



Behaviour and Mental Health in Schools Report

Parliamentary briefing

[The Behaviour and Mental Health in Schools report](#) is based on a year-long inquiry conducted by the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition into mental health and behaviour in schools. The inquiry aimed to explore the links between behaviour and mental health, to look at the impact of school behavioural policies on children and young people, and to understand what can be done to improve the approach to behaviour and mental health in schools.

The inquiry asked young people, parents, carers, and professionals their views on current approaches to behaviour management and mental health in schools and how they can be improved, via an online survey and evidence sessions.

Key findings

A wide range of factors can influence a young person's behaviour in school, including family life, their feelings about the school environment, and issues happening outside of school and the family home. In particular, we heard that a young person's behaviour is strongly linked to their mental health and their special educational needs and disabilities. Of the young people and parents and carers who took part in the call for evidence:

- **81% of young people** and **87% of parents and carers** agreed that a young person's behaviour is linked to their mental health
- **61% of young people** and **81% of parents and carers** agreed that a young person's behaviour is linked to special educational needs and disabilities

Guidance from the Department for Education states that it is up to individual schools to develop their own best practice for managing behaviour. However, often schools tend to prioritise punitive and reactive approaches to behaviour, whereby schools respond reactively to behaviour when it occurs. Behaviour policies can also take a 'one size fits all' approach, meaning that the individual needs of young people are not considered when responding to their behaviour. Of the young people who took part in the call for evidence:

- **65% of young people** stated that schools are not responsive to mental health needs when dealing with behavioural issues and **50% said** they are not responsive to special educational needs and disabilities within this context.
- **61% of young people** said they do not feel listened to when their behaviour is being discussed by their school.

What is more, our findings highlight that punitive approaches to behaviour management are harming children and young people's mental health. Young people, parents, and professionals who took part in the inquiry reported that the use of behaviour management techniques such as **removal rooms, exclusions, suspensions, and fines and penalties for non-attendance** are some of the most detrimental techniques used by schools.

When asked about the impact of experiencing behaviour management techniques on their mental health, some young people described feeling negatively about themselves, noting **feeling worthless, invisible, and disappointed in themselves**. Young people also noted that experiencing behaviour management techniques can lead them to dislike school and can increase feelings of anxiety, particularly in relation to school attendance. Where a child had existing mental health problems and needs, experiencing behaviour management techniques made these difficulties worse.

The inquiry also identified some groups of children and young people who are disproportionately impacted by school behavioural policies, including children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, those from racialised communities including Black and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Communities, and young people from low-income backgrounds. Some schools use blanket approaches to behaviour which can fail to take into account, and accommodate, individual needs and disabilities. Such approaches risk being discriminatory and in contradiction to school duties under the Equality Act 2010.

Whilst it is important for schools to have a range of behavioural management techniques available to use when misbehaviour does occur, the young people, parents and carers who took part in the inquiry expressed concerns about their effectiveness in improving behaviour. Of the young people who told us they had experienced behaviour management techniques at school, **over half (55%)** said they were not effective in improving their behaviour.

Both young people and parents-carers reported that the use of these techniques can ignore the root causes of behaviour such as SEN and disabilities and mental health problems, meaning that circumstances behind the behaviour are never actually addressed. This can leave schools trapped in a cycle of worsening behaviour and unmet need.

What needs to change?

The report identifies the following areas of change that should be prioritised by government and schools. However, it is important to note that schools cannot make change alone, and much more support is needed from the Government in terms of the resources and investment that is available to schools. We consistently heard about the challenges schools are facing in meeting the growing scale of need, and how much more resource and capacity is needed throughout the whole system to ensure that schools can effectively meet the needs of all pupils.

- **A culture shift in how behaviour is viewed in schools**

Evidence provided to the inquiry suggested that behaviour must be seen as a form of communication and that signs of poor behaviour may be an indication that a child has an unmet or undiagnosed need or is struggling to communicate what is going on for them. While this may not be the case in all incidents of misbehaviour, a much more coordinated approach to identifying and supporting needs in schools is needed in order to intervene early and prevent behaviour from worsening. Consequently, there needs to be a culture shift in how behaviour is viewed in schools, with more emphasis to be placed on proactively identifying and responding to children and young people's needs and putting in place strategies to de-escalate behaviour at an earlier stage.

