even [name of headteacher] today she's like "ah you don't act like the way that the report says you're way better".'

It is clear from our conversations that young people did not want to be burdened by their reputations and wanted to have positive relationships with their teachers.

Opportunities to learn when things are right

Throughout our conversations, young people spoke positively about the alternative provisions referenced in this report and the opportunities within them. This signifies the need for alternative provision and mainstream education to share best practices in order to best support young people.

Young people spoke of the added stress that punitive measures such as sanctions and isolation caused in mainstream schools.

> 'Isolation just gets you stressed out more. Cause you're in a little room trapped with so many people.'

Conversely, in specialist schools and alternative provisions children felt far more supported and encouraged to reflect on their behaviour

> 'They're more caring, they're more actually wanna support you, "is there any way I can help you?"'

When children with SEND are listened to and encouraged to reflect on their behaviour through clear communication and compassion, the benefits to their education and well-being are clear to see. Mainstream schools must adopt approaches that allow for this, as is done in alternative provisions. Measures young people mentioned benefitted them in alternative provisions that could be adopted in mainstream schools included the use of dedicated mentors for students who do not have additional teaching responsibilities, and even simpler measures, such as using a teachers first name rather than referring to them by their titles, as young people felt this created a power imbalance.

Children with SEND's first experiences of being supported in an educational institution should not come as a result of being excluded from mainstream school and sent to an alternative provision.

Solutions

What children communicated to us through this project is the need to develop child focused approaches to children's behaviour in school, improve professional understanding of the impact of trauma and SEND on children's behaviour and the need for non-punitive support for children to reduce the number of school suspensions and exclusions.

There is no one silver bullet to resolve the issues identified by children but given the risks of exploitation associated with removing a young person from a school environment,[21] it is crucial that behaviour policies are inclusive and consider young people's needs, contexts, and experiences.

Most recommendations that children and professionals we spoke to made are aimed at schools. Changing approaches to responding to children's behaviours in individual schools will make an important change for children, but to achieve lasting and consistent changes for all children across the country, local authorities, and national government must also commit to change.

Schools and education systems have a duty of care not only to safeguard young people but to safeguard their educational potential, which extends to ensuring all young people are given an equal opportunity to participate in education. Excluding young people from education runs the risk of further marginalising already underrepresented voices.

[21] Just for Kids Law. (2020). Excluded, exploited, forgotten: Childhood criminal exploitation and school exclusions.

Recommendations

Schools

Race & ethnicity

- Schools should provide training to staff to help them develop a robust understanding of structural racism and the impact it has on children's lives and specifically how it relates to school exclusions.
- School policies must include protections for children whose behaviour is impacted by experiencing racism.
- Recruitment approaches in schools should ensure that staff are diverse and representative of the communities they work with, especially in senior leadership roles.
- A greater emphasis is needed on intersectionality, especially race and ethnicity, embedding cultural awareness, competence, and sensitivity.

SEND

- Schools should work with social care and other agencies to identify young people who might present with SEND at the earliest possible time.
- Schools should put as much emphasis on involving parents when a child's behaviour is good as when it is bad. However, schools should remain ambitious for young people with SEND and help them achieve their full potential.
- School staff having training to raise awareness of SEND including speech, language, and communication needs is paramount to support staff in school to identify when a young person could be presenting with such a need.

Behavioural policies

- Schools must run an all-school session early in the school year about the behaviour policy, what is expected from students, and what students can expect from the school.
- Schools must publish a SEND friendly version of their behaviour policy that accommodates all learning needs so that all students are clear on what the school expects of them.
- A diverse range of students or a student council body should be consulted about the school's behaviour policy.
- Schools should also offer information sessions for parents on the school behaviour policy.

Use of isolation

- Staff in isolation units should discuss with students what is causing the behaviour and identify if more support is needed for the student.
- Isolation should not be small, white rooms with enclosed desks that make students feel like they are in a prison. Staff in isolation units should be encouraged to accommodate what the student feels like will help them – for example, letting children go outside and expend energy.

Independent advocates for children

- Independent advocates must be utilised to promote the interests of the young person and ensure that the exclusion appeal system is there to genuinely be a system available and accessible for parents to use should they need it.

Trauma-informed approach

- Schools must implement trauma-informed training and approaches to respond to children's behaviour at school.
- Schools must be aware that behaviours deemed as disruptive (such as difficulty concentrating and learning in school, being easily distracted, not seeming to listen, or being disorganised, hyperactive, and restless) are overlapping symptoms that are common to victims of trauma.

