

# Investigation of the causes and implications of exclusion for autistic children and young people

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# INVESTIGATION OF THE CAUSES AND IMPLICATIONS OF EXCLUSION FOR AUTISTIC CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

## RESEARCH REPORT

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With involvement and input from: The Autism Education Trust Young Person's Panel,  
The Autism Education Trust, The Communication Autism Team, Birmingham City Council,  
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	3
Background .....	3
This research .....	3
The perspective of the YPP on autistic involvement in research .....	5
The perspectives of the YPP in relation to the online questionnaires .....	6
EXCLUSION: DEFINITIONS, TYPES AND RATES OF EXCLUSION .....	7
Definitions and types of exclusion .....	7
Rates of exclusion .....	7
WHY DO EXCLUSIONS HAPPEN? .....	9
Official reasons given for exclusion .....	9
The perspectives of the AET Young Person's Panel on terminology related to behaviour .....	9
Underlying drivers for exclusion .....	10
Marketisation of education .....	11
Lack of awareness of the law .....	11
Lack of consistent systems and capability .....	12
Access to specialist support .....	13
Reasonable adjustments and professional development .....	14
The perspectives of the AET Young person's Panel on the literature review .....	16
THE PERSPECTIVES OF AUTISTIC PEOPLE, PARENTS AND EDUCATORS .....	17
The perspective of autistic children, young people and adults .....	17
The perspectives of parents .....	18
The perspectives of education leaders and a support service .....	18
The perspectives of the AET YPP regarding the findings from educational leaders .....	21
Summary .....	22
THE IMPACTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF EXCLUSION .....	23
Impacts on autistic children, young people and adults .....	23
Impact on families .....	25
INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORT: PREVENTING EXCLUSION .....	26
Child-focused .....	27
Whole-school focused .....	28
Policy-focused .....	30
RECOMMENDATIONS .....	31
The perspectives of the YPP on the recommendations .....	31
Policy recommendations .....	32
Professional Development .....	34
Interventions .....	34
LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY .....	35
CONCLUDING COMMENTS .....	36
DISCLAIMER .....	37
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	37
REFERENCES .....	38

# INTRODUCTION

## Background

A recent report found that autistic pupils are three times more likely to be regularly and unlawfully excluded from school for a fixed term than those who do not have Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), and that exclusions for autistic children and young people rose by 59% between 2011-2016 compared to a rise in overall exclusions of 4% over the same period (Cooke, 2018). In fact, every region in England has had an increase in the number of school exclusions for pupils on the autism spectrum of between 45% and 100% in the last five years, whilst exclusion rates for the general school population have fallen in some regions such as the South East (Cooke, 2018).

Educational exclusion is clearly a growing problem that seems to be affecting autistic children and young people disproportionately. As the proportion of autistic pupils classified in Department for Education (DfE) school population data is also increasing, this should be a priority within government planning. Although estimated UK prevalence figures for autism are typically quoted as being approximately 1% (Baird et al., 2006), official data from the DfE show a figure of 1.7% of pupils classified as autistic in schools. Furthermore, the 1.7 % in 2019/20 official data is probably an underestimate given the number of undiagnosed cases, and that some autistic pupils are likely categorised in the data as having Social Emotional Mental Health (SEMH) difficulties. It is noteworthy, during a time of lingering austerity and budget cuts, that educational exclusions cause a net cost to the UK economy of approximately 2.1 billion for every cohort of excluded pupils (Gill et al., 2017).

## This research

This research focused on England and the aims were to:

- Generate better understanding of the causes underlying the exclusions of autistic children and young people from Early Years, schools and Post 16 provisions.
- Investigate how various factors interplay in the exclusion of those children and young people.
- Highlight the impact of exclusion on the child or young person, and their family.
- Identify the challenges facing policy makers, school leaders, governors and Local Authorities.

The work of this project consisted of a *scoping review of the literature* related to school exclusions of autistic children and young people. We also collected data via *questionnaires* to parents of autistic pupils (n=203), educational leaders (n=91) and autistic adults (n=22) on the causes, the types and the consequences of school exclusion. We asked for opinions about a range of educational settings, including: Early Years; Schools and Post-16 provision; mainstream, special and specialist. We interviewed eight members of the Communication Autism Team (CAT) at Birmingham City Council (BCC). CAT is an outreach team providing specialist autism support to schools in Birmingham. Workshops with the Autism Education Trust (AET) Young Person's Panel (YPP) informed the findings and recommendations. The findings from the YPP are woven into this report, as well as key points being highlighted in text boxes, so that their input is clearly outlined. The text boxes outlining the YPP perspective provide summaries of points made in the focus group in relation to the literature review, the research design, the findings and recommendations.

The research outlined in this report was conducted before the Covid-19 pandemic. Towards the end of the first lockdown, we conducted research on the impact of the pandemic on the lives of families of autistic children and young people. Findings from that indicate that the long-term effects of the pandemic are likely to further exacerbate the issues outlined in this report.





## The perspective of the YPP on autistic involvement in research

### **The importance of the autistic perspective:**

The panel highlighted that it is crucial and obvious to involve autistic people in research about the lives of autistic people:

*...it's not only kind of inauthentic, if you don't involve autistic people in research, it's about them, but also if you take it to the furthest degree it can almost be dangerous, because it can keep stereotypes kind of like persisting.*

*It's really important to make the research more authentic, because if it's coming from the person who would be impacted by the output, then you could have a much better response.*

The panel felt that it should not only be perspectives coming from autistic people per se but specifically from autistic children and young people:

*If it's just parents' perspective, it becomes, it can sometimes become too easy if people are misinformed to spread bad views if we're not getting our voices heard.*

*...it's very valuable to get the information from people who have gone through that very recently because they will have that gift of hindsight, of being in a place that they can actually reflect on what's happened and give that information, and how it's not only affecting them in the past but will be affecting them as they go on into adulthood.*

### **How should the research team involve autistic people in future research?**

The panel highlighted the importance of involvement in all stages of the project

*Allow a full input, because we're coming at this from quite a sort of late stage in the process... ..But I think if we had the initial insight, even earlier than that I think that would have been a lot easier to really understand what they want to have, and what they want to achieve.*

*It can feel like playing catch up when you're involved, later on, rather than from the start.*

### **The panel offered insights into how to better recruit autistic respondents:**

*Sending out some leaflets to say what the project is about. So promoting it a lot more widely. Yeah, promotions, and they could also have a taster session like a group of how the project is and see if they like it or not.*

*Do think really carefully about the [recruitment] plan of your survey. And so where did it go? Where could it have gone? And were there groups that you could have gone to youth groups? If you had come through the panel, they have lots of autistic friends themselves they could have gotten farther and farther and farther.*

*Subjective language can be confusing for autistic people – easily misinterpreted. Make sure the questions aren't leading or vague.*

## The perspectives of the YPP in relation to the online questionnaires

**The panel highlighted the importance of different research methods not just online questionnaires:**

*Do more case studies cause I had a lot more to my story that I could have told them.*

*And you have to ask the person you're doing the question of, like, how they would prefer to fill in a questionnaire because some people cannot deal with long lengthy questionnaires and won't do very well in individual interview... ...focus groups that can help trigger thoughts...*

**The importance of clear language and communication styles:**

*If neurotypicals write questionnaires then I don't always get the questions.*

*I think the research team should involve autistic people definitely and use simple language like simple words so I can do it alone.*

*Subjective language can be confusing for autistic people – easily misinterpreted.*

*Make sure the questions aren't leading or vague.*

**The importance of thinking and processing time:**

*...don't interrupt when someone is trying to talk or think.*

*Give me time to get the feedback, ...[ I like] to think about it and then give my answers so don't be quick and impatient because I may not have thought the questions through.*

*Take in account how people think or process thoughts i.e. walking / pacing / stimming*

**Key message to neurotypical/ non-autistic researchers:**

The YPP highlighted the importance of respecting and adapting:

*Take the time to understand someone's preferences and then implement them.*

*Make sure that you're willing to adapt and not just blanket adaptations. But, reaching out to people and understanding their preferences, learning about their communication styles, their processing speeds, things like that, and making sure that you respect those and take those into account.*

*Do not patronise or infantilise.*

## EXCLUSION: DEFINITIONS, TYPES AND RATES OF EXCLUSION

### Definitions and types of exclusion

Exclusion is the removal of a child or young person from an educational placement as a result of their behaviour. It can be implemented as a preventative or punitive sanction (Gill et al., 2017). Officially recorded exclusions are either permanent (where the pupil is forbidden to return to their school and a new educational placement must be identified) or for a fixed-term (where the pupil returns to the school after usually a short period of time). There is increasing awareness of data on the exclusion of children in England from education being hidden (Gazeley et al., 2015) and that there are a number of ways schools exclude a pupil using unofficial or illegal measures. Parsons (2018), identifies nine ways in which a pupil can be excluded:

1. Permanent exclusion
2. Fixed-term or temporary exclusions
3. Pupil referral units or alternative provisions
4. Managed moves
5. Elective home education
6. Reduced timetables
7. Extended study leave
8. Attendance Code B – approved off-site educational activity
9. Children missing education (Parsons, 2018, p.246)

Alternative provision (AP) is educational provision outside of mainstream and special schools, which is typically used for permanently excluded pupils but can be used in fixed-term exclusions as well. The DfE also mentions AP being used by schools to improve pupils' behaviour, and that they see this provision as also being a way of schools moving pupils to off-site provision to improve their behaviour (DfE, 2013). Under the statutory guidance for use of AP by local authorities, the DfE also allows for AP to be used by schools to improve behaviour. The most common state-maintained example of AP is a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) but Local Authorities may also place pupils in non-maintained provision (e.g. independent school) if there are no spaces at the local PRU (Gill et al., 2017). There is increasing pressure on PRUs as the number of these units has decreased, while the number of referrals made has increased (Department for Education Permanent and Fixed Term Exclusions in England: 2017 to 2018). Off-site alternative provision is where a school still has the child or young person registered but another institution is providing their education.

