



Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
20 Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

Monday 26th April 2021

Dear Secretary of State,

Behaviour and discipline in schools: The impact on mental health and wellbeing

As Chair of a Coalition with over 235 organisations with a particular interest in children and young people's mental health, I am writing to you in response to your recent statement that schools should 'crack down' on poor behaviour among children and young people returning to education from months of lockdown.

The Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition and its members have been increasingly concerned about the current punitive approach in relation to behaviour and discipline. We are worried that this could do more harm than good to children and young people. I am sure we share the same objective of enabling children to learn and ensuring that schools create an environment where all children can achieve the very best from their potential. We are interested in effective approaches to addressing behaviour applying learning from neuroscience.

Children and young people's mental health and wellbeing is one of the most important issues of our time, especially as we emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic. Our members have reported rising mental health needs amongst children, young people, and families as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, but also recognise that some have fared better being out of school during school closures. Members have also expressed concern about children and young people not being considered in decisions made about education during the pandemic.

Children often communicate distress through their behaviour. Challenging behaviour can often be the result of underlying conditions, unmet emotional needs, difficulties at home, at school or in the community, and exposure to trauma, for example. Studies of children who have lived in quarantine have also shown that behavioural difficulties are common when they return to school. The burden of the pandemic was also much higher for specific groups of young people, such as those with Special Educational Needs.

We know that education is so important to children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. It plays a crucial part in improving life chances, maintaining social connections, providing access to support, and helping children learn how to look after their mental health.

Our members want to support schools to respond effectively to behavioural problems in children. That means creating safe school environments for children and young people who have been through traumatic experiences and offering help to those who are struggling most.

We urge you to move away from the disproportionate focus on punitive approaches to behaviour management and take an evidence-based approach to supporting schools to achieve recovery.

Punitive approaches to discipline harm children's mental health and can also be ineffective at achieving the desired outcome. They have the potential to re-traumatise children, and in doing so they can also drive even more challenging behaviour. For example, evidence suggests that school exclusion is associated with worsening mental health, and poor attainment and future life chances.

Such approaches have an unequal impact on some groups of children and young people. For example, school exclusions disproportionately impact children living in poverty, Black Caribbean and Gypsy Roma/Traveler children, trans, non-binary and gender diverse young people and those with Special Educational Needs. These inequalities impact on behaviour, making these groups even more likely to be subject to punitive approaches.

Good behaviour can be promoted in a variety of ways. Research shows that building on the protective factors in a school environment is important in both managing behaviour and promoting children's overall wellbeing.

A whole school and college approach in every education setting across England is vital in helping to create a culture where every student is recognised and valued. Such an approach needs to be implemented across all education settings in England and this should be fully resourced. Trauma-informed approaches are an integral part of this, alongside positive behavioural support strategies.

We need an immediate moratorium on school exclusions this year to protect the most vulnerable from suffering longer-term harm to their life chances. We fully recognise that schools would need support in addressing the needs of children who might otherwise be excluded, but we are conscious of the negative impact of exclusion on children and the enormous cost to government and to society which flows from poor educational attainment, worklessness and - too often - entry into the criminal justice system.

We look forward to meeting with you and your team at a time that is convenient to you to discuss this matter further.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Norman Lamb', with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Sir Norman Lamb, Chair of the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition
and,

Clare Stafford, CEO, The Charlie Waller Trust & Vice-Chair of the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition

Cassandra Harrison, CEO, Youth Access

Christine-Koulla Burke, Director, Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities

Emma Thomas, CEO, YoungMinds

Jabeer Butt OBE, Chief Executive, Race Equality Foundation

Nigel Atter, Policy Advisor, The British Psychological Society

Sarah Hughes, Chief Executive, Centre for Mental Health

Wendy Minhinnett, Rollercoaster Family Support

Alyson Wylding, Director, No5 Young People

Annette Du Bois, Confidence Emotions and Psychological Coach for young people, co-founder, CHAMPS Academy

Arti Sharma, CEO nurtureuk

Beth Bodycote, Founder, Not Fine in School

Betsy de Thierry, Founder, Trauma Recovery Centre UK

Bob Law, Chair of the SEBDA Trust & Chair of the SEBDA National Council

Bozena Merrick, CEO, Terapia

Christine Myhill, Chair, ASCEL

Claire Bethel, Chair, Association of Young People's Health

Claire Dorer, CEO, National Association of Independent Schools and non-maintained Special Schools (NASS)

Danny Hutchinson, Operations Director, Invictus Wellbeing

David Eaton, Chair and Director, The Association of Primary Mental Health Work and Training (CAMHS)

Dean Johnstone, CEO, Minds Ahead

Dr Asha Patel, Chief Executive & Clinical Psychologist, Innovating Minds

Dr James Cusack, CEO, Autistica and Chair of Embracing Complexity

Dr Nick Waggett, Chief Executive, Association of Child Psychotherapists

Dr Phil Moore, Chair, Mental Health Commissioners Network

Dr Sue Pattison, Sue Pattison Consulting and SPC Training Academy

Dympna Cunnane, CEO, Our Time

Ged Flynn, Chief Executive, POPYRUS Prevention of Young Suicide
Geethika Jayatilaka, CEO, Chance UK
Helen Marshall, Chief Executive, Brook Young People
James Watson-O'Neill, Chief Executive, SignHealth
Jennifer Rushworth-Claeys, Head of Young Person service Delivery, We Are With You
John Diamond, CEO, The Mulberry Bush Charity
Jonny Benjamin MBE, Founder and Chair, Beyond
Julie Randles, CEO, Power2
Kamena Dorling, Head of Policy and Advocacy, Article 39
Kamini Gadhok MBE, CEO, Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists
Katherine Hill, Strategic Project Manager, 4in10, London's Child Poverty Network
Kathy Evans, CEO, Children England
Lea Milligan Chief Executive, MQ Mental Health Research
Louisa Rose, CEO, Beyond
Lucy Bailey, CEO, Bounce Forward
Mark Devlin, Chief Executive, Young Epilepsy
Mark Hardy, Chair, Association of Play Industries
Mark Russell, Chief Executive, The Children's Society
Mark Winstanley, Chief Executive, Rethink Mental Illness
Natalie Bailey, Chair, BACP
Rachel Bundock, Chief Executive, Compass - Services to Improve Health and Wellbeing
Rachel Lambie, Chief Executive Officer, NESSie IN ED CIC (NESSie)
Robin Barker, Chief Executive, Healthy Teen Minds
Shantanu Kundu, Founder and Chief Executive, Be Free Campaign
Simon Benn, Founder, Thriving Adoptees
Simon Blake OBE, Chief Executive, Mental Health First Aid England
Susie Green, CEO, Mermaids
Tessy Ojo CBE, CEO, The Diana Award
Trudy Kilcullen MBE, Chief Executive, Jack Petchey Foundation
Wendy Tabuteau, Chief Executive Officer, Partnership for Children