

Sent to: cfe.behaviour@education.gov.uk

Behaviour Team
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
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Monday 9th August 2021

Dear Behaviour Team,

I am writing to provide a response on behalf of YoungMinds to the Department for Education's consultation on 'Behaviour management strategies, in-school units and managed moves'.

YoungMinds is the UK's leading charity championing the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. We put the experiences of children, young people and families at the heart of everything we do.

Our 360 Schools Community is a free digital and e-comms platform for school staff to access school resources, share information and best practice relating to resilience building, wellbeing and mental health. Our community continues to grow, with a total of over 21,674 school staff across England, and over 5,000 staff joining since the pandemic hit last March. Our school resources have been downloaded over 21,000 times during the same period.

Additionally, we work with a small number of teachers as part of our Teachers' Insights Group. This group provides teachers with a forum to discuss pressing issues in their school, and share best practice and insights into YoungMinds campaigns and policy proposals. This submission will draw on the insights and lived experiences of the children, young people, parents, carers and professionals that we work with, alongside wider research.

Summary

We welcome the Department's recognition of the vast range of challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic has posed for young people, their families and professionals in the school environment. The last 18 months have been characterised by uncertainty and upheaval, and many young people are dealing with multiple pressures, especially those who have been bereaved or experienced other trauma during this time. The pandemic

has also intensified existing inequalitiesⁱ amongst demographic groups, and emerging evidence shows that this may be reflected in widening the attainment gapⁱⁱ.

We are pleased that the call to evidence acknowledges the importance of the school setting as an environment characterised by a culture of safety, security and inclusion, particularly given the challenging circumstances we have faced as a society due to the pandemic. However, we are concerned that the Departmental guidance on behaviour can provide varying advice on best practice. The non-statutory Departmental guidance 'Mental Health and Behaviour in Schools' advocates the use of a whole-school approach to mental health, acknowledging the link between behaviour and underlying mental health concerns and traumatic experiencesⁱⁱⁱ. However, the 'Behaviour and Discipline in Schools' guidance does not mention mental health and advocates an approach more explicitly based around sanctions and 'regulating the conduct of pupils'^{iv}. We would encourage the department to ensure that the impact of mental health and behaviour is consistently recognised throughout its policies on behaviour in schools.

Additionally, we are concerned that the current focus on punitive 'zero-tolerance' approaches to behaviour and discipline will have a harmful impact on the mental health of children and young people. Further, we are concerned that some of the behaviour management strategies currently advocated by and in consultation for use in the Department will work to exacerbate existing socioeconomic inequalities and penalise marginalised young people, including many who will have experienced trauma both during and prior to the pandemic.

Supporting young people's mental health in school settings does not sit in opposition to the Department's aim of improving behaviour in schools. Conversely, operationalising a whole-school approach to mental health and behaviour that incorporates trauma-informed practice is central to creating an environment where all young people feel valued, supported and able to prioritise learning.

Mental health, trauma and behaviour

A safe school environment is a key protective factor for young people's mental health, and when discussing behaviour in the school environment, it is crucial to keep in mind the link to young people's mental health. In a school context, there is a chance that in promoting a suite of behaviour management mechanisms that a student body feels is overly punitive or disproportionate, young people may feel less likely that they can turn to other members of the school community for support.

As the Centre for Mental Health has noted, young people who have been exposed to trauma are more likely to have psychological and behavioural problems, which can then be exacerbated by increased risk of exposure to punitive behaviour policies^v. Research

on adversity by YoungMinds has shown that a ‘young person may adopt risky or challenging behaviours, which are frequently misinterpreted or criminalised by those who do not identify their full need’^{vi}.

YoungMinds’ Parents Helpline often receives calls from parents and carers of young people who have experienced punitive responses to their behaviour at school. Parents and carers have relayed that on some occasions, schools appear not to recognise and support the underlying needs and difficulties that are causing young people to display challenging behaviour, and resort to mechanisms such as placing young people on reduced timetables in lieu of providing dedicated support. For some young people, and notably young people with special educational needs, this lack of support can sometimes lead to the implementation of measures such as fixed-term and permanent exclusions.

Recent research by Mind has shown that 48% of young people surveyed said that they had been disciplined at school for behaviour that was due to their mental health, with one in four being subject to isolation^{vii}. However, with many young people also reporting that their behaviour stemmed from experiencing problems with their mental health, both from the COVID-19 pandemic and prior, it is worrying that in the first instance they were met with punitive measures. In both this research and research undertaken by YoungMinds^{viii}, young people responded that they were often not able to access support during the pandemic that they would usually have access to, and felt that previously available coping mechanisms were no longer viable.