According to the Timpson Review (2019), some schools remove a child from the school roll without making a permanent exclusion, or they may encourage a parent to take their child out of the school purely in the interest of the school and not the pupil. This practice is called "off-rolling" (DfE, 2017).

Managed moves can be used when head teachers from two schools agree that a pupil, who would otherwise be permanently excluded, can move from one school to another or to a PRU. This is not recorded as a permanent exclusion. A parent can choose to educate their child at home and increasingly this may be occurring as a result of concerns for the child's welfare. These instances are not recorded in the exclusion data and under Section 29A of the Education Act it is illegal for a school to encourage parents to home educate their child (Education Act 2002, section 29A).

### Rates of exclusion



Official rates of permanent exclusion in England have been rising annually in recent years (Gill et al., 2017; Parsons, 2018). In terms of fixed-term exclusions in English schools, the official rates have also increased by 8% between 2016/17 to 2017/18. Some of the increase in fixed-term exclusions has been a consequence of pupils receiving repeated exclusions. Part of the overall (permanent and fixed-term) increase in national rates are driven by some local authorities excluding children disproportionately more often than others (Department for Education Permanent and Fixed Term Exclusions in England: 2017 to 2018).

In the last recorded DfE statistics for all state-funded primary, secondary and special schools in England (Department for Education Permanent and Fixed Term Exclusions in England: 2018 to 2019), there were a total of *7,894 permanent exclusions* and *438,265 fixed-term exclusions*. As only data from maintained settings is available, it is difficult to know how widespread exclusions are across the wider private, voluntary and independent early years sector or the proportion of children and young people with SEND being excluded.

It is also difficult to capture data on unofficial or illegal exclusions but the IPPR (Institute for Public Policy Research) attempted to identify some of the “missing” data and reported that, in 2016/17, 48,000 pupils were being educated in AP, which is five times the permanent exclusion rate for that year. Even more concerning may be the number of exclusions of children and young people who are hidden from official statistics, such as the total number of home-educated pupils that has increased significantly between 2016/17 and 2017/18 (Gill et al., 2017).

The Associated Directors of Children’s Services (ADCS) annual survey on home education provides the most comprehensive estimate of the number of children and young people currently being electively home educated in England. The survey, which is completed by local authorities every year, suggests that 55,000 children and young people were electively home educated on census day in 2018/19. This has grown from 37,500 in 2015/16. Initial findings from our research investigating the impact of the pandemic and lockdowns on the lives of families with autistic children and young people, indicate that the long-term impact of the pandemic could increase the number of autistic children and young people receiving home-schooling.

The most recent DfE data (Department for Education Permanent and Fixed Term Exclusions in England: 2018 to 2019, updated 30th July, 2020) on state-funded primary, secondary and special schools, shows that 155 pupils with autism as their primary need were permanently excluded and 5,607 received a fixed-term exclusion. Autistic CYP are approximately twice as likely to be excluded from school as pupils who do not have SEND (Department for Education Permanent and Fixed Term Exclusions in England: 2018 to 2019).

Despite the rates of permanent and fixed term exclusions for autistic pupils being above the national average, the scale of the problem is likely to be much higher. For example, official data does not include the number of undiagnosed or misdiagnosed autistic pupils in school. In addition, government data only record ‘official’ exclusions (see section above on unofficial and illegal exclusions). The Ambitious About Autism publication “We Need an Education” (2018) reported that 56% of parents of autistic children who responded had said that their children had been unlawfully sent home from school or denied an education. Ambitious About Autism (2018) see the rise in the number of exclusions as a new and distinct trend, however, these data must also be interpreted in the context of the increase in the number of children with autism as their primary SEND in school.

## WHY DO EXCLUSIONS HAPPEN?

### Official reasons given for exclusion

There are eleven options in official DfE data collection from schools that can be selected as the reason for exclusion. The standard list of reasons that head teachers refer to when deciding to exclude a pupil, include the following categories:

- Physical assault against pupil
- Physical assault against adult
- Verbal abuse/threatening behaviour against pupil
- Verbal abuse/threatening behaviour against adult
- Bullying
- Racist abuse
- Sexual misconduct
- Drug & Alcohol related
- Damage
- Theft
- Persistent disruptive behaviour
- Other (Includes incidents which are not covered by the categories above but this category should be used sparingly).

From the 2018-19 DfE dataset the most common reason for permanent and fixed-term exclusions in the general school population is persistent and disruptive behaviour. For autistic pupils, the most common reasons given for permanent exclusions were 'physical assault against an adult' (32%) and 'persistent disruptive behaviour' (21%). For fixed term exclusions 21% of schools reported 'physical assault against an adult' as the reason, with 'persistent disruptive behaviour' given as a reason in 22% of cases. In the DfE categories of reasons for excluding, we can see from the above that there is an option for the school to select 'other'. It is unclear what fits in this category, and a deeper understanding of the 17% of permanent and 14% of fixed-term exclusions categorised as 'other' would provide insights into the reasoning behind and purpose of some exclusions made of autistic pupils that are not covered by the standard list of exclusions.

### The perspectives of the AET Young Person's Panel on terminology related to behaviour

In our focus groups with the AET YPP, the panel were critical of the use of terminology and language related to exclusion. Terminology used in publications include 'challenging behaviour', 'behaviours that challenge', and 'behaviours of concern', for example. The AET YPP questioned the notion of whether these terms mean the same thing, and also asked whose perspective drives that terminology. They preferred the term 'distress behaviours'.

Given that it is not always the case that a behaviour which a school or another person finds challenging is a behaviour of distress (for example, 'happy noises'), and a number of other perspectives on terminology have been raised by people we consulted, we feel this term needs further consideration and discussion. In this report, we therefore decided to use the terminology 'persistent and disruptive behaviour' when that term is used by a particular report or data set. This term is used

by the DfE and is not autism specific as it covers other neurotypical children and young people, as well as children and young people with other disabilities. In our broader discussion, we use the term 'behaviours that challenge' in this report so that the focus is on the person or setting that is challenged by the behaviour.

From the teacher data gathered for our study, 15% reported making unofficial exclusions, mainly because they felt the child could not have dealt with the 'event'. These findings resonated with the experiences of the majority of the AET YPP members, particularly in relation to part-time timetables, and informal exclusions associated with 'events' such as school trips and Ofsted inspections. Our questionnaire data found that parents frequently regard the reasons schools give them for excluding their child to not be the true reasons. Almost two thirds of parents we surveyed thought that there was an alternative reason, most highlighting failings of the school and lack of teacher knowledge. It is worth noting, however, that official guidance commits the school to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate the pupil's autism and to consider whether the behaviour resulting in a possible exclusion was a consequence of the pupil's autism. Our data highlighted that children and parents sometimes did not understand the process and were often not able to predict the next stage in the cycle. The AET YPP stressed the importance of remembering that it is not just exclusion from education but also friends, mental health services, and other areas of support.

Taking these factors underlying exclusion into account, an important point raised by Graham et al., (2019) is that there may be a "chain reaction" to someone ultimately being excluded. The path to exclusion may begin with distress, disengagement or boredom, then on to behaviour that challenges, disciplinary action and exclusion (Briggs, 2010). Looking at this from the perspective of autistic children and young people, a key point made by members of the AET YPP was that a child or young person might get stuck in a cycle of exclusion, distrust and limited opportunities, and that cycle is then in the hands of adults and the child or young person does not have any control of that cycle.

## Underlying drivers for exclusion

In this section we focus on identifying the underlying drivers for the school exclusion of autistic pupils and the role that schools and the wider education system plays. There are indicators that may predict the likelihood of a child being removed from school, which need to be better understood and communicated to school staff if interventions are to be implemented. The literature, along with our data, found that there is a combination of reasons that contribute to and act as drivers for exclusions. These range from system level reasons, such as the marketisation of education and schools lacking understanding of the legal situation, to school-focused (e.g. reasonable adjustments are not made and the environment is not conducive to learning) and child focused (underlying anxiety and mental health issues) factors. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we found that school leaders, parents and autistic pupils had different perspectives on this question. Attitudes towards autism, and also related to ethnicity and social class, could have an impact on the actions of schools, for example. The CAT team talked about the fact that in certain areas of Birmingham, young black boys were more likely to be excluded, a finding that is also reflected in national statistics. For example, the 2017-2018 DfE statistics show that Black Caribbean boys were 44 times more likely to be permanently excluded than Chinese boys. The highest rates of exclusion were among the following ethnic groups: Gypsy/Roma (0.56%); Traveller of Irish heritage (0.53%); Black Caribbean (0.44%); Mixed race - White and black Caribbean (0.42%).

