



Behaviour and mental health in schools inquiry

Key messages

This short briefing summarises the key findings and messages from the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition's behaviour and mental health in schools' inquiry.

The inquiry was launched in 2022 to explore:

- The links between behaviour and mental health
- The impact of school behaviour policies on the mental health of children
- What can be done to strengthen approaches in schools to better support behaviour, mental health and wellbeing.

We have also collected [case studies of best practice](#) from schools and local areas and have created a [resources document](#) based on the evidence we gathered.

Our approach

We established a parent-carer advisory group and a youth advisory group to support us with the project and to ensure their voices were placed at the centre of this research.

We asked young people, parents, carers and professionals about their views on school behaviour policies, their impact on mental health and their perspective on what change is needed through three online surveys. A total of 840 people responded to our surveys, including:

- 111 young people
- 495 parents and carers
- 234 professionals and practitioners.

We also held evidence sessions with a range of stakeholders to gather further insight and evidence.

What are the links between behaviour and mental health?

Through the inquiry, we were keen to explore how behaviour management techniques impacted pupils with recognised and unrecognised mental health problems and special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities, and how these contribute to behaviour.

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. Many people told us in their evidence that behaviour must be seen as a form of communication and that signs of poor behaviour may be an indication that a child has unmet or undiagnosed needs or is struggling to communicate what is going on for them.

Young people and parents-carers told us overwhelmingly that a young person's behaviour is strongly linked to their mental health and their special educational needs and disabilities.

- **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.

Professionals and practitioners also shared their views on what they believe to be the underlying drivers of behaviour, based on their experiences. Professionals told us how experiences of trauma, growing levels of anxiety, high levels of unmet need, and challenges in accessing timely assessments and support is contributing to a rise in behaviour problems in school.

How is behaviour currently being addressed in schools?

The Government has launched several programmes of work over recent years to improve behaviour and discipline in schools, and to respond to mental health. Most recently this includes the launch of the behaviour hubs programme and a refresh of their main guidance document for schools on behaviour.

Professionals and practitioners told us there were mixed views on the effectiveness of government guidance on behaviour. Whilst some suggested refreshed guidance has added to the pressures facing schools, others told us that it is challenging to assess the impact as schools interpret and adapt the guidance in different ways.

It is up to individual schools to develop their own best practice for managing behaviour. Despite overarching guidance and advice from the Department for Education, there is no statutory requirement for schools to implement this. This means it can be challenging to try and identify a single approach to behaviour across schools.

However, we heard how schools tend to prioritise punitive and reactive approaches to behaviour. We also heard how behaviour policies can take a 'one size fits all' approach, meaning that the individual needs of young people are not considered when responding to their behaviour.

Responsiveness of school behaviour policies to mental health, SEN and disabilities

When we asked professionals if they believe current government guidance on behaviour is promoting the mental health of pupils, **over half (59%)** of those responding to our survey felt that current guidance was promoting pupil mental health to some or little extent, while **just over a third (34%)** felt that it wasn't having a positive influence at all.

Young people who took part in our call for evidence also told us that school behaviour policies are not responsive their needs.

- **Over half of young people (52%)** who took part in our survey told us that their school is not responsive to their needs when dealing with behavioural issues
- **61%** said they do not feel listened to when their behaviour is being discussed by their school
- **65%** of young people said schools are not responsive to mental health needs when dealing with behavioural issues and **50%** said they are not responsive to SEN and disabilities within this context.

When we asked young people, parents-carers and professionals to share their experiences of behaviour management in schools following the Covid-19 pandemic, we found a mixture of responses. While some told us that schools had become much stricter in their responses to behaviour, others told us more positive stories of how some schools reviewed their policies and approaches to ensure that the needs of children and young people were supported during this turbulent period.

The impact of behaviour management techniques on young people's mental health

Government guidance sets out that teachers can sanction pupils if they misbehave, break a rule, or fail to follow reasonable instructions and that these must be clearly communicated. For the purpose of the report, we are referring to these sanctions/ approaches as behaviour management techniques. Government guidance to schools also sets out a range of behaviour management techniques that schools can use to respond to misbehaviour.

