

# The exclusion from school of children aged four to seven

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The number of children aged seven and under who are excluded from primary schools is very small and comprises a tiny proportion of children of this age from a very small proportion of schools. Nevertheless, some children of this age group are receiving fixed-period exclusions, occasionally leading to permanent exclusion. This survey explored the reasons for this and the ways in which some schools manage to avoid using exclusion. The survey found that what determined a school's rate of exclusion was a combination of its philosophy, capacity to meet the challenges presented and, sometimes, the response received from the local authority and outside agencies when the school asked for help.

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# Contents

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|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Executive summary</b>   | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>Key findings</b>  | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>Recommendations</b>   | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>Young children’s behaviour</b>  | <b>8</b>  |
| <b>Why some schools responded by excluding pupils</b>  | <b>8</b>  |
| A time of instability  | 9         |
| ‘A line in the sand’   | 10        |
| A planned strategy for individuals   | 10        |
| A ‘cohort issue’   | 11        |
| Exclusion as part of the school’s policy   | 11        |
| <b>Why some children were excluded repeatedly from schools with otherwise low exclusions</b> | <b>12</b> |
| <b>Sexually inappropriate behaviour</b>  | <b>14</b> |
| <b>How some schools avoided exclusion or reduced a high level of exclusions</b>              | <b>14</b> |
| Philosophy and values  | 15        |
| A range of strategies  | 16        |
| <b>Children’s understanding of expectations</b>  | <b>18</b> |
| <b>How schools worked with parents to promote positive behaviour</b>                         | <b>18</b> |
| <b>What the schools thought would help them to exclude fewer pupils</b>                      | <b>19</b> |
| <b>How local authorities responded to exclusion</b>  | <b>20</b> |
| <b>Notes</b>   | <b>22</b> |
| <b>Further information</b>   | <b>22</b> |

## Executive summary

Near the end of 2008, newspaper headlines focused on the number of children aged seven and under who had been excluded from school. Data collected by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)<sup>1</sup> show that, in reality, the numbers are very small and comprise a tiny proportion of children of this age from a very small proportion of schools. It is rare for schools to exclude children under seven. Nevertheless, some children of this age are receiving fixed-period exclusions, occasionally leading to permanent exclusion. This survey explored the reasons for this and the ways in which some schools manage to avoid using exclusion.

Two groups of infant or primary schools were selected for this survey, using the most recent information held by the DCSF from 2006/07. From the schools which had excluded several young children, often more than once, 30 were selected. Another 27 schools were identified, each located near to one of the first 30 schools, in which exclusion had not occurred during the same period. In addition, inspectors visited a third group of 12 schools: in the same period, these had excluded only one young child, but on several occasions. Inspectors also visited 10 local authorities where exclusions from primary schools were at a high level compared to other local authorities. They held discussions about the strategies used to support schools in managing behaviour effectively and reducing exclusion.

Almost all the schools visited served communities with higher than average levels of deprivation: 39 of the 69 visited were in the highest 20% of schools in terms of pupils' eligibility for free school meals. At least some, and sometimes many, of the children in all the schools experienced severe disruption and difficulties at home and within their local communities. Almost all the schools visited reported high levels of involvement in terms of social care from local authorities' children's services and from other agencies, particularly about child protection, domestic violence and family breakdown. There were high levels of such incidents affecting children in all the schools visited.

These schools faced multiple challenges. All of them dealt with young children who displayed complex behaviours that stopped them from participating positively in learning. In each of the schools, there were young children who had experienced some degree of trauma, sometimes severe. Fourteen of the schools reported incidents of inappropriate sexual behaviour from children of this age. The schools reported that they often found it difficult to gain appropriate support for children for their mental health needs or specialist support for inappropriate sexual behaviour.

What determined a school's rate of exclusion was not its social context but the combination of its philosophy, capacity to meet challenges and, sometimes, the

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<sup>1</sup> Permanent and fixed period exclusions from schools and exclusion appeals in England 2006/07, SFR 14/2008.

response received from its local authority and outside agencies when they were asked to help. Early intervention based on monitoring and evaluation helped in managing children's more complex behaviours successfully, as did strong relationships between settings, schools and parents. The use of 'circle time' and the National Strategy's social and emotional aspects of learning programme (SEAL) were particularly effective. Nurture groups<sup>2</sup>, where they were used, were highly effective in improving children's behaviour and preventing exclusion, but many of the schools said they were unable to afford them.