For each child, the drivers and reasons for exclusions are likely to be multiple, interwoven and cumulative. It is unlikely that there will be a single or primary risk factor for exclusion but that multiple factors combine and interact. The Timpson Review (2019) included a literature review of research on school exclusions (Graham et al., 2019). Factors that have been associated with heightened risk of a

child or young person being excluded include: SEND; poverty; unsafe family environments; poor mental health; low attainment; male gender; being from a particular ethnic background (Graham et al., 2019).

Clearly these factors cannot be regarded in isolation. For example, a child or young person coming from poverty is more likely to also have poor mental health (Wickham et al., 2016) and boys are typically over-represented in the SEND population (Daniels et al., 2002). A longitudinal study of children at age 8 and 16 years of age, which looked at the factors that best predicted educational exclusion, identified child factors of psychiatric disorder or social and communication difficulties and family factors of maternal history of school exclusion, rented housing and depression in pregnancy. They also reported school factors of quality of SEND support, frequency of changing schools, poor teacher relations and less parental engagement in the child's learning. Overall though, key drivers included: the marketisation of education; lack of awareness of, and inconsistency in, the law; challenges related to consistent systems and capability; not enough access to specialist support, and the need for further professional development and understanding of reasonable adjustments. We deal with each of these in turn.

## Marketisation of education

One of the reasons given for the increasing number of unofficial or illegal exclusions has been the marketisation of the English education system, including governmental pressure in terms of performance league tables (Gazeley et al., 2015; Parsons, 2018). The fragmentation of the education system in England and the lack of challenge offered to schools from Local Authorities (LAs), Ofsted (The Office for Standards in Education) and the DfE has impacted on the accountability for school exclusions over recent years (NAHT, 2018). The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Autism (APPGA, 2017) report highlights this lack of accountability as an important factor in the rise of school exclusions for autistic pupils.

*"...the evidence suggests that this guidance is simply being ignored and that children on the autism spectrum are regularly unlawfully excluded, with consequences for their academic progress, self-esteem and mental health. Of the parents who completed our survey, one in four told us that their child had been 'informally' excluded at least once in the last year. Four in ten of the teachers who responded to the survey said that their school had excluded an autistic child, either lawfully or unlawfully, in the last year."* (APPGA; Autism and Education in England, 2017. P.13).

Comments from parents who responded to our questionnaire noted the focus on pupils who do well academically, whilst also noting the pressures that some schools are under in terms of performance and funding. One parent stated that *'when Ofsted came in my son was sent home; when there was staff shortage my son was sent home'*. Another highlighted that *'the school were too focused on the kids that were doing well'*. It is noteworthy, that the latest handbook for the school inspectorate advises that Ofsted can find the school leadership as functioning inadequately if there is evidence that they have removed pupils from the school at the day of inspection because of their behaviour.

## Lack of awareness of the law

The Justice Report (2019) on Challenging School Exclusions was focused on the procedural and legal aspects of the exclusion process in schools. They identified several key weaknesses in current school exclusions processes that disproportionately affected pupils with SEND, including those on the autism spectrum. These included schools' inconsistent understanding of the law and overly rigid application of behaviour policies by school leaders.

Findings from The Office of the Children's Commissioner's Report on illegal exclusions *'Always Someone Else's Problem'* (2013) identified a lack of awareness of the law by school leaders, gaps in the accountability framework for schools and a lack of a meaningful sanction as key factors contributing to both legal and illegal school exclusions. They found that almost a third (31%) of teachers did not know whether it was legal to encourage a parent into educating their child at home. Around a quarter (24%) of teachers did not know whether it was legal to falsify attendance records for a child who had been asked not to attend school. More than a third (39%) of teachers did not know whether it was legal to send children with a statement of SEND home when their carer or teaching assistant was unavailable. There was clear evidence of schools failing to have due regard to their legal responsibilities regarding the exclusion of children with SEND and to their responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010. This issue has not gone away in the intervening years given that the Timpson Review (2019) also found that schools and school leaders were insufficiently aware of equalities legislation, such as having 'due regard' to direct and indirect discrimination or advancing opportunity. There are also clear inconsistencies and contradictions in the law as schools are encouraged by the DfE to have zero tolerance policies, but are also asked to follow Equality Act guidance.

### Lack of consistent systems and capability

The situation has been compounded by a lack of SEND expertise and knowledge on second-stage independent review panels and inaccessible guidance to parents, families and pupils on exclusion and review processes. This has left many parents feeling a sense of helplessness, that there was no accountability and that their views were not being listened to. This finding was echoed by a parent of an autistic pupil excluded from secondary school cited in the 'We need an education report' by Ambitious About Autism (2018):

*"So, in all my efforts, I couldn't find a single body able to hold the school to account. Parents are powerless right now, not only in changing our children's situations – but even to get people to acknowledge these exclusions exist"* (p11).

However, parents have the right to request a SEND expert to attend an independent review panel meeting. The Office of the Children's Commissioner's Report (2013) found that governing bodies were neither equipped nor willing to effectively challenge head teachers when it comes to exclusions of pupils with SEND, either formal or informal. This report identified that the exclusion of children with SEND happens most to students whose parents and families may have their own additional needs and are least likely to know their rights or be able to support these rights on their children's behalf. One autistic adult who responded to our questionnaire said

*"There was little discussion about my exclusion I was just labelled as the bad kid from the bad estate and blamed. My mum was called in but as it turns out she was high functioning autistic too and not much help under the circumstances"*

The Office of the Children's Commissioner's Report (2013) found that poor communication with parents, families and pupils meant that opportunities were missed for relevant information sharing prior to exclusion decisions, or for the pupil and their family to try to act to prevent it. The first-stage review before governing bodies panel were ineffective and not independent, resulting in 'rubber stamping' headteacher decisions.

The Timpson Review (2019) identified a lack of consistent systems, capability and capacity in schools to understand, manage and support additional needs. This resulted in some school leaders feeling that they and their staff were not equipped to meet needs and manage behaviour that challenges, to offer effective help earlier or facilitate alternatives to exclusion.

In their response to Timpson's call for evidence on school exclusion practice in England, the NAHT (National Association of Headteachers) school leaders felt that curriculum changes had resulted in a less accessible curriculum for those with SEND in mainstream schools (NAHT, 2018). Over three-quarters of school leaders felt that the current national curriculum requirements were not providing the best outcomes for SEND pupils in mainstream education and 88% thought that too much focus is placed on academic testing as a measure of pupils' success. While accountability measures have a negative impact on all pupils, many of them disproportionately affect disadvantaged and SEND pupils.

The APPGA (2017) report recognised that a lack of assessment or slow assessment processes has meant many autistic learners' needs were not being met within schools. 70% of parents surveyed for the report agreed that support was not put in place quickly enough for their child. Nearly 70% waited more than six months for support and 50% waited more than a year. This lack of early assessment and intervention meant reasonable adjustments were not being made within schools to enable autistic pupils to access learning effectively. The Timpson Review (2019) reported that autistic children who have an EHCP are less likely to be excluded than those without an EHCP, suggesting that EHCPs are protective in some ways for the autistic child not being excluded. Indeed, the statutory guidance for headteachers on exclusion states that the head teacher should make every effort to avoid permanently excluding a pupil with an EHCP.

## Access to specialist support

Reduced budgets for training and pastoral care mean that schools are working with limited resources to support autistic pupils, which puts those pupils at greater risk of exclusion. An implication of reduced budgets has been on the role of deputy and assistant heads and SENCOs within schools. The 'Balancing Act Survey' (NAHT, 2016) demonstrated that their non-teaching time is coming under increasing pressure, as schools seek further budget savings. This was seen as reducing a school's capacity to deliver support for individual pupils with SEND since deputy and assistant heads often lead on behaviour management and SEND. This impacts on their ability to secure support from health, mental health and social care services and makes the delivery of whole-school strategies on SEND or behaviour support more challenging. Wellbeing and safeguarding are necessary for all pupils and staff. One Deputy Headteacher who responded to our questionnaire told us "Alternative therapeutic services need to be in place for emergency support. Wellbeing of teachers and staff is being ignored."

Accessing specialist support has been restricted due to cuts to services such as CAMHS during the period of austerity and also by disbanding autism outreach teams in some local authorities. The 2018 Teacher Voice Omnibus Survey found just over 60% of School Leaders felt that their staff did not have access to specialist SEMH professional support, for example. Overall, the difficulty in accessing these services reduces the ability of schools to effectively support and manage pupils with these needs, which increases the risk of exclusion.

This is of significance for autistic pupils as around 70% of children and young people on the autism spectrum meet criteria for a mental health condition, most often anxiety (Simonoff et al., 2008). The existence of co-occurring psychiatric conditions both leading up to exclusion occurring (Sproston et al., 2017) and as a consequence of exclusion happening (Contact a Family, 2013) was identified in the autism research literature. Furthermore, the increased risk of bullying and social isolation of autistic pupils means they are at higher risk of exclusion, given that both bullying and being the victim of bullying emerged as a potential trigger for exclusion in the Timpson literature review (Graham et al., 2019). However, according to DfE statutory guidance for teachers on exclusion, the head teacher should be taking into account bullying as a contributing factor in explaining an exclusion event. The DfE reports that children with SEND have much higher levels of unhappiness regarding school



(Barnes and Harrison, 2017) and have more frequent conduct problems, hyperactivity and poor peer relationships. Many of these factors may explain why autistic pupils are at risk of exclusion reoccurring and why some autistic individuals may display persistent and disruptive behaviour as a way of escaping school.