We wanted to explore how different behaviour management techniques used by schools impact young people's mental health on a scale from very harmful to very beneficial. Young people, parents-carers and professionals told us they believed the following behaviour management techniques are the most harmful to mental health based on their experiences and perspective:

- The use of removal rooms
- Permanent exclusions
- Suspension
- The use of fines/penalties for lateness or non-attendance
- Whole class punishment

Many young people told us how experiencing behaviour management techniques at school had some impact on their mental health. Some young people described feeling negatively about themselves, noting **feeling worthless, invisible, and disappointed in themselves**. Young people also told us how experiencing behaviour management techniques can lead them to dislike school and can increase feelings of anxiety, particularly in relation to school attendance.

Parents and carers further reported that where their child had existing mental health problems and needs, experiencing **behaviour management techniques made these difficulties worse**. In some cases, parents and carers told us how these experiences led their child to self-harm and experience suicidal thoughts.

The impact on specific groups of young people

We consistently heard evidence that some groups of children and young people are disproportionately impacted by school behavioural policies, and that these policies often fail to take into consideration the individual needs of and challenges faced by different young people. This includes:

- Young people with special educational needs and disabilities
- Young people from racialised communities, including Black and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities
- Young people from low-income backgrounds.

A lack of understanding on how to manage children who have differing abilities, and cultural and relationship expectations, can lead to confrontations between teachers and children, increasing the likelihood of specific groups of children having disciplinary problems, exceeding boundaries and thresholds, and ultimately being excluded.

Behaviour policies that also fail to recognise and accommodate pupils' individual differences risk being discriminatory. A school's duties under the Equality Act 2010 should take precedence over behaviour policies and practices.

The effectiveness of behaviour management techniques

Professionals highlighted the necessity of having a range of behavioural management techniques available to use in the school environment. However,

the young people, parents and carers we spoke to who had experience of these techniques 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.
- Of the parents and carers who said their child had experienced behaviour management techniques, **77%** said they were not effective at all in improving behaviour.

Both young people and parents-carers told us 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.

These techniques provided some benefit in terms of preventing young people from repeating the behaviour in the short term. Children and young people also told us they felt like they had to conform to behaviour policies due to feeling scared of the consequences of misbehaving. However, there was consensus that because they do not address individual needs, they are not effective in changing behaviour in the long term.

Evidence suggests that a shift of focus from managing behaviour towards teaching a child learning behaviours may be more effective in improving behaviour.

What can be done differently?

It is important for schools to have clear expectations in relation to pupil behaviour, and we heard about the importance of teaching pupils positive behaviours in order to thrive in the school environment. This should be coupled with a supportive, nurturing, and inclusive school environment, where every child is valued.

Many schools have taken steps to prioritise and embed relational and restorative approaches in order to improve both behaviour and mental health. Whole education approaches to mental health and wellbeing have also been recognised as an integral factor in protecting and promoting the mental health and wellbeing of pupils in education.

What became clear is that a culture shift is needed in how behaviour is viewed in schools. We need to move beyond a place where behaviour is seen as problematic and something that needs to be managed, to a much more curious place about what the behaviour could be telling us. By changing the way behaviour is viewed, needs can be identified at a much earlier stage.

Schools cannot make these changes alone and much more capacity is needed throughout the whole system to ensure schools can effectively meet the needs of all pupils.

Recommendations

National government:

A coordinated approach to school policy

1. The Department for Education should expand the Behaviour Hub programme to include a focus on mental health and wellbeing provision.
2. The Department for Education should establish a group to oversee the delivery of mental health and behaviour programmes of work to ensure alignment. This group should review and utilise the data collected by schools to inform planning and delivery, and to tackle inequalities.
3. The Department for Education should review attendance codes for schools to ensure there is a more nuanced approach, recognising that both mental health problems as well as SEN and disabilities can be recorded as authorised absences.
4. The Department for Education should take an anti-racist approach to policy making.