Most of the 30 schools visited which had had high fixed-period exclusions in 2006/07 had reduced their use of exclusion to some extent by the time the survey took place.

Weaknesses in the way in which exclusions data are analysed currently by the DCSF results in an incomplete picture of what is happening to children aged seven and under. Although data are collected for each school, the DCSF collates only the overall figures: this does not highlight the unevenness of exclusion across schools or enable the DCSF to challenge local authorities robustly about the action they are taking with high-excluding schools. Further, no data are collected on exclusions from nursery schools or on the termination of contracts between parents and private providers of early years education and care.

## Key findings

- The very large majority of infant and primary schools in England do not exclude any children aged four to seven from the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1, either for fixed terms or permanently. Occasional exclusion is used by a small number of schools and only a very small number use exclusion regularly with children within Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1.
- All the schools visited had had experience of young children who showed challenging behaviour or a degree of complex behaviour that stopped them from participating positively in learning. The schools' responses were determined by a combination of factors: their philosophy, their capacity and, sometimes, the support received from the local authority and other agencies.
- With the exception of two schools visited, written behaviour policies were at least satisfactory. The extent of their effectiveness, however, was determined by the degree to which the headteacher, senior leaders and governors had helped staff to have high expectations based on a clear set of values, clearly communicated and applied consistently. Where this was a strong feature, schools were able to reduce exclusions or cease to use them as a means of controlling pupils.

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<sup>2</sup> A nurture group is a small supportive group of up to 12 children, usually located in a mainstream primary school, run on Nurture Group Organisation principles, based on Marjorie Boxall's work: [www.nurturegroups.org](http://www.nurturegroups.org). A nurture group focuses on social and emotional as well as academic development. See 'Further information'.

- Young children in all the schools visited showed a good understanding of the adults' expectations of their behaviour.
- Effective management of low-level disruptive behaviour was a key feature in all the schools that had succeeded in reducing the use of exclusions with young children or that did not exclude children of this age.
- All the schools articulated clearly their determination to respond positively to individuals. This was reflected in the wide and carefully planned range of responses to young children who struggled to cope in school.
- Instability in terms of leadership and staffing was a factor in five of the schools that had had relatively high levels of exclusions.
- In three of the schools visited, exclusions had risen on the appointment of a new headteacher. This was either a short-term strategy to stabilise poor behaviour or – in schools that had previously sent children home unofficially – because the headteacher insisted that the law on exclusion be followed, ensuring that all incidents, of whatever duration, were recorded as formal exclusions.
- Relationships with parents were pivotal in preventing or reducing exclusions. Almost all the schools visited worked hard to build positive relationships, particularly with parents whose children were the most challenging to manage.
- Fourteen of the schools visited reported behaviour from young children which they perceived to have a sexual element. Eight of these schools had excluded the child for a fixed period. Two of the schools said they were concerned about the lack of response from social workers and other local authority support services when they were alerted to these incidents.
- The nine schools that had nurture groups found these were essential provision in supporting young children who were most in need and who displayed complex and compound behaviours.
- Local authorities' monitoring of exclusion and their challenge and support to schools were too variable. Schools where the number of exclusions was high were often unaware of how it related to the local authority or nationally.

## Recommendations

The DCSF should:

- analyse exclusions data annually on a school by school basis and use the information obtained to question local authorities about the challenge to and support they provide for their primary schools with the highest number of exclusions
- collect data on the exclusion of children from nursery schools
- investigate the extent to which young children are excluded from private providers

- investigate the availability of mental health support for young children who have suffered extreme trauma
- evaluate the role of nurture groups in improving young children's behaviour and in helping schools to minimise the use of exclusion
- produce guidance for governors about the exclusion of young children so that they are enabled to respond in an informed way to the level of exclusion in their own school
- produce urgently, guidance for schools on identifying and responding to sexually inappropriate behaviour in young children, including when these should be referred in accordance with the Local Safeguarding Children Board's procedures to children's social care services.

Local authorities should:

- analyse closely the exclusions of young children and challenge and support all schools that are excluding children of this age
- ensure that, where schools refer a young child to a support service because of sexual or aggressive behaviour, this referral is taken seriously
- record all exclusions of young children due to sexually inappropriate behaviour and monitor the subsequent actions taken by support services.