Being excluded taught me that if I lashed out, I could go home to get peace and quiet Autistic Adult

Exclusions aren't a sanction for a child who is stressed and in need. It re-enforces the behaviour to get them out of a difficult situation. It re-enforces their belief that school is a stressful and unsafe place. Parent of an autistic child excluded at age 6 from a primary mainstream

## Reasonable adjustments and professional development

Given the increased rates of behaviours that challenge found in pupils with autism, these occurrences can often be avoided by making environmental adjustments (Mazurek et al., 2013). Therefore, it is important to look beyond the tip of the iceberg to identify *why* these behaviours might be taking place.

Firstly, the rise in so called 'zero-tolerance' behaviour policies is creating school environments where pupils are punished and ultimately excluded for incidents that could and should be managed within the mainstream school environment (House of Commons Education Committee, 2018). Secondly, Brede et al. (2017) highlighted that the social, institutional and environmental complexity of mainstream school settings means that autistic pupils can come under significant pressure and this may be an underlying reason for their increased rates of stress and behavioural issues. Thirdly, children and young people may be more likely to exhibit behaviours that challenge when moving to secondary school, where there may be less willingness to make adjustment to their specific needs. Some reports have suggested that the rigid, pressurised and uncaring environment at secondary compared to primary school is a cause for behaviours that challenge and exclusion (Levinson, 2016; Farouk, 2017). Despite some pupils who had been previously excluded regarding the period when GCSEs start as an opportunity for a fresh beginning, teachers continued to stigmatise them and regard them as poorly behaved (Trotman et al., 2015). Poor transition planning is of particular significance for pupils on the autism spectrum who find transition and change difficult to manage and are more likely to need enhanced support around their social, emotional and sensory needs (Makin et al., 2017).

The AET YPP and the interviews with the CAT team expressed frustration that schools refer to exclusion policies instead of SEND policies, that reasonable adjustments are often not made, and when they are made, they are not adhered to. Yet it is a legal requirement to make reasonable adjustments, and to keep a log of those. AET YPP members also spoke about how parents often have to be very 'clued up' on policies and process to support their child, even having to take time off work to support them. That said, the YPP also made the point that it is important not to forget the positive experiences. The majority of autistic CYP are not excluded and some schools work hard to support autistic students. These points were also highlighted by the CAT interviews and in the questionnaires to parents and educational leaders.

The AET YPP emphasised the need for professional development for staff. Their view was that schools, teachers, and Teaching Assistants (TAs) need more training and understanding about autism. Their experience was that there are some supportive members of staff but by all means not all of them. One member of the AET YPP stated: *My key recommendation to schools, about exclusion is training; training to teach you to support them, [autistic students]*. The feedback from the AET YPP and from the educational leaders' questionnaire was that professional development needs to be

## **Investigation of the causes and implications of exclusion for autistic children and young people in England**

focused more on practice than theory. It needs to be applied professional development that supports staff with practicalities.

## The perspectives of the AET Young person's Panel on the literature review

The literature review resonated with the experiences of the majority of panel members, particularly in relation to part-time timetables, and informal exclusions related to school trips and Ofsted inspections. The YPP reminded us that we must remember it's not just exclusion from education but also friends, mental health services, other areas of support and that you may get stuck in a cycle, and that cycle is then in the hands of adults and you haven't got any control of that cycle. They suggested that we need to think about how young people are integrated back into a school after a period of exclusion.

The literature review prompted four important areas of discussion:

**Use of language** – Use of terms like challenging behaviour. How would a young person describe the behaviour that led to them being excluded? The importance of taking the CYPs perspective. Are young people asked about what's going on? The micro-escalation of 'problems' which has impact across the lifespan and creates stigma.

**School policies** – why do schools refer to exclusion policies instead of SEND policies? Why aren't reasonable adjustments made, and when they are made why aren't they adhered to? The YPP found this very frustrating. Some of the panel members spoke about how parents often have to be very 'clued up' on policies and process to support their child, even having to take time off work.

**Training and understanding** – schools, teachers, TAs need more training AND understanding about autism. There are some supportive members of staff but by all means not all of them.

**Marketisation of schools** - how are budgets spent? The YPP felt it was important to ask questions regarding whether the money was used to support the student or on other things like heating.

### Points to consider:

- Don't forget the positive experiences. Not all autistic students are excluded and some schools do work hard to support autistic students.
- The panel felt it would be good to have a shorter read and/ or glossary to support their involvement with the report.
- It would have been interesting to read some information about the different types of schools or students e.g. single sex schools, fee paying schools, those students that have Free School Meals, different areas of the country.

## THE PERSPECTIVES OF AUTISTIC PEOPLE, PARENTS AND EDUCATORS

This section outlines the perspectives of autistic adults, parents and educational leaders, and draws on both previous reports and our own data.

### The perspective of autistic children, young people and adults

Brede et al. (2017) examined the experiences of children and young people on the autism spectrum who had previously been excluded from education. Interviews with their parents identified that they felt schools and teaching staff failed to understand and accommodate their children's often-complex needs. School staff used inappropriate methods to deal with resulting behaviours that challenge. This led to the children becoming unable to engage in and access education. In most cases, they were permanently excluded from school. The authors reported that autistic children in their study were aware that their own difficulties (peer relations and communication problems), as well as the school's reluctance to adapt (lack of teacher training), were key factors in the decline in school performance and behaviour issues (Brede et al., 2017).

The APPGA (2017) report on autism and education in England heard evidence from young people on the autism spectrum, parents, teachers and other practitioners, inspectors, elected councillors, and other professionals. They concluded that three years on from the introduction of significant reforms to the special educational needs system in England, children on the autism spectrum are still being let down by the education system. The House of Commons Education Committee report *'Forgotten children: alternative provision and the scandal of ever-increasing exclusions'* (2018) cited the unidentified and unmet special educational needs of many pupils as being a key reason for their school exclusion. This included hearing evidence that some schools may be deliberately failing to identify a pupil as having SEND as it is more difficult to permanently exclude them. They also heard evidence that schools were justifying permanent exclusions of pupils with SEND, by claiming that they will get the support that they need in alternative provision, and exclusion will speed up the assessment process.

In terms of the data we collected from autistic adults, most of the respondents to our questionnaire had experienced exclusion in secondary school, and told us the reason they were excluded was 'persistent and disruptive behaviour', with one respondent commenting that *I think mainstream schools aim to cater for the majority, and people with behavioural problems get in the way of that*. The responses highlighted that underlying reasons were much more complex and other causes were at play, with one commenting on *sensory overload causing meltdowns where I lashed out*.

Many did not have an autism diagnosis at the time of exclusion (64%), but they had a broad range of additional difficulties around the time of exclusion. This included anxiety, depression, sleep and attention problems. Common feelings before exclusion occurred were stress, confusion, worry and anger. Eighty one percent of adults reported being bullied prior to exclusion occurring. Comments from respondents included: *Because I did not fit in. Because I was being bullied. Because I was too slow. Because I was too different.*

All respondents felt that they were unsupported by the teachers, and a large proportion (80%) reported that things worsened or stayed the same when they re-joined education. Furthermore, many highlighted that exclusion led to school refusal as they no longer felt safe or welcome in school, leading to a lack of trust and a breakdown in relationships. As stated by several different respondents:

*"I was glad to be excluded because I felt better at home." "I was too scared to say much to staff after that in fear of things getting worse." "Teachers labelled me and didn't give me a chance!" "If I had been diagnosed with autism perhaps they would have had more idea of how to help me."*

## The perspectives of parents

In two previous studies drawing on the perspective of parents, they were asked about what factors led to school exclusion (Sproston et al., 2017; Brede et al., 2017). Parents highlighted: a lack of adaptation in sensory environments; conflict between staff and pupils; damaging peer relationships (including bullying); limited understanding of the needs of autistic pupils and a lack of transition planning when moving from their previous school. They spoke of promises of support not being upheld by staff, a lack of empathy and care shown by teachers and a limited understanding of how autistic individuals manage stress. Parents in the study said that the relationships with teaching staff were often poor and they only ever got in touch when there was something negative to say (Sproston et al., 2017).

From our parent questionnaire data, 'persistent and disruptive behaviour' came through as the most common reason given by the school for why their child was excluded. Parents reported that the most common co-occurring difficulty their child had at the time of exclusion was anxiety, followed by attention issues, aggression and sleeping. In contrast to previous research and our own autistic adult survey, most experienced exclusion in primary mainstream school, and large numbers of parents felt that exclusion could have been avoided.

Many reasons for exclusion provided by parents included the expression that the school just 'couldn't cope' with their child and lack of resources with one parent stating that *the head teacher claimed there were no resources to follow the EHCP*. Parents also highlighted the failure of schools to support their child's needs and a lack of teacher knowledge, with one parent commenting on *the failure to accept a child as autistic, labelled her as naughty and tried to force her to conform without making adjustments*. A number of parents highlighted that they were choosing to home educate their children.

Eighty four percent of parents felt their child's autism was not taken account of when decisions on exclusion were made. As stated by one parent: *they couldn't deal with her extra needs - which weren't many. However in other areas they shone and couldn't be faulted*.

