Increasing Inclusion: Making the Case for Preventing Primary School Suspensions and Exclusions

Summary

Chance UK provides early intervention support to children age 5-13 and their families to help them develop social and emotional skills, to build resilience in a changing world. The charity has been providing intensive support to children across a number of London boroughs for over 25 years.

In the Autumn 2019/20 term almost 30,000 primary school aged children received a suspension and just under 500 children were permanently excluded.

Although school exclusion has been the subject of various reviews, the focus has largely been on secondary schools because of the greater numbers of exclusions. However, in the Autumn 2019/20 term (the last term before Covid) suspensions (previously called fixed-term exclusions) at primary school increased by 21%, compared to a 12% rise at secondary school. During the same period, permanent exclusions increased by 20% at primary school compared to 3% at secondary school.

In our own direct work with children, 1 in 7 of the young people we worked with last year had experienced either a suspension or permanent exclusion at primary school.

"When my son was in reception, he was excluded 17 times and that wasn't including the unauthorised 'you need to come pick up your son' times... If I didn't get a call by 10am I knew I could eat my breakfast." Parent

With the government's current focus on reviewing the Behaviour in Schools and Exclusions guidance, along with the publication of the SEND Review Green Paper and Schools White Paper, we believe that there is an opportunity to review and reshape support for children who are at risk of exclusion.

This briefing will explore primary school exclusions in more detail, setting out why exclusions at primary school level are a problem, some of the key issues that we believe are leading to increasing numbers of primary school exclusions and how children can be better supported to prevent exclusion.

We believe there is an urgent need to tackle primary school suspensions and exclusions and we recommend that the government commits to preventing exclusions at primary school. **We believe this can be achieved by working with schools and other services to strengthen early intervention support to children and families to help prevent the risk of exclusion.**

'It would be much easier to exclude than to do all the work that the school is doing, but the children are worth the effort. We really need these young people to know that we are not scared of their pain, and when trauma is expressed as anger, we can deal with it. Because if we can't, how can we expect them to?" Assistant Head for Inclusion, Henry Fawcett Primary School, Lambeth

The current situation

In the last full school term before Covid-19 (Autumn 2019/20), the number of permanent exclusions at primary school increased by 20% and suspensions rose by 21% compared to the same period in 2018/19. This is in contrast to just a 3% increase in permanent exclusions and a 12% increase in suspensions at secondary school level over the same period.[1]

Almost 30,000 primary school aged children received a suspension in the Autumn 2019/20 term and just under 500 children were permanently excluded.[2] Although the numbers of children being excluded at primary school level are much lower than at secondary school, these figures are still significant and concerning as they show that increasing numbers of younger children are missing out on education at a vital time during their development.

Government guidance states that suspensions and permanent exclusions are to be used when other interventions to improve behaviour have been exhausted and that exclusions are only to be used as a last resort.[3] However, with increases in numbers of children being excluded at primary school level, it is important that we understand what is contributing to this trend and work to turn the tide.

In the context of recent government consultations reviewing the Behaviour in Schools and Suspension and Permanent Exclusions guidance, the Green Paper on SEND support for children in schools, in addition to the Schools White paper, there is now an opportunity to comprehensively review and reshape support for children who are at risk of exclusion. This briefing will set out why primary school exclusions are a problem, what is contributing to exclusions and what we can do to help.

Why are primary school exclusions a problem?

"Louie was just five years old when he was expelled from his first school. This was before we had an ADHD diagnosis and the first I knew that there were any issues was when he started to play out. Eventually another school place was found for him but over the next year he was excluded many times for his behaviour. It was so stressful; I'd dread hearing the words 'can we just have a moment'." - Mary-Ann, Mother of Louie aged 10 years

Some children as young as five years old receive either suspensions or permanent exclusions. For example, in 2018/19[4], over 10,000 children age five and under received a suspension.[5] When children are suspended or excluded, this can lead to lower attendance at school and academic underachievement.[6] This means that children as young as five are already at risk of falling behind on their education, almost as soon as their school journeys have begun.

School exclusions inequitably impacts some groups of children more than others. It is well documented that particular groups of children are excluded from primary school at disproportionate levels. Children from particular ethnic backgrounds, children with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND) and children living in low-income families are all more likely to experience a suspension or permanent exclusion.