Recognise school exclusions as a safeguarding issue

- Schools must recognise young people being out of education exposes them to more hidden risks, and therefore must recognise that exclusion is a safeguarding issue.
- Schools need to develop their understanding around contextual safeguarding and understand removing a child from their school will not be removing the threat or risk from the community as the source of harm will remain.

Local authority

Training

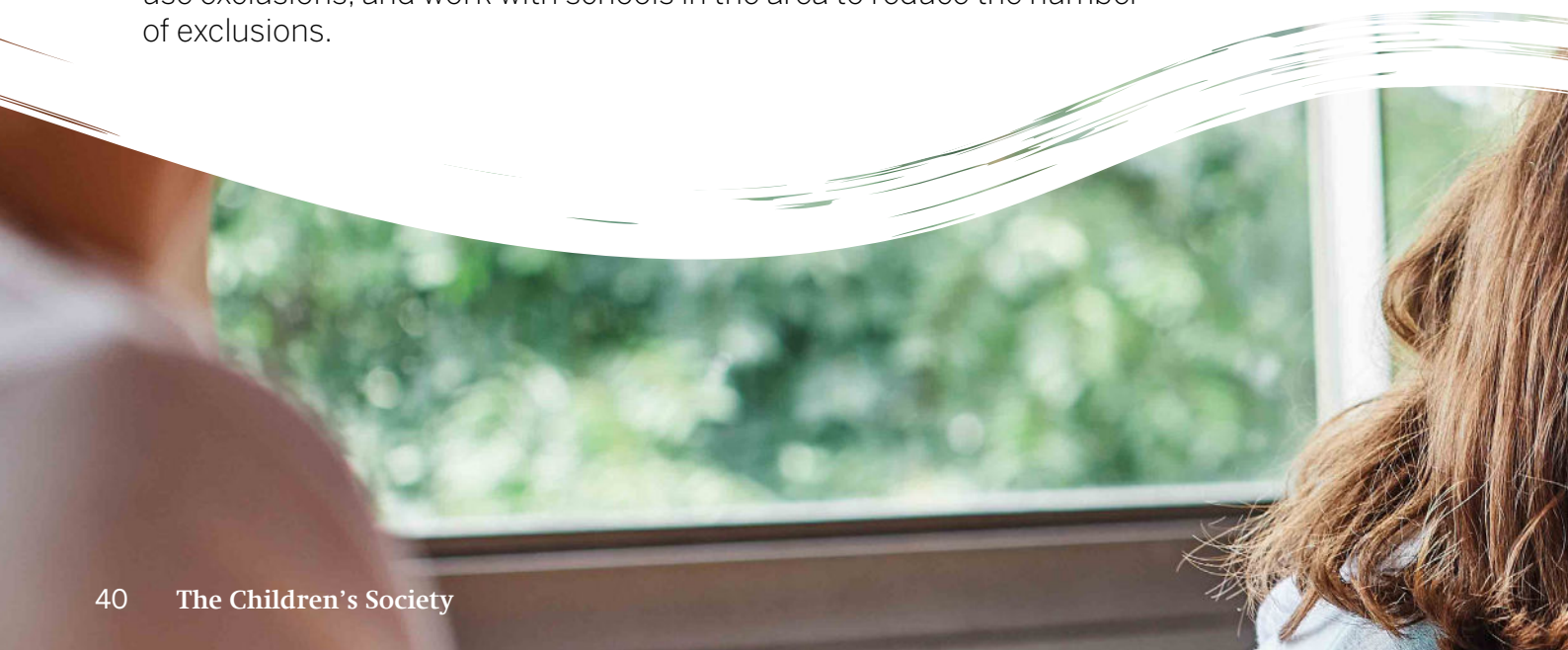
- Local authorities should support schools across their local area to access training on key issues such as on race and the impact of trauma on behaviours.

Identifying children with SEND

- Local authorities should work with schools as early as possible when a child's behaviour starts causing a concern to help identify any possible underlying reasons in behaviour, such as undiagnosed SEND needs, abuse or neglect at home and work together to offer support and safeguard children.

Oversight of Suspensions and Exclusions

- Local authorities should provide oversight of how often schools in the area use exclusions, and work with schools in the area to reduce the number of exclusions.