Eighty five percent of parents felt unsupported and 93% thought the exclusion could have been avoided. This is in part illustrated by the fact that 63% were unaware of their school's behaviour policy prior to exclusion occurring, and parents commented on a lack of communication about the process, with one stating: *School called me and said my son cannot come back to school. There was no official letter of exclusion*.

## The perspectives of education leaders and a support service

In the data from questionnaires to educational leaders (of which the majority were SENCOs working in primary schools and from the East Midlands), 10% of the respondents reported that they only share the behaviour policy once exclusion has been decided upon. In contrast to the findings from the parent questionnaire, eighty percent of respondents to our questionnaire to education leaders said that the child's autism is considered when decisions are made. Fifteen percent admitted to making unofficial exclusions, mainly because they felt the child couldn't cope with the change, and most of

these examples of exclusion are not recorded in the data. Many highlighted finances as a limitation to them providing support.

Interviews with eight Communication Autism Team (CAT) members at Birmingham City Council (BCC) emphasised the importance of relationships: between schools and families, within schools and between staff and autistic pupils. They reported breakdowns in communication between school staff, between schools and families, and between schools and children. The interviews pointed to the prevalence of a medical model approach, seeing the child as the problem, with a lack of emphasis on recognising and addressing barriers in the environment. Interviews identified the need for a whole-school approach, but pointed to lack of joint working and communication, difficulty balancing the needs of the school and the individual child, and a lack of consistency in applying strategies. There was a strong emphasis on the importance of leadership, and the impact of the leaders' ethos. In fact, interviewees highlighted that a knowledgeable school culture informed by the leadership team was often the difference between the success and failure of pupils at risk of exclusion.

The interviews with the specialist support service team highlighted that there were unmet needs, including lack of understanding of autism, and behaviour being misunderstood. Pre-cursors to permanent exclusion included missed opportunities to prevent exclusion, due to behaviour being treated as 'problem' rather than a signal for specialist support needs. Anxiety was seen as a key underlying feature of behaviours that challenge shown by autistic pupils, but not recognised in the behavioural approaches of schools. Schools predominantly draw on behaviour policies, and these do not tend to reference autism. There is therefore a lack of understanding around why behaviour happens and the reason to why a child or young person might behave in a certain way.

In particular, there was an emphasis on the disempowerment of pupils and families and their lack of agency in the context of exclusion. The interviews pointed to the fact that autistic pupils are disadvantaged due to reduced timetables, are given little explanation of stages and outcomes around exclusion and there is a neglect of their perspectives and voice. A consistent theme was that exclusion often leads to school refusal as the pupil no longer feels safe in school, leading to a lack of trust and a breakdown in relationships.



## Investigation of the causes and implications of exclusion for autistic children and young people in England

This highlights the need for further professional development for education staff, a point emphasised by the CAT interviewees, the AET YPP and the parent interviews. In particular, findings from our questionnaire to education staff emphasised the need for (in order of frequency recommended):

- **More support (27)**- this includes support from local authority, autism teams and other external services.
- **Training (26)**- in-depth understanding of autism, supporting behaviour and understanding exclusion process.
- **Better funding (24)**- to make required environmental changes and to provide additional staff.
- **Appropriate placement (14)**- greater availability of special school placements and ensuring that the children placed in mainstream schools can cope in this situation.
- **Good resources (13)**- more space in the schools to provide safe spaces, sensory rooms etc., and staff.
- **Better understanding (10)**- which could lead to staff making adjustments at various levels to support the students- environmental, including peers.
- **Systemic changes (8)**- ban schools from excluding, individualised behaviour policies, change in inspection criteria, careful management of admissions, less bureaucracy.
- **Less emphasis on assessments (6)**- and narrow measures of progress.

## The perspectives of the AET YPP regarding the findings from educational leaders

### Issues relating to the educational leader's questionnaire and findings:

Panel members were sceptical of the results from teachers, especially around training. Comments included:

*It doesn't fit with our experience, that's the issue... because it can encapsulate anything from an hour's session at the end of a school day to somebody receiving more in-depth training...*

*I'm disinclined to take teachers seriously because [the researcher] said they mostly asked head teachers, or lead practitioners who tend not to be the ones working directly with us. ...in the surveys, they're going to say what makes them look good.*

*Training should be more focused on practice rather than theory.*

*[Teachers] receive autism general training but want specific and applied training that supports them with practicalities rather than abstract ideas.*

Panel members had concerns about the level and standard of training that 86% of educational leaders had received:

*It would be really interesting to know whether it was an hour. Was it something they did on their own accord or was it mandatory.*

The panel would be interested to know what teachers mean when they say that they want more information on 'appropriate placements to meet needs':

*...why can't [schools] make themselves an appropriate place. .... You just don't want to put the effort in to make yourselves appropriate you just want to ship them off to somebody else.*

*Sometimes it feels like schools would rather send a child somewhere else rather than try and make themselves an appropriate place. It doesn't take much effort and we're often not asking for much to change.*

## Summary

In summary, the literature review and our data found that a combination of child-focused and school/environment focused factors emerged as key drivers for exclusion, but that the key contributing factors to exclusion are much more weighted towards factors related to provision and practice, than to any 'within child' factors.

For an individual child or young person, there can be lots of reasons for behaviour, including:

- Anxiety being a strong underlying factor that is made worse by exclusion.
- Sensory issues making busy school environments difficult.
- Mental health issues playing a huge part in the lives of excluded autistic children and young people.
- Bullying being an issue before and after exclusion.

That said, the school and education-focused factors tell a story of the needs of autistic pupils not being recognised and met due to a number of intersecting factors, including the following:

- Broad contextual challenges included the marketisation of schools, the attainment culture, lack of resources, staffing cuts and turnover.
- Lack of clarity around exclusions, including insufficient knowledge about the legislation, poor communication with parents and inconsistency in practices.
- Staff lack knowledge and understanding of autism. There is reduced budgets for training and pastoral care. There is no mandatory professional development and this highlights the need to build capacity for professional development.
- Challenges related to reasonable adjustments included difficulties with identification and categorisation, understanding co-occurring difficulties and prioritising needs, and creating an appropriate environment.
- Data highlighted the need for whole-school approaches, but that there is a lack of joint working and communication, difficulty balancing the needs of the school and the individual child, and a lack of consistency in applying strategies.
- Pupils tend to be managed through behaviour policies rather than SEND policies. There is a lack of understanding around why behaviour happens and the reason to why a child or young person might behave in a certain way.

## THE IMPACTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF EXCLUSION

This section looks at the impact and consequences of exclusion on the lives of autistic children and young people and their families.

### Impacts on autistic children, young people and adults

The IPPR (Gill et al., 2017) report states that *“school exclusion too often results in social exclusion”* (p.21). In the short term, excluded children can feel angry and stigmatised at being excluded, and forgotten by teaching staff (Quin & Hemphill, 2014). This was highlighted by several of the autistic adults who responded to our questionnaire, with one stating that *it had a very negative impact as I was excluded from all forms of education for two years. It has ruined my life, no exams taken greatly reduced my chance of employment. Another autistic adult stated it had a negative impact as although some knew my home background was difficult none of the teaching staff was interested enough to see how they could help. They took the view that school was for academic achievement and they were not social workers.* These feelings were captured by one adult who simply said *“Teachers labelled me and didn’t give me a chance!”*.

Longer term negative impacts include on an individual’s prospects, opportunities, appearing in criminal justice system and both physical and mental health (Pirrie et al., 2011; Gill et al., 2017). As one respondent to our questionnaire stated: *I still feel excluded and my self-belief is low due to not being accepted for who I am.*

The outcome for autistic adults is often regarded as ‘poor’ (Howlin et al., 2004). They are more likely to be out of work (Howlin and Moss, 2012), with only 16% in full employment. They are often socially excluded (Howlin, 2013), experience mental health difficulties (Lever and Guerts, 2016) and many end up in the criminal justice system (King and Murphy, 2014). The increasing rate of school exclusion and a lack of focused future research will only make these outcomes in adult life worse for autistic people.

Berridge et al. (2001) found that pupils from the general school population experience a mixture of emotions during the period they are excluded from school, including: fortunate (they did not have to attend school); boredom (remaining at home); anxious and depressed. One of the respondents to our questionnaire stressed the effect that exclusion can have on the teachers attitude to the person who has been excluded: *To be honest looking back it really stressed me out just before my exams. I missed all the revision and exam technique classes too. Also, my tutors had a different attitude towards me... from teacher’s pet to hooligan.*

Studies have also found an increase in rates of offending in the general school population in the period after being excluded from school. Daniels and Cole (2010) found that a lack of engagement in the new provision correlated with higher rates of offending behaviour. Qualitative interview data suggests that exclusion can lead to social isolation from peers and future risk of bullying (e.g. Paget et al., 2018; Levinson, 2016). Daniels and Cole (2010), researched the short- and medium-term impacts of exclusion. Most moved into AP and seemed to have a more positive experience there compared to the mainstream school they came from and had better relations with staff. In the medium-term, half of respondents felt that the exclusion process had been negative, stigmatising and affected future prospects, whereas almost a fifth regarded being excluded as a positive experience. Positive relations with teaching staff improved pupils’ perceptions of self-worth but many lacked self-belief and saw themselves as having limited opportunities (Daniels and Cole, 2010).