Schools should:

- minimise the exclusion of young children by developing a range of strategies to manage behaviour, from low-level disruption to challenging behaviour
- ensure that their training on child protection issues considers the reasons for young children's inappropriate sexual behaviour
- inform children's social care services of serious incidents of sexually inappropriate behaviour displayed by young children, in accordance with the Local Safeguarding Children's Board procedures, and request support.

Ofsted should:

- ensure that all inspections of primary schools evaluate their use of exclusion, particularly for children in the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1, and consider this when making judgements about behaviour, leadership and management
- prioritise for Grade 3 monitoring visits schools that exclude a high proportion of individual learners in the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1
- ensure that inspectors monitor and evaluate local authorities' approaches to exclusion as part of Ofsted's rolling programme of safeguarding inspections.

## Young children's behaviour

1. In all the schools surveyed, almost all the children responded well to the school's expectations, but a small number of children found this difficult. The schools that had excluded or were still excluding high numbers of children listed characteristics of their behaviour, which included:

- biting other children
- persistent refusal to follow instructions
- swearing
- running away from staff
- kicking or hitting staff
- climbing over the school fence
- throwing chairs.

Similar behaviours were also reported by most of the schools that had not excluded any children. In addition, the schools sometimes perceived a sexual element to a child's behaviour, which concerned them.

2. All the schools visited described young children who had experienced trauma, to a greater or lesser extent. An extreme case was a child who had come to England from a refugee camp, having seen his mother killed. Many of the children had experienced family breakdown. Many of the schools perceived domestic violence as a significant influence on their pupils' behaviour.

## Why some schools responded by excluding pupils

3. Schools' responses to children's behaviour were determined by a combination of:
  - their philosophy – whether they believed that exclusion was an appropriate response to young children's behaviour
  - their capacity to respond to challenges – for example, whether they were fully staffed; whether they had a range of provision to support children whose behaviour was challenging; whether staff were well trained
  - sometimes, the support they received from their local authority and outside agencies, including the timeliness of such support.
4. Headteachers of the 30 schools where rates of fixed-period exclusion were or had been high gave various reasons for deciding to exclude individual children, including:



- the need to emphasise to the child's parents that the behaviour was not acceptable, particularly when the school felt that the parents were not being supportive
  - the view that the child's behaviour was unsafe, either for the child or for other children
  - seeing exclusion as a way to trigger support from the local authority
  - feeling under pressure from staff, or from unions
  - the wish to bolster teachers' morale when behaviour was poor
  - pressure from the parents of other children
  - pressure from governors.
5. Further analysis revealed five overarching reasons for the high levels of exclusion:
- instability in staffing, leadership or both
  - setting expectations on the arrival of a new headteacher
  - as a strategy for managing an individual pupil
  - difficulties with a particular cohort
  - as a reflection of the school's policy.

### **A time of instability**

6. In five of the 30 schools, their rate of exclusion had been a symptom of their own instability. Each of the five schools had experienced significant gaps in staffing, including periods of time when there was an acting headteacher, no headteacher, or no senior leaders apart from the headteacher. This had led to inconsistent management of pupils' behaviour, an increase in poor behaviour and a lack of strategies to support pupils and staff. In the absence of alternative strategies, the schools used exclusion and, as a result, the rate had risen sharply. At the time of the survey, all five of the schools had a substantive headteacher and staffing was more stable.
7. One of the headteachers described the extensive work he had done to improve teaching and learning and to improve the management of classrooms and social times. Several teachers had left the school, some through a capability route. This had been replicated, to some extent, in the other four schools. Although some exclusion was still occurring in these five schools, the numbers of those excluded had decreased considerably, particularly amongst the youngest children.
8. The situation in one school illustrated well the impact that instability can have on pupils' behaviour.

In 2003, a local authority amalgamated two quite different primary schools. This was unpopular with many of the staff and with the local community. The intention was to move the schools onto one site, but it took nearly three years before the new building was ready. In the meantime, senior leaders struggled to manage the split-site school and tensions rose among the staff. Staff who left were replaced by those on temporary contracts. Pupils' behaviour deteriorated as a result of this instability. A survey revealed that the staff had contrasting views on the reasons for the poor behaviour. While some respondents commented, 'Bad behaviour has spiralled and for some it is the norm', others noted, 'Some staff just don't like kids'.