Staff development and wellbeing

5. The Department for Education should expand the National Professional Qualification in Behaviour and Culture to include training on identifying and addressing the underlying drivers of behaviour.
6. The Department for Education should mandate that teachers are given time for continuous professional development in the areas of behaviour, mental health, SEN and disabilities.
7. The Department for Education should update initial teacher training to ensure that content on mental health, SEN and disabilities is included.
8. The Department for Education should ensure that the Education Staff Wellbeing Charter is properly resourced, and that annual figures are published on how many schools have signed up to this.
9. The Department for Education, as a first step, should provide support to schools to implement their own staff reflective spaces. In the long term, the Department should explore supervision opportunities for Senior Leaders, using external qualified practitioners.

Improving the SEN and disability system of support

10. The Department for Education should ensure that all education staff are supported in their initial training and throughout their career to identify and address needs that underlie SEN and disabilities, and to understand statutory responsibilities to children and young people with SEN and disabilities.

11. The Department for Education should explore what the range of indicators of progress might look like for children and young people with SEN and disabilities that do not predominantly focus on academic progress.
12. The Government should use the SEND improvement plan to strengthen the availability of specialist support services and to address gaps in the specialist workforce.

Embedding whole education approaches to mental health and wellbeing

13. The Department for Education should develop a national implementation programme to support every school, college and university to adopt a whole education approach to mental health and wellbeing.
14. The Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care should commit to, and fund, the full national roll-out of Mental Health Support Teams across all schools and colleges in England.

The role of Ofsted

15. Ofsted should consult with key stakeholders to understand and define harmful behavioural practices in schools to further inform the 'Behaviour and Attitudes' judgement area in inspections.
16. Ofsted should look beyond just academic attainment and overall performance and also assess schools on their efforts to promote pupils' overall wellbeing, development and creative skills, including implementation of whole school approaches to mental health and wellbeing.

Integrated Care Systems:

Building systems of support around families and integrating services

17. Plans and strategies developed by Integrated Care Boards and Integrated Care Partnerships should set out how they will improve access to, and capacity in, specialist services, alongside how they will map local offers of support.
18. Integrated Care Boards should ensure that school representatives contribute to strategic planning and the commissioning of children and young people's mental health support.

Schools:

Putting relationships at the centre of the school culture

19. School leaders should commission staff training around relational and restorative approaches to help make the necessary changes and build more inclusive and nurturing environments for all pupils.

Moving from a one size fits all approach

20. Staff in schools should shift away from the adoption of a one size fits all approach to behaviour and consider more flexible and tailored approaches to support that recognise pupils' individual needs and diversity.
21. All schools should ensure they take a whole school approach to anti-racism, equality and diversity, and comply with the latest guidance and legislation in this area. This should include ensuring all staff working with pupils receive relevant training.
22. School leaders and governing boards should collect and monitor data relating to the experiences of pupils with protected characteristics and those facing inequalities to plan effective provision and address any disparities. This should include qualitative data from pupils and families to build richer insights into their experiences.

The role of school governors and academy trustees

23. Members of school governing boards and academy trustee boards should be involved in the development and approval of school behaviour policies and should work alongside school leaders to routinely review implementation of the policy and track progress.

Improved mental health knowledge and awareness in schools

24. Schools should explore how to integrate mental health and wellbeing within the school curriculum and take steps to embed a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing, so that it forms a central part of the school culture.
25. Schools should develop a specific mental health and wellbeing policy, setting out how they will meet all 8 principles of a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing. Audits should be carried out regularly by school leaders to assess how well they are meeting the aims of this policy.

Listening to children and young people

26. Schools should review their co-production practices to ensure they are regularly listening to the voices of children and young people.

Working with families

27. School staff should proactively build relationships with parents and carers at the earliest opportunity to support pupils' learning journeys.
28. Teachers and school leaders must ensure they communicate school expectations around behaviour, including what is set out in key school policies and approaches taken.
29. Schools should create opportunities for parents and carers to voice their views and have a say in decision-making.
30. School leaders should seek to address and eliminate the culture of parent-carer blame where it exists.

About The Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition

Our vision: For all babies, children and young people to grow up in a society that prioritises, invests, listens and attends to their mental health and wellbeing. We listen to, and learn from members, supporters, children and young people and families, using this knowledge to influence and shape policy, systems and practice.

For more information, check out our website: www.cypmhc.org.uk

Follow us on Twitter: @CYPMentalHealth

Contact us: info@cypmhc.org.uk