The 2018/19 government data[7] shows that:

- Black Caribbean children were twice as likely as White British children to be permanently excluded and 1.8 times more likely to be suspended at primary school.

[1] https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/permanent-and-fixed-period-exclusions-in-england/2019-20
[2] https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/permanent-and-fixed-period-exclusions-in-england/2019-20
[3] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/921405/20170831_Exclusion_Stat_guidance_Web_version.pdf
[4] We refer to the 2018/19 data because it was the last full academic year before Covid-19. The 2019/20 Exclusions data shows an overall decrease in the numbers of children receiving suspension and permanent exclusions and it is likely that Covid lockdowns and school closures contributed to this.
[5] https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/permanent-and-fixed-period-exclusions-in-england/2018-19
[6] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/800028/Timpson_review_of_school_exclusion_literature_review.pdf
[7] https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/permanent-and-fixed-period-exclusions-in-england/2018-19

- Boys were over 8 times more likely than girls to be permanently excluded and just under 7 times more likely to be suspended.
- Children with an Educational Healthcare Plan were suspended at a rate of 13% compared to a rate of 0.4% for children without SEND.
- Children in receipt of Free School Meals were almost 6 times more likely to be permanently excluded than children not in receipt of FSM. And were 4.5 times more likely to be suspended.

This disproportionality is concerning because many of these characteristics are protected under the Equality Act 2010. There are several reasons why these groups are more likely to be excluded, with research suggesting that bias and discrimination in the cases of ethnicity, gender and disadvantage plays a role.[8]

Whilst the impacts of school exclusion, particularly at secondary school level have been well-documented, less research has been conducted into the impacts of exclusion at primary level. It is likely because of the small numbers of children who are excluded at primary school in comparison to secondary school, however previous research that explored outcomes of children at secondary school who had been permanently excluded at primary school found that many children went on to have poor outcomes, and 36% of the sample went on to receive exclusions at secondary school.[9]

Other research has documented the impacts of exclusion on older children and has shown that exclusions can have immediate impacts including affecting children's relationships, wellbeing and self-esteem; and long-term impacts such as being more likely to go on to be NEET if they finish Key Stage 4 in AP, or more likely to be involved in, or a victim of, crime later in life.[10, 11, 12]

Strong relationships between exclusions, mental health, wellbeing, and behavioural difficulties also exist. For example, children who have been excluded report higher perceived stress, lower levels of empathy, poorer problem solving, goal setting and emotion management.[13] Similarly, other research has found that children with psychological distress and mental-health problems are more likely to be excluded, and that exclusion predicted increased levels of psychological distress three years later.[14]

If children who are excluded from primary school, either on a fixed-term basis (suspended) or permanently, do not receive the support they need to address underlying causes leading to exclusion, it is likely that they will have continued lower attendance and attainment, as highlighted above, which may make it more likely they go on to experience exclusion at secondary school.

Consequently, it is vital that we shine a light on primary school exclusions to understand what can lead to exclusion and how we can intervene early to support young children at risk of exclusion.

Supporting children at risk of suspension or exclusion

"I am worried about what will happen at secondary school. My son says to me 'what if I can't get into school', I know he's scared and I have to fight back tears when I think about it. I don't want them to look at his past and think about that rather than his future." Parent

Excluding children from school often fails to address underlying challenges that may have led to the exclusion and it is likely that when a child returns to school following a suspension, the situation that caused the suspension is not resolved and the same challenges may continue.

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[8]https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/800028/Timpson_review_of_school_exclusion_literature_review.pdf

[9] https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/4693/1/RR271.pdf

[10] https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/youth-voice-on-school-exclusions

[11] https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/destinations-of-ks4-and-ks5-pupils-2015-revised

[12] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/serious-violence-strategy

[13] https://www.ucl.ac.uk/evidence-based-practice-unit/sites/evidence-based-practice-unit/files/headstart_evidence_briefing_3.pdf

[14] https://www.exeter.ac.uk/news/research/title_595920_en.html

Behaviour rarely happens in isolation and it is vital that children are supported to address any wider issues, whether that is a diagnosed or undiagnosed SEND, Social, Emotional or Mental Health difficulty or any other challenges they may be facing at home or in school. Intervening early to support children with additional needs can help to prevent an exclusion but many children are unable to access that support which can cause situations to escalate and may result in exclusion.