The move to one site, new senior leaders to support the headteacher, partnership with another school, a new, consistently implemented behaviour policy, a small nurturing group for some children, and some carefully appointed new staff made a significant difference to behaviour. Exclusion is now used sparingly.

Over the last five years, the greatest number of exclusions has been from the current Year 5 class, starting from when they were very young. Since starting school, they have had 24 different class teachers. This indicates the extent of the disruption they have suffered and the subsequent impact on their behaviour.

### **'A line in the sand'**

9. Three of the schools had experienced similar disruption to those described above. However, in these three, exclusions had risen when a new headteacher took up her or his post and discovered the extent of the poor behaviour. These headteachers felt that it was important to set a new standard for behaviour and were implored by staff to do so. One headteacher reported being asked on his first day, 'What are you going to do about behaviour?' Another had not believed previously that it was appropriate to exclude primary age children but felt that it was essential to 'draw a line in the sand', signalling to pupils and to parents that certain behaviours were no longer acceptable. However, at the same time, these headteachers deployed a range of strategies to support pupils with difficulties, and to support staff in managing behaviour more effectively. Exclusions in these schools have now reduced.

### **A planned strategy for individuals**

10. Seven of the schools used exclusion as part of a planned strategy for individual children, usually for half a day or one day. These schools emphasised that they followed the 'letter of the law'. The children were never sent home to 'cool off'; rather, if the headteacher decided that a child needed to go home following an incident, this was recorded correctly as an exclusion. Exclusion was used most often when the school felt that a child's behaviour jeopardised his own or

others' safety.<sup>3</sup> Examples included occasions where a child was distressed and refusing to follow instructions or repeatedly hurting other children. Schools' records indicated that a number of children were excluded only once. In other cases, the school had worked with parents and had agreed on which incidents would require the child to go home. These individual children often had complex needs and were receiving a wide range of support from the school.

## A 'cohort issue'

11. In five of the schools, the high number of exclusions in one academic year occurred because they were insufficiently prepared to respond to a group of children, sometimes in one year group or class, whose behaviour or needs were more challenging or complex than the school had been used to. In these schools, the policy for managing pupils' behaviour was appropriate for most children, but lacked strategies for those who found it difficult to conform easily to the schools' expectations. The schools concerned used fixed-term exclusions when they had exhausted their sometimes limited range of strategies to manage pupils' behaviour. These schools had found, sometimes, that children in a particular cohort were reasonably settled in the Foundation Stage, but had not coped well with the transition to more structure in Key Stage 1.
12. These schools solved this problem in different ways. Some developed a wider range of support, such as a base where children could spend time with an adult when they were distressed or needed some quiet time. One of the headteachers invited all the parents of such children to school to discuss the concerns and to agree on the next steps. All the schools reviewed their curriculum and their approaches to teaching. At the time of the survey, they were still in the process of making changes, for example introducing more flexible teaching approaches in Key Stage 1. All the schools, to some extent, were reducing their exclusions.
13. In several of these schools, the headteachers considered that the local authority's response to their appeal for help was too slow. One of the headteachers reported being told by the authority's behaviour support service that she should exclude the children for fixed periods when their behaviour was poor; this was because a record of exclusion would be necessary if the child required a place at a special school or pupil referral unit in the future. Infant schools, in particular, had difficulty in getting the support they needed, especially if, in the past, they had not asked for much help.

## Exclusion as part of the school's policy

14. Nine of the 30 schools had a clear policy to exclude children for certain types of behaviour and this was explicitly mentioned as part of their behaviour policy.

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<sup>3</sup> The majority of these children were boys.

Nevertheless, six of these schools used exclusion only sparingly with young children, tending to reserve it for aggressive incidents, or incidents where the school felt that safety was being compromised.