The impact of exclusion, whether permanent, fixed term or informal, particularly around the broader curriculum, can be far-reaching as exclusion impacts on many aspects of life. In fact,

an AET YPP member described it as *'the micro-escalation of 'problems' which has impact across the lifespan'*. Exclusion impacts on learning and aspirations, on social development and peer relationships, on wellbeing and mental health. Challenges intersect and include gender, race, language and socio-economic factors, and these need to be better understood.

In terms of short-term impact on children, the most common cited reasons by parents were on *self-esteem, being isolated from peers and feeling let down by education*. Isolation from peers was particularly highlighted as a consequence in the parent data.

Parent data on the impact of exclusion highlighted that exclusion led to

- Impact on self-esteem (83%)
- Isolation from friends (58%)
- Feeling let down by education system (54%)
- Impact on academic performance (50%)
- The child feeling stigmatised (48%).

The interviews with the CAT team also pointed to the isolation and stigma associated with exclusion and the subsequent impact on mental health and anxiety. As stated by one interviewee: *anxiety is an underlying issue for many autistic pupils and is made worse by exclusion. One parent stated that her child was very vulnerable that day with high anxiety and should not have been in school, but school insisted she attended and promised to keep her safe.*

Overall, our study found that mental health issues are reported prior to exclusion occurring (including high rates of bullying) and as a consequence of exclusion. Rates of self-harm were reported before, during and after exclusion. This included a particularly harrowing story told by one of the parents who responded to our questionnaire: *the callous way the school excluded my son dealt him a huge blow from which neither he or we recovered. His mental health declined, he lost faith in education and the system. He turned to drugs and self-harm and eventually he took his own life.* Clearly this is of serious concern, and given the recent focus on suicide and autism, may be even more relevant now ([Mental Health and Suicide within the Autism Community - House of Commons Library \(parliament.uk\)](#)).

The individual pupil can become excluded from the very activities that might motivate and engage them. Many autistic children and young people do not want to return to school and report being happier at home. This could lead to increased rates of school refusal and home education as the only option. Our recent survey on parental experiences during Covid-19 indicate that some parents have seen the benefits to mental health from educating their children at home and plan to continue that way.

## Impact on families

In terms of impact on parents, research has suggested that when dealing with children who are demonstrating behaviours that challenge, school staff tend to blame it on poor parenting or see it as related to social class (e.g. Kulz 2015, MacLeod et al., 2013). Parents report feeling that there is a breakdown in communication with the school during exclusion (MacLeod et al., 2013). However, when teachers (school leaders and classroom teachers) were asked about how well they engage with parents when behaviour is an issue, 90% regard this as either very good (20%), good (44%) or

acceptable (20%), (Teacher Force Childcare Survey, 2016). Brede et al., (2017) highlighted the sense of a perpetual crisis that families with autistic pupils being excluded felt. Parents struggle with knowing where to go for help, feel that their opinions are not being listened to and that the school is “judge, jury and executioner” (Smith, 2009). The exclusion process also impacts on siblings as the whole family feels under increased pressure and there is a pervasive sense of anxiety (Smith 2009; Contact a Family 2013). The financial impact on parents and families was shown to be significant in the Ambitious About Autism ‘Ruled out’ report (2014), which found that 50% of parents were unable to work or had to give up working as a result of their child’s regular exclusions and 32% of parents who did work reported having to take substantial time off.

Findings from our questionnaire to parents indicate that for parents the impact was stress, taking time off work and financial, with one parent stating *exclusions were a direct result of (my child’s) anxiety and schools actions made things worse. The stress caused to myself and my husband was enormous.*

Exclusion places additional demands on families as managing reduced timetables is complex and leads to additional pressures. Many families need to give up work and this often leads to financial pressures. This has a disproportionate impact on mothers. Parent data on the impact of exclusion highlighted the following most frequent impacts on families. These concluded that exclusion:

- Caused stress (97%)
- Led to having to take time off work (76%),
- Impacted on finance (47%)
- Caused problems for siblings (42%).

A parent from our questionnaire reported: *I had to give up a career to care for my son. He couldn’t understand why school weren’t letting him back, he got sad as he couldn’t see friends. The new school is amazing though. I still can’t work as my marriage broke down, so I’m on my own now.*

Several strands of our data found that exclusion also leads to isolation and stigma for the whole family. This in turn impacts on family relationships and dynamics, including siblings.

There is little information and support, and poor attention to parental needs. This leads to an imbalance of rights and responsibilities. Cultural and socio-economic differences can serve to disadvantage further in multiple ways. In particular, the CAT team emphasised the fact that many school staff did not understand the home lives of some of their children due to cultural differences, and there being a disconnect between the family and school’s expectations of what exclusion could achieve.

## The perspectives of the AET YPP regarding the findings



**Overall comments:**

- The findings were a mix of results that the panel did not expect to see.
- The panel expected that the different groups (autistic people, parents, and educational leaders) would give different answers as they have had different experiences.
- Differences in the findings may be because different questions were asked in the three different questionnaires.
- Different schools may have different thresholds for exclusion.

*It keeps talking about like the difference in what parents say to what teachers say to you, or the autistic adult say, but then if you look at the questionnaires that [the research team] sent. I've read all three of them, and they're asking different questions so of course, the findings are going to be different. I would have been way more comfortable answering the parents' questionnaire because the questionnaire for autistic adults, doesn't ask anything about whether they think the reason that school gave for exclusion was true. And it doesn't ask them if they knew about their school's exclusion policy. And it doesn't ask whether they feel that autism impacted the decision to be excluded...*

*...if you went to a school like in my area or you went to school in, say Liverpool, where I went to uni, like I knew that the levels to exclude a child in that school, the behaviour was very different to say how a child in my school had been excluded like as to what teachers could cope with that makes sense.*

**Concerns about accuracy of the findings:**

Participants were concerned that the answers from autistic adults weren't accurate because of difficulties explaining feelings and worried this meant people stopped taking part: *And when it's like, how are you feeling about school, prior to being excluded in relation to feelings. I wouldn't be able to define the difference between worried and stressed to you... And they only let you choose three and what if you're feeling more than one feeling or all the feelings....*

*It would be interesting to know how many people clicked on the autistic adult one but dropped off.*

## INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORT: PREVENTING EXCLUSION

In this section we consider the evidence on approaches to preventing school exclusion and, where the literature allows, specifically for autistic pupils. Much of the literature is based on qualitative evidence. The literature does provide some useful insights about the range of approaches and practice related to preventing exclusion for SEND pupils, which by definition, would include children and young people on the autism spectrum. These have been organised into:

- Child Focused
- Whole School Focused
- Policy Focused

### Child-focused

The complex nature of SEND pupils means that schools need specialist support to meet their educational, health and social care needs. Educational practitioners need awareness and understanding of the likely challenges facing autistic pupils in schools and effective educational practices to address these. The heterogeneous nature of autism means that they require *“distinctive supports and assistance to be successful”* (Guldborg et al. 2019, p10).

It was evident from several sources that excluded autistic pupils felt that positive relationships with adults, based on trust and respect, were critical to their school experience and risk of exclusion (Gazeley et al. 2015; Sproston et al; 2017). Findings highlighted the importance of forming relationships based on an understanding of the individual pupil and their range of strengths, needs and interests. Consistency, warmth and familiarity were all seen as important factors for supportive teachers and staff highlighted the fragility of trust and how it can be easily broken. Brede et al. (2017) reported on the progress that excluded autistic children were making when they attended an Autism Learning Hub. The children described a preference for this learning environment as the staff were well trained, made tailored adjustments to the physical environment and provided personal space. There was also a focus on improving wellbeing and staying calm.

The Timpson Review (2019) highlighted that schools need to take account of the views and experiences of pupils on the autism spectrum in relation to exclusion, ranging from behaviour management policy, to alternative approaches within schools, to managed moves and the exclusion process. They must also promote positive relationships with parents, carers and their families and involve them in the decision-making process around exclusions (Brede et al., 2017; Timpson Review, 2019). These principles are essential for the development and maintenance of positive relationships based on trust and reflect a commitment to listen to and empower autistic pupils to take responsibility for themselves and others.

Gill et al. (2017) highlight that there is insufficient evidence regarding *‘what works’* in terms of preventing exclusion; however, there is agreement that early intervention before crises occur is what is required (Panayiotopoulos & Kerfoot, 2007). Intervention studies in the general school population for those at risk of future exclusions have not been able to show clear improvements in terms of reducing future exclusions (Panayiotopoulos & Kerfoot 2007; Obsuth et al., 2017). Indeed, one such intervention that targeted improving children’s social and communication skills was unable to show beneficial results in terms of exclusion rates, with the authors highlighting the need for these interventions to be carefully managed and for teachers to be onboard early (Obsuth et al., 2017).

If our goal is to improve preventative support for young people with complex needs in mainstream schools at risk of exclusion (Gill et al., 2017), then it is critical schools recognise that autistic pupils are at higher risk and vulnerable to high levels of stress, anxiety and depression. This should involve a range of education, health and social care professionals working together with schools to provide appropriate universal, targeted and specialist levels of support.

Parents of autistic pupils talk about the gradual decline into crisis before exclusion finally occurs (Brede et al., 2017) and it will be important to listen to the concerns of parents and pupils during this period to help prevent exclusion occurring. The Timpson Review (2019) outlines an analysis of various risk factors for exclusion that will give a percentage of how likely it is that a child will be permanently or temporarily excluded. If early identification is to work then a further exploration of these data specifically for autistic pupils could mean that autism-specific exclusion prevention plans can be put in place.