Behaviour as Communication of Unmet Needs

One of the most common reasons cited for exclusion is 'persistent disruptive behaviour'. Behaviour is typically an expression of unmet need and excluding children for persistently disruptive behaviour fails to address the root cause of the behaviour. In a recent consultation with families who have experience of school exclusions, parents shared with us that their children have been labelled as 'disruptive' at school due to a lack of understanding about the individual child when in reality, their children often have an undiagnosed SEND, Social, Emotional or Mental Health need or they may have experienced trauma.[15]

> *"The school failed my son terribly. He needed an EHC plan but we were never informed... the more they failed him, the worse his behaviour became."* – Mother of 10 year old boy

Children also recognise the importance of understanding why certain behaviour might occur and in a recent consultation, a primary school child shared with us in the context of behaviour and exclusions that "you are disappointed because you know what you have done but it carries on." If schools and other services do not work with children to understand why a certain behaviour occurred then it is likely the behaviour will continue.

Case Study

Cameron was in Year 5 and had previously been excluded from school, he is now attending a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). He had previously been diagnosed with ADHD and had also been violent and disruptive at school and had difficulty focusing on structured activities or following instructions. Cameron was referred to Chance UK by his PRU and was matched with a mentor who worked with him on activities that helped him to increase his focus, improve his literacy skills and learn a new skill. Supporting Cameron with the challenges that were causing his behaviour and work to improve communication between Cameron and his mum has helped both Cameron's home and school life.

Early Intervention and Identification of Need

It's essential that children are able to access support as early as possible both in school and in their wider communities to prevent any low-level needs from escalating. Left unidentified and unsupported, children's needs may be expressed through challenging behaviour in school which may result in suspension or permanent exclusion. In recent years, and particularly in light of the pandemic, it is becoming increasingly difficult for children and families to access the right support at the right time.

Case Study

Frank has anxiety and autism and exhibits self-harming behaviour. He has experienced a number of suspensions/fixed-term exclusions at primary school and was referred to Chance UK for support with his mental health. With mentoring support from Chance UK due to come to an end soon, his Youth Worker has been looking for onward support services for Frank. She believes that further one-to-one support would benefit him as he struggles to work in groups. However, the Youth Worker could not find any appropriate step-down services for children under 11, and of the few that existed, referrals are not currently accepted or the child has to be at crisis point to access help. Frank has also been waiting for an assessment for ADHD for nine months and the family are unable to access services that might help and support him until the diagnosis is received.

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[15] https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/reports/2020/the-rsa-pinball-kids-preventing-school-exclusions.pdf

Unidentified and Undiagnosed Needs

We know from working with families in our services, that many of the children we support who have experienced school exclusion go on to be diagnosed with a SEND or social, emotional and mental health needs. However, families face difficulties in reaching that point. Parents have shared with us that they often struggle to find information, they do not know which services exist or how to access a referral, despite the fact that they know their child needs support. This can be an extremely difficult time for many families who sometimes cannot access support until the situation has reached crisis point.

Case Study

Louie was just five years old when he was suspended from his first school. His mum first realised there were challenges when he would exhibit destructive behaviour at school, throwing objects around rooms and the school would call her to collect him. The school responded at first by excluding Louie for a few days at a time. However, after one incident where Louie climbed a steep staircase and threatened to jump off, the school permanently excluded him. He was home schooled for a while, before moving to another school but eventually he started receiving fixed-term exclusions/suspensions again in response to behaviour incidents. It wasn't until Louie was nine years old, four years since his first exclusion that his Mum was finally able to access the support they needed, following a trip to the GP when she was at breaking point, which resulted in Louie's diagnosis for ADHD.