15. Three of the highest excluding schools visited were in this group. In one of them, a new headteacher had inherited a tradition of excluding pupils. The teachers of young children had not been coping well with the demands of a complex school population; the young children, for their part, had not been coping well with an over-rigid approach to teaching, and strategies other than exclusion were lacking. As a result, exclusion rates were high. The headteacher and deputy headteacher were working tirelessly to develop an appropriate range of responses and exclusions were starting to fall.
16. In the second school, the behaviour policy was over-complicated and its tone was negative, for example, referring to the need to record bad behaviour clearly in an incident book as this 'may be needed as evidence when speaking to parents'; records referred to one child as 'feral'.
17. The third school, a large primary school, had a rigid, complex behaviour policy which was not appropriate for young children and was applied inflexibly. Exclusion was an explicit sanction for a range of non-compliant behaviour. Consequently, exclusions during one academic year were extremely high, numbering over 600 days across the school. While exclusions had fallen significantly the following year, they were still very high. Pupils had little sense of the need to take responsibility for their own behaviour by making good choices.
18. In these three schools, the local authorities had provided insufficient challenge to them to improve their practice.

## **Why some children were excluded repeatedly from schools with otherwise low exclusions**

19. In addition to the 30 schools discussed, inspectors visited a further 12 because they had repeatedly excluded one child aged between four and seven for fixed terms, but had not excluded any other children of this age. The exclusion was usually for a short time, often for between half a day and two days, but some children had been excluded over 10 times in one academic year. Inspectors' discussions with staff and analysis of records revealed one of the following:
  - the child showed challenging behaviour and the school was using exclusion as part of a planned strategy with the involvement of parents
  - the child showed challenging behaviour and the school:
    - seemed to have exhausted its strategies
    - was finding it difficult to cope with the child

- felt the incidents were too serious for exclusion not to be used
- was making a cry for help to the local authority

or a mix of the above.

20. Inspectors examined the records of 13 children who had received multiple exclusions (more than 10 days, or more than five periods of exclusion) during one year of the Foundation Stage or Key Stage 1. They found that:

- all the children were boys
- all but one were identified as having special educational needs
- seven were at School Action Plus
- five had a statement of special educational needs.

At the time of the survey visits, one of these children had been permanently excluded, two had moved to a specialist unit and four had moved to a special school, one of these following some time at a pupil referral unit. Five of the other six were reported to be well settled in their school; the sixth had moved schools. One of the schools concerned had a nurture group and had used this provision very successfully to help the child to settle and to succeed.

A Year 1 boy had joined the school from another school during the Reception year. He received 11 fixed-term exclusions in 2006/07 and five further exclusions in 2007/08 for physical assaults on adults, persistent disruptive behaviour and refusing to follow instructions: the school reported that he 'did as he wished'. He was placed on the school's special educational needs list and received a range of additional support. The local authority's behaviour support team advised the school on how to manage his behaviour. The school allocated a teaching assistant to his class and held regular meetings with his parents. Some improvement was seen, although at first his parents held different views from those of the school on how to manage his behaviour. The school employed a behaviour support consultant, who worked with the child's parents. The headteacher felt that the relationship they gradually built with the child's mother, the subsequent consistent approach and good communication made a positive difference.

At the time of the survey, the child was still at the school and had not been excluded since 2007/08.

A Year 2 boy had been identified by the school as having special educational needs. He had transferred from another school where he had received lots of support and had been in a nurture group. He presented himself as a very challenging and aggressive pupil and had a chaotic family life. The school did not have a nurture group to replicate the pupil's

previous provision. However, it did use the social and emotional aspects of learning programme and was using circle time. The headteacher nominated a teaching assistant to provide substantial one-to-one support for the pupil and a behaviour support worker from the local authority provided counselling and helped him to manage his anger. The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service was involved with the pupil during this time. The school found his behaviour did not improve, felt that fixed-term exclusion was necessary at times and, eventually, felt his needs would be met more effectively in specialist provision. A place was found for him at the local authority's pupil referral unit and, following a one-term placement there, he moved to a special school.

21. Several of the schools, including the one described above, felt that swifter and more thoughtful decisions by the local authority about these children's initial admissions and subsequent placements would have avoided the need for such frequent exclusion.

## **Sexually inappropriate behaviour**

22. Eight of the 69 schools visited had excluded children for a fixed period for behaviour which they perceived to have an inappropriate sexual element. Most of the schools said that, in addition to exclusion, they had instigated child protection proceedings or, at least, had contacted social workers and put in place a range of support for the child. Six other schools said that they had witnessed sexual elements to children's behaviour but emphasised that they did not respond to such incidents with exclusion; rather, they viewed them, rightly, as child protection concerns. These schools described the robust procedures they used to deal with such incidents. Two of the schools reported a worrying lack of response from social workers and other local authority support services to their concerns about seemingly serious incidents. The headteacher of an infant school reported that, having written a detailed letter to a specialist support agency in the local authority about the sexual elements of a Year 1 child's behaviour, she was told that the child was 'too young for a referral and he might grow out of it'. At the time of the survey, the child had moved to a junior school and a further referral had been made for the same types of behaviour.