## Whole-school focused

*The House of Commons Education Committee* (Forgotten children: alternative provision and the scandal of ever-increasing exclusions, Session Report, 2018) made a clear recommendation that school policies seek to encourage children rather than punish them and that the DfE should issue guidance to all schools to ensure that their behaviour policies are in line with these responsibilities under the SEND code of practice (2014) and The Equality Act (2010). They go further to suggest that both the Government and Ofsted should introduce an inclusion measure or criteria that sits within schools to incentivise school leaders to be more inclusive. In making reasonable adjustments to the learning environment, schools need to show increased flexibility in the way they deliver and structure activities, lessons, timetables and unstructured times. The impact of this was identified by the excluded autistic pupils in the study by Brede et al. (2017), where staff made significant adjustments to the physical environment and provided them with a personal space where they could reset.

It has been long established that effective leadership strategies can have a significant impact on pupil outcomes (Heck & Hallinger, 1997) by unifying organisational vision and values, and developing the skills, support and resources available. A key task for school leadership and management is to develop education systems within which staff feel supported and challenged to explore effective ways of facilitating the learning of all children and young people. In 2019, Justice, an all-party law reform and human rights organisation working to strengthen the human justice system, launched its latest working paper report on exclusions. This focused on the processes school leaders use to make and review decisions. The report called for significant change to the current system, including better training for schools (Justice, 2019). The Timpson review on exclusions (2019) suggests that working with school leadership will be an effective way to address the issue of exclusion. It is the Headteacher who sets the standard of behaviour at the school and they must publish a behaviour policy annually that staff, pupils and parents can access, which states the disciplinary action that will be taken against pupils (Behaviour and Discipline in Schools: Advice for Headteachers and School Staff. January 2016).

It was clear from the literature that a greater degree of continuing professional development was needed for school leaders to enable them to actively promote an inclusive ethos and approach within schools and meet the needs of a diverse range of learners, including those on the autism spectrum (e.g. Sproston et al., 2017). The Justice Report (2019) went further in suggesting that all school staff in leadership positions should have mandatory training on law regarding exclusions (including SEND code of practice and Equality Act), so that there is more consistent consideration of unmet SEND needs and better communication with parents and pupils during exclusion. The DfE guidance on the content of professional development for school leaders (National Professional Qualification (NPQ)

Content and Assessment Framework: A guide for NPQ participants, 2019) makes reference to the SEND Code of practice and Equality Act as part of the NPQL and NPQH qualifications. However, it was unclear from the literature how this training impacted on knowledge, understanding and practice relating to SEND or the impact on exclusion for at risks groups, such as autistic pupils.

The APPGA Report (2017) found that 60% of young autistic people said that having a teacher who understands autism is the main thing that would improve their experience of school. In contrast, the same report showed that fewer than five in 10 teachers surveyed felt confident about supporting a child on the autism spectrum (APPGA, 2017). Research has shown that a lack of autism knowledge in teaching staff can negatively impact on the school experiences of autistic children and reduces pupils' opportunities to succeed (Humphrey & Symes, 2013; Wittemeyer et al., 2011). Therefore, staff development is clearly critical in terms of enhancing practice and outcomes for autistic children and young people, and in reducing exclusion rates (Parsons et al., 2011). Ambitious About Autism in their *'We Need an Education'* report (2018) highlight that this is needed not just in initial teacher training but for all school staff, including school governors.

The IPPR report (Gill et al., 2017) draws a direct link between unqualified and under-confident teaching staff, school exclusions and poor adult outcomes. They highlight the need to develop a community of best educational practice to meet these challenges (Gill et al., 2017), starting in early years education (Ring et al., 2019). The Timpson Review (2019) stated that the DfE have responsibility to ensure that initial teacher training should include mandatory training on behaviour and that this is embedded in the Early Career Framework. The needs specific to vulnerable groups, including those on the autism spectrum, should be part of this training so teachers understand the underlying causes of behaviours that challenge (including attachment, trauma and speech, language and communication needs), and are trained in strategies and tools to deal effectively with this.

Flexibility in provision and the curriculum emerged as important strategies, both in terms of maintaining young people at school and as an alternative to both fixed term and permanent exclusion (NAHT, 2018). For autistic pupils, this may involve providing a different curriculum tailored to their needs and allowing them to succeed rather than being forced into a direction that will disengage them and brand them as failures (Sproston et al., 2017). A wider curriculum offer may be part of a more diverse range of provision to match the individual's needs. In this sense, tackling exclusion should be seen as an element within an education continuum designed to serve the individual needs of autistic pupils.

There should also be a focus on enhanced transition support for pupils at risk of exclusion or for those who had been excluded (Timpson Review, 2019; Menzies and Baars, 2015). More can be done to foster pro-active and collaborative practices in relation to Primary to Secondary transition and across year groups and key stages, with a particular emphasis on support for children with SEND, including those pupils on the autism spectrum (APPGA, 2017). This may include transition support for the reintegration of autistic pupils who have been excluded for a period of time. Appleby Payne (2010) outline a set of "child-focussed" recommendations to support this process of transitioning back into education:

- Understanding the child and their preferred means of communicating.
- Building a positive relationship with them.
- Creating a structured and predictable environment, thereby eliminating anxiety.
- Developing a curriculum that is personalised and built on strengths.
- Using a multi-agency approach so the pupil can access services outside the school.
- Making sure there is a consistent means of transport to school.
- Establishing a mutually respectful working relationship.

## Policy-focused

There are clear recommendations in the literature to ensure consequences are established to provide a more effective deterrent for breaches of the national guidance on exclusion. Under Section 8 of the current Ofsted Inspection Framework, OFSTED requires *“records and analysis of exclusions, pupils taken off roll, incidents of poor behaviour and any use of internal isolation”* for short inspections. For long school inspections *“If a school uses fixed-term and internal exclusions, inspectors will evaluate their effectiveness, including the rates, patterns and reasons for exclusion and whether any pupils are repeatedly excluded.”* The ‘We need an education’ report (Ambitious About Autism, 2018) is clear that Ofsted’s role on exclusions needs to be strengthened to ensure they have the power to thoroughly investigate unlawful exclusions and take appropriate action. This could include unlawful exclusions being dealt with as a disciplinary matter for the head teacher who would be referred to the National College for Teaching and Leadership for professional misconduct. Financial penalties could be applied, for example, where a child has been identified to have been illegally excluded for a period of one month.

Justice (2019) recommended a radical overhaul of the exclusion process to make it a more transparent and fair approach for pupils and their families, particularly those with SEND. This includes a new ‘Independent Reviewer’ governing body in first stage of review process and a new ‘Appeals Body’ with specialist expertise e.g., first-tier SEN tribunal panel, that can reinstate wrongly excluded pupils. Changes to guidance on the exclusion review process (improve design, content and availability) should be made to make this more accessible to pupils and parents, as well as improving signposting and availability of independent advisors and services. Both the Office of the Children’s Commissioner’s Report on illegal exclusions (2013) and the Timpson Review (2019) focused on the need to build the capacity and capability of governors and trustees to offer effective support and challenge to schools. In addition, all school-based professionals should have a clear route of accountability which enables them to draw problems to the attention of the relevant external body if they consider that a school is illegally excluding pupils.

The need for an effective local and regional collaboration to establish partnerships that provide a bridge for pupils between mainstream schools, alternative provision schools and special schools was identified as a strong preventative measure to exclusion by the National association of Head Teachers (2018). This is reliant on partnerships being able to access sufficient resources to meet the needs of their pupils and receive timely and easily accessible support from Health and Social Care professionals. It is recognised that to protect and maintain such partnerships is challenging so it is critical that policy priority (at national and local authority level) is given to the development and maintenance of systems that support collaboration, consistency and the sharing of good practice. This point was also emphasised in our data from educational leaders in their emphasis on the need for systemic changes and appropriate placements.

There also needs to be greater coordination between those services that are typically involved in educational exclusion, including schools, early years settings, health and mental health services, youth offending teams and social services (Lloyd et al., 2003). Case studies of good practice showed that inter-professional collaboration can work well and support consistency in developing good practice (Office of the Children’s Commissioner’s Report on illegal exclusions, 2013). Many children who are excluded have an undiagnosed or misdiagnosed autism. Promptly and accurately diagnosing autism in school populations, as well as providing an EHCP, will be important in reducing educational exclusion (Paget & Emond, 2016).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This section outlines some key recommendations emerging from this study. These are divided into policy recommendations for the DfE and Local Authorities, and recommendations for schools. The recommendations were discussed with the YPP. The panel gave us feedback regarding the importance of being specific and tangible in making recommendations. Their comments led to a revision of the recommendations, which can be found below.

The AET YPP suggested that some of the recommendations could be turned into actual guides and advice on what to do – something that teachers can learn and use. The panel wanted to know that it is getting to the right people and *won't just sit behind a paywall where teachers, can't access it*, they want it to get to the people who will actually benefit from it. This was also emphasised by the feedback from the parent questionnaire and the questionnaire to educational leaders. As a result of this feedback, we are in the process of developing an open access digital resource for school leaders and teachers. This resource includes materials, resources and guidance on the legal context regarding exclusion, supporting the autistic child, young people and their family before, during and after exclusion, and managing the transition back into school. The resource will be available on the Autism Centre for Education and Research (ACER) website.