Waiting Times

Even once children have been referred to services, the waiting times to access support can be long and challenging. With increasing numbers of children referred to support services, waiting times are increasing. For routine cases within children's mental health services, the average wait is nine weeks for a first appointment and a total of thirteen weeks to start treatment. Waiting Times for Autistic Spectrum Disorder services are significantly longer, at an average of 22 weeks.[16]

Furthermore, the numbers of children waiting for either assessments or support itself once a referral has been made has been increasing over recent years, and has been exacerbated by the pandemic. For example, between April and June 2021, 190,271 children aged 0-18 year old were referred to Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), up 134% on the same period in 2020. Similarly, 8,552 children and young people were referred for urgent or emergency crisis care between April and June 2021, up 80% on the same period in 2020.[17]

Often, children working with Chance UK are on waiting lists for support when they are first referred to our service and when our intervention ends nine months later, we find that many children are still on waiting lists and are yet to receive help that could further support their needs.

Children Who Don't Meet Thresholds for Support

There are also many children who are at risk of exclusion, with emotional and behavioural difficulties who do not meet thresholds for support, despite referrals and waiting lists. Recent research found that almost 65,000 children per year who miss out on Early Help services are re-referred to children's social care within 12 months.[18]

Many of the young people that work with Chance UK have low level needs, but left unsupported, these can develop into crisis. In our recent consultation with families, many parents spoke of not meeting the threshold for support when they were assessed by children's social care but were not signposted or referred to other preventative services.

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[16] https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/blogs/childrens-mental-health-services-data-behind-headlines

[17] https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/news-and-features/latest-news/detail/2021/09/23/record-number-of-children-and-young-people-referred-to-mental-health-services-as-pandemic-takes-its-toll

[18] https://media.actionforchildren.org.uk/documents/Too_Little_Too_Late_Report_Final.pdf

Families wanted more help to support their children who were at risk of exclusion, but instead their cases were closed and they were not offered a step-down referral to Early Help.

The Impacts of Covid

The complexity and level of need experienced by some families has also been exacerbated by Covid. For example, it was estimated that 1.5 million children will need support for mental health difficulties as a result of the pandemic.[19] Research from June 2020 found that even only a few months into the pandemic, parents of primary school aged children reported statistically significant increases in their child's emotional and behavioural difficulties.[20]

The increase in children's needs can be demonstrated by increased demand on support services.[21] Issues with demand and service capacity were prevalent even before the pandemic, with local authorities struggling to keep up with their statutory duties for the most vulnerable children.[22] As a result, many early intervention services have been severely reduced, which means that many children's low level needs are now going unidentified.

In the 2019/20 academic year, the numbers of children receiving exclusions decreased, most likely as a result of school closures and lockdowns due to the pandemic. However, as children return to school full-time, we are concerned that rates of exclusion will return to pre-pandemic levels or continue to rise. As some of the above data highlights, the Covid-19 pandemic has led to an increase in social, emotional and mental health needs and complex cases among children and young people and these additional needs may be expressed as challenging behaviour in school, which may put more children at risk of exclusion.

[19] https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/news/10-million-people-england-may-need-support-their-mental-health-result-pandemic-says-centre-mental-health

[20] https://emergingminds.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CoSPACE-Report-4-June-2020.pdf

[21] https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/news-and-features/latest-news/detail/2021/09/23/record-number-of-children-and-young-people-referred-to-mental-health-services-as-pandemic-takes-its-toll

[22] https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-05/Analysis%20funding%20and%20spending%20on%20children%20and%20young%20people%27s%20services%20-%20May%202020.pdf

Preventing Exclusions at Primary School

As children return to school full-time, following an unprecedented two years that has had significant impacts on children's mental health and well-being, it is more important than ever that children can access the support they need to prevent their needs from escalating. We believe that through intervening early, any underlying challenges that may be affecting children in school can help to prevent school exclusions.

School Case Study – Henry Fawcett Primary School, Lambeth

Henry Fawcett Primary School in Lambeth introduced a Relationships and Behaviour policy that aims to avoid exclusions and instead has a strong focus on responding to behaviour in a holistic and trauma-informed way. The school's policy is based on an understanding of psychological and neurological development and how this impacts behaviour. This change came at the time of Covid-19 and a change in leadership which felt like a good opportunity to reshape how the school responds to behaviour.