## **How some schools avoided exclusion or reduced a high level of exclusions**

23. The 27 schools that had not excluded any young children shared common characteristics which were also evident or emerging in the schools that had managed to reduce markedly their previously high levels of exclusion.

## Philosophy and values

24. The headteachers of these schools had strong views on the use of exclusion for children of this age. Primarily, they viewed it as a last resort and as a response which was neither useful nor purposeful. Several of the headteachers expressed the view that, if they excluded a pupil, their school had failed the child. A few said that they 'did not believe in exclusion' as a sanction for young children and, indeed, had never used it.
25. All of these schools placed great emphasis on valuing each individual. This was almost tangible, and evident in the way staff spoke to children, the wide range of rewards used, the welcoming entrance to the school and each classroom, and the celebratory displays of children's work.
26. These schools also had high expectations for all children, which were clearly expressed by senior staff and understood by all. If children did not meet these expectations, however, headteachers asked, 'What do we need to do to ensure that this child can succeed?' rather than seeking to punish the child. The importance of the individual was evident in the depth of teachers' knowledge about their class and, as a result, the way in which small problems with behaviour were dealt with before they grew to be significant.
27. The headteachers also knew each family well. In these schools, listening to children was crucial, and this extended to seeking the child's perspective following an incident of poor behaviour. Often, this revealed concerns which were not immediately obvious, such as the child's having been a victim of surreptitious teasing or bullying.
28. Interaction between staff and children was consistently positive in these schools. Providing models of appropriate behaviour was key. Staff used a warm tone of voice to speak to children and to each other, and children were encouraged to speak pleasantly to everyone. In these schools, praise was genuine, celebratory and frequent, and rewards were always more prominent than sanctions.
29. One school that had not excluded any young children was situated in an area of very high deprivation. The school reported that domestic violence was common and they perceived that there was a high incidence of mental health problems among parents and children.

The school's positive, inclusive philosophy is clear from the moment of walking in the door. The entrance is bright and welcoming, with named photographs of all staff and governors, and many examples of children's work, beautifully displayed. The headteacher believes passionately that each child can succeed, and that it is the school's role to ensure that this happens. She is emphatic about the importance of consistent, positive communication. All staff speak to children in a warm and enthusiastic tone, and there is constantly someone expressing their delight in a child's

work. The celebration of success permeates the school. When a child's work or behaviour is particularly good, or greatly improved, all staff are told and all praise the child at some point during the day, with the aim of making the child feel really special and noticed. Every child in the school has a 'named person' whom they have chosen – a member of staff to whom they can speak about anything that is troubling them. All staff, including the site supervisor, have been trained for this role. Children's feeling of safety when they are at school is tangible – they relax, they learn, they enjoy each day, and their behaviour is impeccable.

## A range of strategies

30. Each of the schools described had a wide range of strategies to teach and encourage good behaviour, and a wide range of additional support for children who found it difficult to learn important social and emotional skills or appropriate behaviour. The schools did not assume that young children would automatically know or understand the behaviours they expected. What was meant by 'good behaviour' was explained clearly, sometimes with reasons. For example, the code of conduct in one of the schools visited contained phrases such as: 'We listen carefully so that we can learn from each other'; 'We are caring, kind, cooperative and helpful to make our school a safe and happy place'. Social and behavioural skills were also taught directly – almost all these schools placed great importance on using the National Strategy's social and emotional aspects of learning programme (SEAL), sometimes combined with specific programmes for emotional literacy.
31. Behaviour policies were carefully structured, with a clear emphasis on rewards. Sanctions were staged and age-appropriate but used sparingly. Sometimes, teachers were encouraged to adapt aspects of the policy for their own classroom, but the core principles were still followed highly consistently. Rewards and sanctions were proportionate to the child's needs. Headteachers emphasised and demonstrated the way in which engaging teaching and appropriate support promoted good behaviour.
32. These carefully thought-out approaches helped most children to behave well most of the time. However, the schools recognised that, for some children, this was not sufficient to enable them to succeed, so they designed and implemented programmes of additional support. This meant that, when a child or a group of children with challenging behaviours joined the school, usually there was already a strategy or some provision to meet the child's needs. However, if this was not the case, the schools designed a new one – quickly.