In light of this, it is especially crucial that provision of in-school mental health support is widely available, and that young people who need support and understanding from the school community are not faced in the first instance with zero-tolerance behaviour management policies.

Zero-tolerance approaches to behaviour

As the call for evidence acknowledges, improving behaviour and discipline in schools has become an increasing focus for the Department in recent years. Reports such as Tom Bennett’s 2017 ‘Creating a Culture’ have been integral to shaping how behaviour and discipline are understood in the wider context of the school environment. This understanding of behaviour positions the behaviour of individual young people as reflective of the culture of the whole school, placing emphasis on individual responsibility for conduct.

In the above report, poor behaviour is described as any behaviour that ‘detracts from the academic and social success of the school community, along with behaviour that diminishes the dignity of staff or students’^{ix}. As the Centre for Mental Health notes, this conception of challenging behaviour is combined with a return to a narrative focused

primarily on discipline, using terminology such as ‘zero-tolerance’ and ‘sanctions’; and a behaviour agenda comprising of policies such as the behaviour hub programme and National Behaviour Survey^x.

Simultaneous with this renewed emphasis on behaviour, the consequences of perceived poor or challenging behaviour have become more pronounced. Rates of fixed-term exclusions reached a 13-year high in 2020, while rates of permanent exclusions showed a 60% increase from five years prior^{xi}. Challenging behaviour is the most common reason for young people to face fixed term exclusions^{xii}.

When used as a first resort, zero-tolerance policies ‘serv[e] as a catch-all device that does not discriminate between low-level, infrequent behaviour issues or serious offence and harm^{xiii}, thereby fostering a sense of unfairness and mistrust amongst young people. Additionally, an Education Select Committee inquiry in 2018 found that zero-tolerance behaviour policies were ‘creating an environment where pupils are being excluded for infractions which should be managed within the mainstream school environment^{xiv}.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, where many young people did not have access to a school setting for periods of time with peers for several months at a time, it has been observed that young people have often struggled to adapt to being back in the classroom. Organisations such as Ofsted have pointed to a link between an increase in challenging behaviour and time that young people have spent away from school since March 2020. An October 2020 report by Ofsted noted that ‘some pupils’ concentration or their mental and physical stamina have reduced. Some leaders said pupils were fatigued, ‘disconnected’ from learning or struggling to stay awake and alert^{xv}. In some cases, this was coupled with a deterioration in behaviour, including aggression and less willingness to follow school rules, which was connected to possible exposure to trauma in the home environment in the intervening time before schools reopened to all pupils.

In addition to the above, we are also concerned that the evidence base for the efficacy of zero-tolerance approaches to behaviour having a positive impact on young people’s attainment is lacking. The Education Endowment Foundation reports that ‘very few robust studies have assessed the impact of zero-tolerance policies on pupil outcomes, and no high-quality studies have been completed in English schools^{xvi}.

Based on the above evidence, we believe that zero-tolerance behaviour policies can have a negative impact on young people’s mental health, especially when underlying distress is not recognised, and that there is a lack of evidence that they benefit academic attainment or school experience.

Exacerbating existing inequalities

There is extensive evidence to show that taking overly punitive approaches to challenging behaviour serves to exacerbate existing inequalities amongst different demographic groups of young people. As the 2019 Timpson Review notes, some groups of children and young people including those on Free School Meals, those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), Black pupils and those from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller backgrounds were much more likely to be excluded than their peers^{xvii}. Further, in research carried out by LGBT+ charity Stonewall, eight percent of LGBT+ young people surveyed had experience of school exclusion^{xviii}.

The disproportionate impact of such measures is evidenced by the lived experiences of young Black people in particular. An article from the British Educational Research Association points to the literature review the Department for Education carried out alongside the Timpson Review in 2019, showing that ‘teachers often rationalise Black children’s exclusion as a “clash of cultures”’^{xix} ^{xx}. In this review, researchers found that the responses of school staff to the behaviour of Black pupils was often influenced by racialised stereotypes, which therefore led to the behaviour of Black pupils being characterised as problematic compared to the same behaviour in their non-Black peers.

Young Black people being more likely to experience punitive measures such as exclusion than their peers is not a recent phenomenon. A 2006 Department for Education report states that the exclusion gap between Black and non-Black pupils is based on the application of discriminatory policies, and that Black Caribbean pupils are still more likely to be excluded when free school meals, special educational needs, attendance and behaviour records are taken into account^{xxi}. Further research has shown that this has a long-term negative impact on the mental health of Black pupils, with a zero-tolerance approach to behaviour appearing to ‘intensify disadvantage over time’^{xxii}, as its punitive approach contributes to Black pupils feeling less safe and more threatened in school^{xxiii}.

