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Exclusion of autistic pupils

It feels like we have all the ingredients of a Perfect Storm. The impact of a funding crisis, the requirement for schools to meet the first £6,000 of SEN provision per pupil, and a [£536M funding gap in the high needs sector](#) have all led to reductions to in-school support from teaching assistants and intervention programmes.

This has resulted in a steady climb in exclusions over the last 4 years with [7,720 pupils permanently excluded in 2016/17](#). In the same year, 4,840 autistic pupils were given a fixed term exclusion (where they can return to school after a given period) and 125 permanently excluded from school. The majority of exclusions result from persistent and disruptive behaviour or physical assault against a pupil or adult, and yet we know that the behaviour of autistic pupils is often the result of sensory overload resulting in the fight, flight or freeze responses.

Under the [Equalities Act 2010](#), schools must not discriminate against pupils because of their disability, but there was an exemption for pupils with a 'tendency to physical abuse' which meant that if an autistic child lashes out when experiencing a meltdown, even if no reasonable adjustments have been made, they could legally be excluded. This has now changed. In a [landmark High Court ruling in August 2018](#), Judge Rowley found that the exclusion of an autistic pupil for behaviour arising from his autism was unlawful. She stated, "Aggressive behaviour is not a choice for children with autism".

The impact of exclusions on autistic pupils and their families is both severe and sometimes surprising. Exclusion can leave a child feeling:

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- angry
- confused
- lost without their school routines
- let down
- scared and uncertain.

Some children's self-esteem plummets and some become suicidal. Others find being out of a stressful environment a profound relief. Sadly, as found by Professor Tamsin Ford and colleagues in 2017, pupils with mental health issues are more likely to be excluded, and being excluded means an increased risk of mental illness. Even short-term exclusion had an impact up to 3 years later.

Schools have a duty of care to all pupils including those who are autistic (as well as their staff), so what can they do? There are a number of approaches being used in schools to improve learning within the classroom. Schools are using internal seclusion and isolation rooms - which work as a deterrent for neurotypical pupils but may well be a relief for the autistic pupil - alongside other approaches such as:

- [Ready to Learn](#)
- [Thrive](#)
- [restorative justice](#)
- [nurture groups](#).

These approaches may help some neurotypical students but they don't automatically make the reasonable adjustments needed by an autistic pupil.

[Steps to avoid the exclusion of autistic pupils](#), written for the Autism Education Trust by the National Autistic Society Exclusions Service and funded by the Department for Education, suggests:

1. Training - for example the [Autism Education Trust](#) to ensure that the school understands autistic pupils
2. SEN support - having people in place resourced to provide support when needed
3. Understanding the difficulties for each individual pupil
4. Making reasonable adjustments - which often requires changes to practice, rather than additional cost.
5. Education, Health & Care Needs Assessment (if necessary)

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Schools will continue to struggle to support autistic pupils if they are not provided with the appropriate training, resources and support to make it possible.

Fortunately, that's not the end of the story. Whilst training does cost money to roll out across a school, setting an autism-friendly school ethos is within the reach of all schools if they choose to implement the [AET Standards, Professional Competencies and Progression Frameworks](#), all of which provide a wealth of free resources consistent with the Ofsted frameworks and Quality Teaching Standards. Where these are in place and being used, staff are more confident in supporting autistic pupils and in helping them to make better progress in all areas of their learning (Cullen et al, 2013).

The vast majority of autistic pupils who are excluded should be able to return to school without the same issues reoccurring, but this very much depends on the school environment rather than the pupil. More of the same won't work, especially as the reason for the exclusion is unlikely to have been within their control in the first place.

The art of successful reintegration is therefore largely down to the willingness and skill of the staff. It takes:

- a genuinely inclusive ethos
- the ability to communicate effectively with the pupil using the strategies which work for them
- focussed listening to how being autistic affects their learning in school.

Rescuing a damaged relationship with an increasingly vulnerable pupil takes a strong commitment to work with them, their parents and outside agencies if it is to work and to get them back on the track of successful learning. It can happen and we need to make it work. Their future depends on it.

Further information

Sarah will be running a workshop on exclusions at the forthcoming National Autistic Society Professional Conference, 7 -8 March 2019 at the International Convention Centre, Birmingham.

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