Almost half the pupils at a primary school are entitled to free school meals. The school places great importance on their weekly emotional literacy lessons; the headteacher describes these as 'non-negotiable'. Staff follow a scheme of work which was written by their own advanced skills teacher, and has since been published. This has made a significant



difference, even to very young children's empathy and to their ability to manage their emotions. At the time of the survey, some highly effective work had recently taken place on the topic of 'It's OK to be different'. Children's very personal responses, displayed on the walls, included: 'It's OK to... say no to bad things, have two dads, have no hair, have freckles, be sad, have crutches'. The demonstration by staff of good behaviour is regarded as key and is evident throughout the school.

A range of support is available for children with challenging behaviour, at the centre of which is the school's nurture group. Originally designed for the youngest children, who are still the focus each morning, the group has been expanded to include older children, parents and whole families. The philosophy of the nurture group has permeated the whole school, which has refined its approaches to managing behaviour in all classes. No children have been excluded.

### Managing social times

33. Senior leaders in these schools understood clearly how break and lunchtimes, if badly managed, could undermine children's otherwise good behaviour, as well as being unpleasant for vulnerable children. These times were therefore very well organised. Play equipment was carefully chosen and appropriate to children's ages and they were taught how to play cooperative games. Lunchtime supervisors were well trained as play leaders and in how to manage behaviour. Their roles were clearly defined: they were expected to follow the school's policy for managing behaviour and supported to do so. Children were expected to treat them with respect. Senior leaders had a high profile at lunchtime: several emphasised that they saw this as crucial in ensuring a calm and pleasant time and a smooth start to the afternoon. The schools provided a range of clubs and, for children who found it difficult to behave well during unstructured times, they organised additional support and special opportunities, such as quiet rooms.

### Involving children

34. In these schools, children of all ages were responsible for helping one another. 'Circle time' approaches were widely used, which enabled children to develop the skills to negotiate, listen and respond with empathy, as well as to express themselves and to solve problems. In many cases, children were involved in defining the class rules or expectations based on the whole-school rules, and designing rewards and even sanctions. In the best practice, children were taught and encouraged to be highly aware of their own behaviour, including the possible triggers for poor behaviour, and to regulate it accordingly. In one classroom, for example, a 'calming tent' gave children a quiet space to which they could go if they felt angry, upset or frustrated. This enabled them to avoid inappropriate responses such as hurting another child.

## Children's understanding of expectations

35. The schools found that, when children started school, many did not understand that 'adults are in charge' or that 'no means no'. This was related partly to their experience before they started school. One school noted: 'Children who have been through the children's centre come in as more mature and better rounded individuals', a view reflected particularly by the other schools that had close working relationships with a children's centre.
36. During the school visits, inspectors talked to children about what they understood about behaviour and what the school expected from them. In all the schools, even the youngest children were able to explain, to some degree, the basic principles of how their school dealt with behaviour, such as why they were given 'well done' stickers, and what happened if someone in the class did not follow the rules. Sometimes children's responses reflected the school's approach to managing children's behaviour. For example, in a school that had a very positive approach, when asked the question, 'What happens in your class if you are good?' a child replied, 'We have lots of fun!' Children thoroughly enjoyed rewards when they were used well and frequently, for example being a 'star of the day', which involved wearing a medal or a crown, or being given stickers to take home. They also appreciated simple rewards which involved extra attention from an adult, such as taking their work to show the headteacher or taking a note home to their parents.
37. Children generally understood the school's expectations. What determined the extent to which they were able to meet them was the way in which teachers and support staff consistently helped them to do so, and how well they were supported when they found this difficult.