Government

Training

- The government needs to ensure that all teacher training programmes include modules on discrimination, SEND, and the impact of trauma on behaviours to ensure that children receive more child-centred and not punitive responses in schools.

SEND

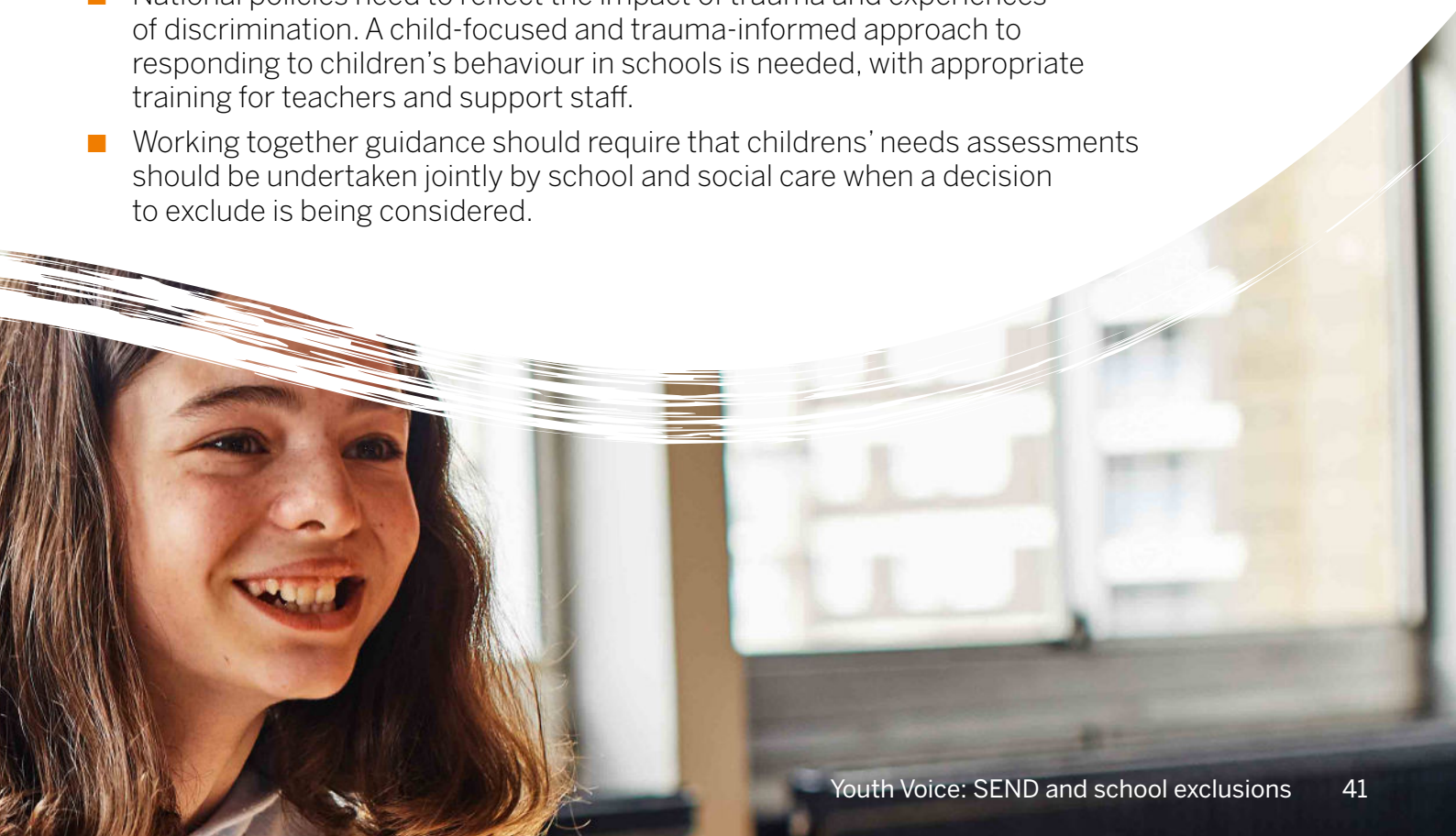
- When SEND reforms are developed and implemented it is vitally important that the SEND system has co-production with children, young people, and their families at its core. Reforms must be intentionally intersectional, explicitly acknowledging and responding to the discrimination that some young people face in the SEND system, including those from minority communities.
- Greater investment is needed across early intervention for SEND young people, alternative provision, and reintegration after attending alternative provision. A comprehensive package is essential to improve the experiences of children and young people with SEND.