The school shared that the work has been challenging at times, with lots of difficult conversations across the school to shift the culture but they believe it is an extremely worthwhile change. A number of key changes has helped the school to successfully shift their ways of working. Low level behaviour is responded to with consistent and clear boundaries, with kindness and without escalation. Responding to more serious challenges, the school implements a Restorative Response which seeks to understand the emotions and motivations of all involved, increase empathy and work collaboratively towards a resolution. Consequences in response to undesirable behaviour are only ever restorative and, rather than a punishment, they focus on individuals taking responsibility for their actions and finding ways to move forwards.

The school prioritises this work for the Inclusion team and the Senior Leadership team within the school. The Schools' Learning Mentor plays a crucial role in supporting children with behaviour throughout the school. For example, if a behaviour incident occurs between a pupil and a Teacher, the Learning Mentor will step in to take over the class while the pupil and Teacher take some time away to discuss the incident and repair their relationship. The school has found that this simple change has significant impacts, as previously, a child would spend time with the Learning Mentor away from the class and teacher, but this did not allow for those involved in the behaviour incident to discuss and repair the relationship and reach a resolution together.

The school has also worked on the way it communicates with parents to create more honest and open conversations. The school shared that they aim to contact parents when their child has achieved something positive at school, and genuinely listen to families as the experts on their own children. They have found this has helped them to build trusting relationships which has proved extremely valuable when the school does have to respond to a behaviour incident.

The school were able to share details of a number of young people, previously excluded or moved from other schools, who, with the right support, are now managing well, and often thriving, in their mainstream classes. Examples were also shared of behaviour incidents that would previously have led to an escalating sequence of exclusions, which the new policy had allowed to be effectively de-escalated and learning restored.

The Assistant Head for Inclusion told us that *"it would be much easier to exclude than to do all the work that (Henry Fawcett) school is doing, but the children are worth the effort. We really need these young people to know that we are not scared of their pain, and when trauma is expressed as anger, we can deal with it. Because if we can't, how can we expect them to?"*

Preventing exclusions requires a strong focus on holistic support for children who are at risk. In our recent consultation with families, many parents expressed their frustrations with sometimes fractured relationships between home and school, with parents feeling blamed or feeling their views were not taken into account.

"My relationship with the school has really gone downhill. At the start I was very quiet and respectful but I've realised over the years that you have to fight and be loud if you want to get the support you need. Sometimes I feel I want to

scream and I'm so tired of fighting for things that he should have because of his educational plan." Mary-Ann, Mother of Louie aged 10 years

We know from our own work with children and parents that positive relationships between school and home can be extremely helpful in supporting children.

Many teachers believe that repeatedly removing a child from class is detrimental to their learning and progress and teachers want support from other professionals and agencies to better meet pupils' needs to keep children in classrooms.[23] It is vital that all services that are involved with supporting a particular child, including schools, statutory services and voluntary agencies, work together to ensure that all of the family's wider needs are being met and that where appropriate, information is shared between services to take a whole-child approach.

Case Study

Chance UK worked with Carl, a nine-year-old child who had high mental health needs and expressed suicidal ideation. Carl was at risk of exclusion from school due to violent behaviour. The family already had a social worker and the school referred the child to CAMHS for an assessment. Carl was diagnosed with Autism and has been able to access support and attend an Alternative Provision school a few days a week. His parents also attend group sessions to get support with helping their child with Autism. Chance UK and the wider multi-agency team around the family have held a number of meetings and have maintained open communication throughout the process to ensure Carl is supported properly. Carl is now able to identify and talk about his emotions and his school offers him time away from class if he needs time to reflect. Since restarting school in the September term, he shared with his Youth Worker that he receives lots of certificates and stickers from school for his behaviour.

There is a great amount of good practice already happening across schools to support children at risk of exclusion but we know that supporting children with additional needs extends beyond the classroom. That's why we recommend that the government sets out a commitment to preventing primary school exclusions, with a focus on strengthening early intervention services for children and families. We believe that adequate support for schools, teachers, children and families will benefit everyone and prevent exclusions.

Chance UK would like to engage further with families, schools, local authorities and national government on the issue of primary school exclusions. We will be continuing work on this important issue going forwards and if you would like to get in touch to discuss our work, please message us on Twitter @ChanceUK

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[23] https://www.thersa.org/blog/2020/03/preventing-school-exclusions