### The perspectives of the YPP on the recommendations

**The recommendations are good but do not provide any new knowledge. This is quite frustrating as it feels as though researchers and academics are not listening (the initial recommendations were changed as a result of this feedback)**

*Our overall feeling was the recommendations are fine. But it feels like they've been said before, and people haven't taken action on them. So what we really wanted to see was actions and tangible things.*

*I feel like everything they've recommended for schools is just common sense. And it's things that we've been saying for ages.*

**Training and support for teachers is the most crucial recommendation:**

*My key recommendation to schools, about exclusion is training, training to teach you to support them, [autistic students]*

*If the teachers have told you in that survey that they just feel they understand autism or exclusion, or the law well enough, and you just tell them to put a reasonable adjustment to communicate with the family. They know they need to do that they just don't know how to do it so I feel like those recommendations don't work.*

*We talked about what the teachers are saying is, they got too much theory and not enough practice recommendations...*

**The research team needs to think about who will be able to access these recommendations and how these recommendations will be used:**

*How are they implementing the recommendations? Can we get some like updates, monitoring it is probably a good idea.*



*[Turn] these recommendations or [translate] them into actual guides, or like real advice on what to do.*

*We don't necessarily want more research finding out the same things we want action. So we want this to turn into something, we want this to be tangible we want it to be guidance that teachers can use, and learn from rather than an ongoing chain of research that doesn't feel like it makes a difference in schools.*

*Can we translate these recommendations into something people can use, and people can follow. Because just reading a recommendation isn't necessarily helpful, especially when they've been made before. [The panel] wants to know that it's getting to the right people and won't just sit behind a paywall where teachers, can't access it, they want it to get to the people who will actually benefit from it.*

**Further research might not be the best next step, action, or research PLUS action, may be more useful:**

*Rather than what research you want to do next I would hope to see what we're going to do, what is [the] action plan.*

*...we don't want more research. We just want action.*

*Please, research into why this is taking so long. What factors are stopping this? [reduction in exclusions]*

*The recommendations should be don't do any more research. Can I say because it's not achieving anything.*

*We don't necessarily want more research finding out the same things we want action. So we want this to turn into something, we want this to be tangible we want it to be guidance that teachers can use, and learn from rather than an ongoing chain of research that doesn't feel like it makes a difference in schools.*

*If you were going to do further research... ...go to the autistic community and ask them what their priority would be around that before you make any decisions on to what the next steps should be.*

*...there's a huge resource in everyone's hands and it's the autistic students in their schools, and if people were open to talking to them and learning from them and not seeing that admitting failure by going to the experts who are the autistic children, then that would be great.*

## Policy recommendations

The following recommendations are made for the Department of Education:

- Make it a legal requirement for schools to use a specific code for recording absence due to pupils being on part-time timetables.
- Parents are encouraged to contact their Local Authority Education Welfare Officer to highlight instances of unlawful or unofficial exclusion.
- In order to achieve greater clarity when it comes to recording reasons, provide an open response to which schools can record what they classify as 'other'.
- Capture the number of autistic children in home education (this may be even more important as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic) and the parents' reasons for that decision.
- If a child or young person is permanently excluded, gather data on whether that child had been temporarily excluded previously.
- Provide clearer guidance to schools as to the decision process they should be undertaking when making exclusions (i.e. justifying their reasons).
- Provide clearer guidance as to how schools should be informing families about the exclusion process and the reasonable adjustments they put in place for a child prior to exclusion occurring.
- Provide guidance on how senior leadership should be including statements on SEND and autism within school behaviour policies and how to train their staff on the matter.
- Provide national and individual school guidance on exclusion policy related to autism and more broadly on SEN and SEMH.
- Create good practice guidelines on how and what to communicate to families and pupils at each stage of the exclusion process, to ensure essential information is passed on at appropriate times.
- Conduct research to understand the "profiles" of pupils at risk for exclusion (including those on the autism spectrum) and make sure schools are using these data to guide early intervention and school awareness policies.

The following recommendations are made for Local Authorities:

- Collect data on part-time timetables and informal exclusions in order to develop a system for challenging exclusions.
- Track data on how many autistic children and young people are being excluded within each Local Authority. Those LAs who are particularly struggling with exclusion and autism could be signposted to the AET for training.
- Improved LA data collection on their autistic pupils. Information around specific need is important in order to target local authority support and generate a response to it. If LAs do not know the needs of the cohort that are being excluded, they are unlikely to put the right provision in place.
- Introduce greater independent monitoring of schools' exclusion processes and interventions when illegal exclusions occur.
- Facilitate the fast delivery of EHCPs for those children who need it given their risk of exclusion.
- Set up local SEND youth panels to provide advice to schools. For example, Birmingham City Council (BCC) have set up a SEND Youth Forum that meets 4-6 times a year. It consists of secondary age young people who have a disability or SEND and the aim is that they should have a say in influencing policies across the city. Seventeen have been appointed (among many applicants). It is a neuro-diverse group with a high proportion of autistic young people.

## Professional Development

- Professional Development is needed on the legal processes around exclusion. This must include understanding of the Equalities Act.
- Guidance should be provided to schools about how to transition autistic CYP back after a period of exclusion, in particular to secure and maintain peer relations.
- School leadership need to encourage staff to attend de-escalation training to manage behaviours that challenge in the classroom.
- Training – and particularly for school leadership – should include a whole-school approach to reducing stigma around school exclusion.
- There needs to be more consideration of how Initial Teacher Education courses can learn about the particular risks for autistic pupils regarding exclusion.
- Professional development should include how to reduce the frequency of unofficial exclusions or when they occur, to ensure they are recorded in the data.

## Interventions

- The development of preventative interventions to reduce the exclusion of autistic pupils.
- Unpicking what the reasons are for an EHCP being a protective factor for exclusion (e.g. it is a consequence of teachers taking a different approach to children with an EHCP).
- Use of mindfulness training for students at risk of exclusion, especially at times of significant stress (e.g. exam periods).
- Use of reflective practice and mindfulness for staff who are feeling under significant pressure and making decisions about behaviour and exclusion.
- Enhanced transition planning and support – particularly from primary to secondary school.
- The importance of working with colleagues in other agencies and in AP to share skills.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to provide an up-to-date summary of what we know to date about the exclusions of children and young people from educational establishments, drawing on the perspectives of different people affected by exclusion. Limitations of the research include that the sample of adult autistic people was small, with half of the adult groups consisting of older participants. Furthermore, a high proportion of the parents who responded had primary aged children, and further research is needed to further investigate exclusion rates in primary settings. The respondents to the survey sent to professionals was geographically skewed with a high proportion of respondents from the East Midlands and respondents were not necessarily education leaders, but included highly trained professionals at different levels of leadership.

One of the key inputs by the AET YPP, was that it is absolutely crucial and obvious to involve autistic people in research about the lives of autistic people:....*it's not only kind of inauthentic, if you don't involve autistic people in research, it's about them, but also if you take it to the furthest degree it can almost be dangerous, because it can keep stereotype types kind of like persisting.....it's very valuable to get the information from people who have gone through that.*

A key point and a lesson for future research, is the importance of autistic involvement in all stages of the project. The panel highlighted the need to involve autistic people in the design of questionnaires themselves, particularly in the questionnaire that went out to autistic people. *If neurotypicals write questionnaires, then I don't always get the questions. I think the research team should involve autistic people definitely and use simple language like simple words so I can do it alone.* Although the research team got feedback from several autistic people on the pilot questionnaires, it indicates the importance of involving autistic people in the initial construction of the questionnaires themselves.

Finally, the AET YPP made the point that *there is a huge resource in everyone's hands and it's the autistic students in schools, and if people were open to talking to them and learning from them and by going to the experts who are the autistic children, then that would be great.*

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Children and young people on the autism spectrum face disproportionately high rates of school exclusion and frequently report a range of negative educational experiences, which can have a significant impact on their wellbeing and educational outcomes. The implementation of appropriate educational support for these pupils is vital to reduce school exclusions and ensure positive educational experiences. It is therefore surprising that so few studies have explored the drivers for school exclusion, preventative measures, the experiences of autistic pupils excluded from school and the impact on their families. As with the school exclusion of other vulnerable groups there appear a range of complex drivers impacting on rates of permanent and fixed term exclusion for autistic pupils. These appear to be primarily school and system-level factors: including unidentified and unmet need; the existing curriculum and accountability system; the availability and accessibility of specialist mental health support. The impact of wider contextual factors must also be considered, such as levels of school funding.

The lack of evidence concerning targeted and individual approaches that seek to reduce the exclusion of autistic pupils who are vulnerable to exclusion is a significant gap in the literature and this needs to be addressed. This may involve looking to other countries, where exclusion rates are lower or alternative approaches are taken, to explore their policy and practice in this area. For example, the approach to school exclusions by the Scottish government provides a useful counterpoint to the English model given the much lower exclusion rates in Scotland.

Key approaches to developing positive relationships and behaviour should be explored. These include: restorative and solution-oriented approaches as part of a whole school approach; whole school nurturing approaches in early years, primary, and secondary and specialist provision; anti-bullying policies and practice which contribute to social and emotional wellbeing; effective learning and teaching which contributes to developing good relationships and positive behaviour in the classroom, playground and wider school community.

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## Investigation of the causes and implications of exclusion for autistic children and young people in England

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