Research by Mind on the link between school attendance and mental health showed that there was a particular correlation for young people from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller backgrounds. Of the young people interviewed from these communities, all but one reported experiencing racism at school and over half often missed school, with reasons cited including anxiety, difficulties managing anger due to issues at home, and the mental health impact of bullying at school^{xxiv}. The most recent Government absence data confirms this, with Gypsy and Roma young people absent from school 13% of the time, and Irish Traveller young people absent from school 18.8% of the time, compared to an average absence rate across all ethnicities of 4.8%^{xxv}.

After controlling for other characteristics, there is also a strong link between disadvantage and exclusion, with children who receive Free School Meals being 45% more likely to be excluded than other pupils^{xxvi}. Young people who may be classed as

vulnerable or who may be more likely to have experienced trauma, such as young people on a Children in Need Plan or a Child Protection Plan and looked-after young people, are also more likely to be permanently excluded (at 4, 3.5 and 2.3 times more likely respectively).

Research has shown that a positive school climate that enhances belonging and connectedness is a key protective factor for young people and their mental health^{xxvii}. For young people who have experienced adverse circumstances outside of the school environment, ensuring that challenging behaviour is met in the first instance with understanding rather than punitive measures is crucial to promoting a sense of belonging. Further measures such as coproducing behaviour policies, with particular emphasis on including young people from marginalised groups and who are most disproportionately impacted by zero-tolerance behaviour policies, may also help fostering a sense of belonging to the school community.

Towards a whole-school approach

A whole-school approach to mental health ‘refers to a universal, school-wide and multi-component approach to the promotion of children and young people’s wellbeing and mental health’^{xxviii}.

There is a strong and growing evidence base that universal, whole-school approaches to wellbeing, and social and emotional learning, can have a range of benefits for individual students, staff and whole-school populations^{xxix}, including higher engagement, attendance and academic attainment, improved behaviour, reduced anxiety, bullying and stigma^{xxx}. There is also some evidence that social and emotional learning programmes can have particular benefits for children who come from lower-income backgrounds or are performing below average academically^{xxxi}.

In contrast to zero-tolerance approaches, which often view challenging behaviour as a problem to be solved without recourse to the wider context of a young person’s circumstances, a whole-school approach allows for behaviour to be viewed holistically. Research undertaken by UCL’s Institute of Education in partnership with the National Education Union conveys that there is a robust evidence base in favour of approaches that promote belonging and wellbeing in order to improve student engagement and to reduce feelings of othering^{xxxii}.

A recent study by YoungMinds and UK Youth has shown that access to trusted adults – adults with whom young people have ‘an ongoing, positive and trusting relationship’^{xxxiii} – is a clear protective factor for young people’s mental health. School is one environment where access to trusted adults is available to the majority of young people, and promoting a whole-school approach to mental health assists in fostering positive relationships between young people and trusted adults.

As such, prioritising a whole-school approach to mental health, taking into account the impact of structural, socioeconomic and in-school factors to understand why young people may be exhibiting challenging behaviours is crucial to facilitating a safe, supportive and understanding school environment. Particularly in the wake of COVID-19, young people must be supported to reach their full potential, not punished for displaying distress. Below we have included recommendations we would be grateful for the Department and Behaviour Team to take into account.

Recommendations

- Implement a whole-school approach with trauma informed practice as a key cornerstone of behaviour policy

We recommend that a whole-school approach to mental health, wellbeing and social and emotional learning is a key component to any behaviour strategy undertaken by the Department. This should be complemented and underpinned by a trauma-informed understanding of behaviour and mental health, which is particularly crucial given the upheaval and often, trauma and grief, experienced by young people over the past 18 months. Further, given the clear link between behaviour and mental health, the planned National Behaviour Survey should include questions about pupil mental health and wellbeing and the provision of in-school support.

- Engage young people in the co-production of behaviour policies within the school environment

Fostering a sense of belonging in young people is integral to them viewing the school environment positively, thus allowing it to become a protective factor for their mental health. To increase a sense of belonging and involvement, where possible and appropriate we would recommend that behaviour policies are meaningfully co-produced with young people, ensuring that young people from groups who are disproportionately impacted by existing behaviour policies are included in the process.