Oversight of suspensions and exclusions

- National policies on school exclusion and safeguarding should provide for a greater oversight of headteachers' decisions to exclude to ensure all solutions have been exhausted before turning to exclusion. This should include explicit consideration of whether a child at risk of exclusion may be showing risk factors for exploitation and to consider this as part of their decision. Exclusion consideration should be seen as a 'reachable' moment when education and social care should jointly assess the needs of the child and offer support.

National guidance

- National policies need to reflect the impact of trauma and experiences of discrimination. A child-focused and trauma-informed approach to responding to children's behaviour in schools is needed, with appropriate training for teachers and support staff.
- Working together guidance should require that childrens' needs assessments should be undertaken jointly by school and social care when a decision to exclude is being considered.



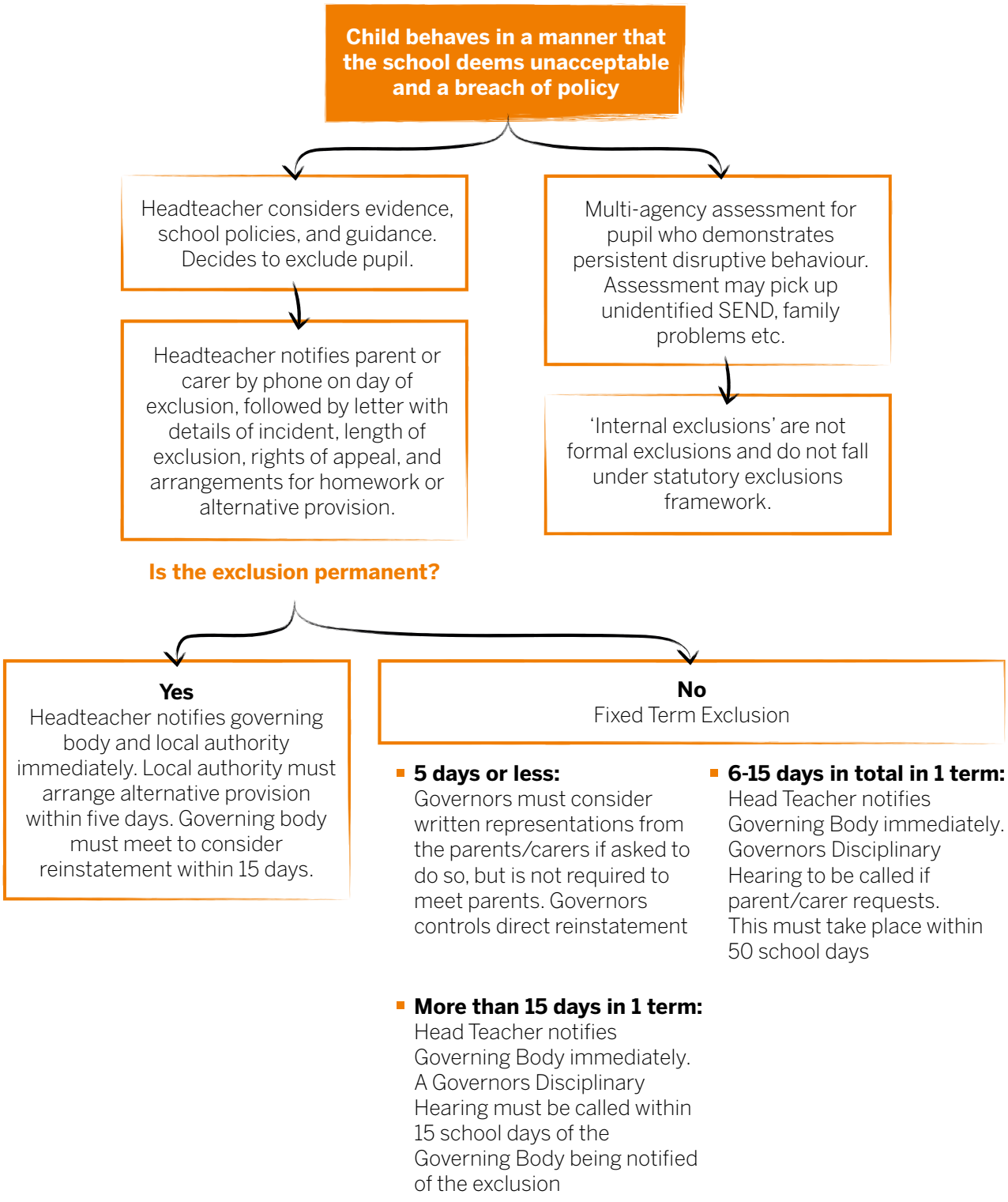
Appendix 1: Definition of terms

- **Temporary school exclusion:** This is also known as a fixed period exclusion. This can only be for up to 45 school days in one school year.
- **Isolation:** The process whereby school pupils are removed from the classroom to another area away from their peers. This is a disciplinary measure and is normally enforced by school staff in response to behaviour that is deemed to be disruptive. Young people can be removed to other classrooms, placed in a room with a series of partitioned booths, or placed in a room and made to face the wall. A member of staff should be supervising the young person at all times. Isolation is sometimes referred to as 'seclusion' or an 'internal exclusion'.
- **Permanent school exclusion:** This is also known as being expelled. The local authority must arrange alternative full-time schooling.
- **Managed move:** If a child is at risk of permanent exclusion, a managed move can be used as an alternative. This is a voluntary agreement between two schools, parents or carers, and the pupil to transfer the child to another school for a trial period with the aim of improved behaviour.
- **Alternative provision:** This is an educational placement arranged by the local authority for children who are unable to attend mainstream school due to: exclusion, illness, or to receive appropriate education for their needs. Alternative provisions could include hospital schools, vocational courses, or therapeutic facilities.
- **Pupil referral unit:** This is a type of alternative provision. Pupil referral units have expertise in supporting children with SEND, with support from social workers, counsellors, and educational psychologists. Classes are often smaller than mainstream schools and there is flexibility in the curriculum to meet the pupils' specific needs and ambitions.
- **Special educational needs and disabilities:** A term used to describe learning difficulties or disabilities a child may have which can impact on their ability to learn and retain information. This may mean the child requires additional support in school such as speech and language therapy. Examples of SEND include:
  - Cognition and learning: A child might have difficulties with specific activities such as reading, spelling, memory, and following instructions.
  - Communication and interaction: A child may have difficulty talking with others or understanding what others are saying to them.
  - Physical and sensory: This can include medical conditions which affect a child physically and also sensory impairment such as vision and hearing loss.
  - Social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH): A child may be experiencing emotional and mental health needs such as anxiety, low levels of emotional well-being, or behavioural difficulties.
- Education health and care plan = This is a document completed by the local authority listing all the child's special educational, health and social care needs, and what additional provision will be provided in schools to meet these needs. This is a legally enforceable document.

Appendix 2: Resources

Additional written resources by The Children's Society can be found at national exploitation resources by The Children's Society or listen to our DEx podcast on Apple Podcasts.

Appendix 3: Process of exclusion



Governing body meets to consider representations from parents or carers and consider reinstatement of pupil.

Does the governing body direct reinstatement of the pupil?

Yes
Pupil reinstated immediately or at a specified date. Governing body informs parents or carers, headteacher, and local authority.

No

- **Permanent exclusion**
  Outcome of consideration is recorded on the pupils' education record. Governing body notifies headteacher and local authority of outcome. Governing body notifies parents or carers of decision and right to request consideration from independent review panel.
- **Fixed-term exclusion**
  Pupil not reinstated and has no further appeal. Governing body informs parents or carers, headteacher, and local authority.

Do parents or carers request an independent review?

Yes
Local authority or academy trust convene independent review panel within 15 days of notice from parents or carers at their request.

No
Exclusion process complete. Governing body ensures pupil's name removed from school roll.

Does the independent review panel uphold the decision of the governing body?

Yes
Exclusion process complete. Governing body ensures pupil's name removed from school roll.

No
Independent review panel sends decision back to school's governors for reconsideration. Governors must meet within 10 working days to reconsider.

Does the governing body uphold the exclusion?

Yes
Independent review panel must report outcome immediately to local authority.

No
Pupil reinstated immediately or at a specified date. Governing body informs parents or carers, local authority, and headteacher.

Together, we're stronger. And we can build the world young people need.

To find out more...

Visit childrenssociety.org.uk/disrupting-exploitation-report

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