There is also very little evidence in place to suggest that the use of punitive techniques are effective in improving behaviour. Instead, evidence suggests that a shift of focus from managing a child's behaviour towards teaching a child learning behaviours may be more effective in improving behaviour than a focus on punitive approaches (Education Endowment Fund, 2019).

- **A more coordinated approach to school policy**

The Government has launched several programmes of work over recent years to improve behaviour and discipline in schools, and to respond to mental health. Concerns have been expressed regarding the alignment between these programmes of work, and how efforts to improve both behaviour and mental health can sometimes work against one another. We believe that the behaviour and mental health programmes of work need to be better aligned to ensure they are supporting one another in the work that they are doing, and that the links between behaviour, mental health and special educational needs and disability are recognised throughout all streams of work.

We have seen some progress in this area with the departmental prioritisation of whole school and college approaches to mental health and wellbeing, however further work is needed. There are existing programmes of work that can be expanded further to ensure better alignment between behaviour and mental health approaches. This could include expanding the remit of Mental Health Support Teams to work with behaviours that concern and including a focus on mental health and wellbeing within the scope of the Behaviour Hub programme.

- **Increasing the availability of mental health support in schools**

The inquiry consistently heard the importance of targeted mental health support within schools. There have been some welcome steps to increase the availability of mental health support in education settings through provisions such as Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) and the senior lead for mental health. However, there have been longstanding concerns about the implementation and speed in which all areas of the country will have access to this additional support.

Findings from Barnardo's suggest that the current timetable for the roll out of MHSTs leaves around 6.5 million children without access in the medium term, further exacerbating inequality in access to support (Barnardo's, 2023). What is more, funding for MHSTs beyond 2023/24 is still yet to be decided (Department of Health and Social Care written answer, 2021) meaning there is no guarantee on how much further, or how quickly, MHSTs will be expanded to children and young people across all education settings.

- **Full implementation of whole education approaches to mental health**

Whole education approaches to mental health and wellbeing have also been recognised as an integral factor by the Government in protecting and promoting the mental health and wellbeing of pupils in education. Evidence highlights the effective role that whole school approaches have to play in supporting mental health, wellbeing and behaviour (Early Intervention Foundation, 2021).

The Coalition has long been calling for such approaches to be fully implemented across the country, but significant gaps still remain. We heard about the significant challenges that education settings face in relation to implementing such approaches, including challenges with resources and capacity to roll out these approaches in the face of shrinking budgets and increasing academic pressures. There is therefore a need for a more systematic implementation of a whole education approaches across all settings, which should be sufficiently resourced and prioritised.

- **Building systems of support around schools and families**

Schools cannot respond to pupils needs alone and are therefore reliant on the wider service provision that is available in the local area. However, links between schools and NHS Children and Young People’s mental health services (CYPMHS) are not consistently good across all areas, and where NHS CYPMHS experience long waiting lists and demand, there is subsequently an increased demand on schools to hold more complex cases for mental health support while children and families wait.

While ongoing commitments to expand and transform specialist mental health services for children and young people are welcomed, progress continues to be slow and variable. There are opportunities to build on existing government initiatives to increase access to specialist mental health provision, and to grow the workforce through greater investment and a clearer implementation roadmap. The Government should use the new Major Conditions Strategy to set out how it will achieve this and outline steps towards a longer-term vision for the mental health system.

What can you do to support?

- Raise the report and the key findings in oral questions and parliamentary debates.
- Share the report on social media using the #BehaviourandMentalHealthinSchools.
- Meet with us to discuss the key findings from the report and how we can support you in your work.

Questions to Government:

- What plans do the Government have to ensure the roll-out of Mental Health Support team is continued beyond 2023/24?
- How will the Government ensure that all education settings have implemented whole education approaches to mental health and wellbeing?
- To what extent will the Major Conditions Strategy prioritise children and young people’s mental health?
- How does the Government plan to align its behaviour, mental health and special educational needs and disabilities programmes of work?

To read the report and its accompanying documents, use this QR code:



About the Children and Young People’s Mental Health Coalition

The Children and Young People’s Mental Health Coalition brings together over 260 organisations to campaign and influence policy, with and on behalf of infants, children and young people, in relation to their mental health and wellbeing. We do not represent any one organisation, approach, or professional group, but come together to provide a strong unified voice speaking out about children and young people’s mental health.

For more information, please contact Charlotte Rainer, Coalition Lead, at Charlotte.Rainer@cypmhc.org.uk

References

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