- Commit to abolishing the use of isolation as a punitive mechanism

In line with the recommendation in Mind's recent education inquiry^{xxxiv}, we are supporting the call to ban the use of isolation as a way to tackle challenging behaviour in schools. For many young people whose challenging behaviour is the result of trauma, negative experiences in their lives both in and outside of school, or a diagnosable mental health condition or learning disability, inflicting isolation will not encourage the perception of school and school staff as a safe and supportive environment and community.

- Accelerate rollout of Mental Health Support Teams and Designated Senior Leads for Mental Health

We are pleased by the recent announcement of the decision to accelerate the rollout of Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) to reach 35% of schools by 2023, but this does not go far enough – particularly to help with COVID-19 recovery. Given that this means that 65% of schools will still not be able to access support from MHSTs by 2023, we believe that this rollout must be immediately expedited to reach more young people. This should be complemented by the immediate rollout of Designated Senior Leads for Mental Health.

- Supporting additional measures to provide mental health support in schools

Mental Health Support Teams must sit alongside other forms of support to ensure that as many young people are able to access help that works for them within the school environment. An early evaluation of the roll-out of Mental Health Support Teams highlighted a small number of instances where schools had disinvested in other forms of mental health support^{xxxv}; it is vital that MHSTs are complemented by other forms of in-school support, such as school counsellors, who will often have had more intensive training and who will be more likely to provide one-to-one support.

- Training on mental health as part of Initial Teacher Training and Continuing Professional Development

It is imperative that all trusted adults who work with young people have access to continual training on mental health. For teachers, this means that there should be much greater focus on young people's mental health in Initial Teacher Training, as well as further learning opportunities in their Continuing Professional Development. This should not be limited to teachers only; and should be rolled out in an appropriate format to all school staff.

- Accountability mechanisms must recognise schools' ability to understand and support young people with their mental health

Accountability mechanisms must work to centre understanding and support rather than punitive measures in the first instance, in line with an understanding of behaviour as an expression of distress. We recommend that the Behaviour and Attitudes judgement in the Ofsted inspection framework is reviewed to recognise more fully the work schools do understand the context of challenging behaviour and support pupils.

- Engaging parents, carers and young people should be the first port of call when young people are struggling to attend school, as opposed to recourse to sanctions

As Mind's recent education inquiry shows, issues with attendance can often stem from young people struggling with their mental health. This can be for reasons both within and outside of the school environment, such as bullying, trauma, caring responsibilities or a stressful home environment. As parent-led organisations including Square Peg and Not Fine in School have shown, the current approach to attendance difficulties can be counterproductive, particularly when mental health diagnoses or support are difficult to access. We recommend that the Department launches a review of attendance codes, in consultation with young people and parent-led organisations, to ensure that all families receive support and are treated with understanding if a child is struggling to attend school because of their mental health, rather than being threatened with sanctions.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this further with you and continue to engage with the Department throughout the consultation process.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss any of the points raised in this submission, please do not hesitate to get in contact (charlotte.watson@youngminds.org.uk).

Yours sincerely,

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YoungMinds

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ⁱⁱ Department for Education (2021): https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/962330/Learning_Loss_Report_1A_-_FINAL.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Department for Education (2018): https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/755135/Mental_health_and_behaviour_in_schools_.pdf

^{iv} Department for Education (2016): https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/488034/Behaviour_and_Discipline_in_Schools_-_A_guide_for_headteachers_and_School_Staff.pdf

^v Centre for Mental Health (2020): https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-01/Briefing_54_traumainformed%20schools_0.pdf

^{vi} YoungMinds (2016): https://youngminds.org.uk/media/1241/report_-_beyond_adversity.pdf

^{vii} Mind (2021): <https://www.mind.org.uk/media/8852/not-making-the-grade.pdf>

^{viii} YoungMinds (2020): <https://youngminds.org.uk/about-us/reports/coronavirus-impact-on-young-people-with-mental-health-needs/>

- ^{ix} Department for Education (2017): https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/602487/Tom_Bennett_Independent_Review_of_Behaviour_in_Schools.pdf
- ^x Centre for Mental Health (2021): <https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/blogs/behaviour-and-mental-health-towards-new-approach>
- ^{xi} <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/permanent-and-fixed-period-exclusions-in-england>
- ^{xii} National Education Union (2020): <https://neu.org.uk/place-belonging>
- ^{xiii} Ibid.
- ^{xiv} Department for Education (2019): https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/800028/Timpson_review_of_school_exclusion_literature_review.pdf
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- ^{xvi} Education Endowment Foundation: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Publications/Behaviour/EEF_Improving_behaviour_in_schools_Report.pdf
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