## How schools worked with parents to promote positive behaviour

38. All the schools that had not excluded any children, and those that had reduced the number of exclusions, emphasised the importance of building good relationships with parents. They stressed that it was particularly important to create strong relationships with the parents of children who were not settling well and who presented a challenge. Many of the schools found that there were considerable barriers to break down before relationships could be established. Parents were often under immense pressure created by family breakdown, poverty, work, domestic violence or illness, and could react defensively to a school's attempts to include them in discussions about their children.
39. The most effective schools saw parents as part of the solution and not part of the problem and made every effort to work closely with them. Parents were valued and welcomed into school. These schools also set out clear expectations from the beginning that parents should work with them to support their

children. Several of the schools also placed great importance on building good relationships with grandparents when appropriate, as this provided another layer of support – for the child and the parents.

40. The schools that were the most successful in promoting good behaviour went far beyond involving parents just when there were difficulties. They:
- established firm links before the children started school, often visiting parents at home
  - let parents know when their children had been successful, not just when there was a problem
  - helped parents to secure support from other agencies, even for home-based problems
  - ran workshops to inform or help them with aspects of their child's development
  - provided an open and welcoming approach so parents knew they could quickly find someone to talk to about their child.

When five boys in a Reception class in one school were not behaving well and had not settled into routines after a few weeks, the headteacher and Reception teacher invited the parents of all these children to an informal meeting. The school already knew all the parents; the Reception teacher had visited each family before the children had started school and the parents had been into school for assemblies and events in the first few weeks. Difficulties were aired openly, expectations were communicated and parents were asked to help the school to find solutions.

It became clear that several parents were having similar difficulties at home. In response, the school organised a series of workshops for these and other parents to help them to help their children, both with behaviour and learning. The children are now settled and happy and no child has been excluded.

41. Occasionally, communication from a school to families was over-complicated and rather authoritarian. Understandably, parents did not respond well and tension was created between home and school.

## **What the schools thought would help them to exclude fewer pupils**

42. Schools that had high numbers of exclusions at the time of the survey, or had in the past, expressed many views on what would help them to prevent or reduce exclusions.

- The establishment of a nurture group: many of the schools cited a lack of funding as a reason for not having a nurture group but thought such provision would make a difference.
  - More responsive support from the local authority for individual children experiencing long-term difficulties and quick local authority support when children were 'in crisis': for example, a team of support assistants attached to the local authority who could work with a child temporarily; an effective behaviour support team to work with staff.
  - Available, responsive support from the child and adolescent mental health service for children who had suffered severe trauma.
  - A highly trained family support worker who could work with individual families and run courses for groups of parents.
  - Enough funding to be able to have one full-time teaching assistant in each class.
  - Better exchange of information when children were admitted to school partway through a year so that the receiving school knew about the child's needs in advance.
  - More space in the school to allow children to spread out more; to allow rooms for small group and individual work; to provide specialist areas such as calming rooms and sensory rooms.
43. The schools that had not excluded pupils and had implemented some of these strategies were no better funded than other schools. Schools that had a nurture group, for example, stressed that to fund one properly was 'a struggle', but saw the group as a prime factor in reducing or preventing exclusions and in radically improving the behaviour of some children. Those that had implemented strategies such as nurture groups emphasised that this had sometimes required imaginative use of funding in order to 'stretch' the budget. One of the schools, for example, relied on income it received as a result of having advanced skills teachers and being a training school. Another had involved a Catholic charity; the charity worked with some families who were having difficulties at home, which then had an impact on the children at school. One of the headteachers had opened a private nursery on the school's site, with very low fees, which was giving greater support, in particular, to some of the single parents.

## How local authorities responded to exclusion

44. The 10 local authorities were chosen for this survey because data showed they had high numbers of excluded primary age pupils during 2006/07. Local authorities' realisation that exclusions from primary schools had reached a high level during that year had generally prompted them to improve the quality and frequency of their monitoring of exclusion.

45. The frequency of the collection of such data varied widely. Two of the local authorities collected data weekly, while the rest collected information termly or half termly. Data were used to challenge schools, for example through the school improvement partner or school improvement advisers. Vigilant monitoring of afternoon absences by one local authority, for example, enabled it to notice and challenge schools that were breaking the law by sending children home without recording an official exclusion. Data were also used to inform decisions about what support schools needed.
46. One of the local authorities where exclusions were high held a half-termly formal meeting with the headteacher, the chair of governors, the school improvement partner and a local authority officer. These meetings were very rigorous, with a strong focus on determining the desired outcomes. In the local authorities where monitoring and subsequent challenge and support had improved, exclusions had fallen accordingly. This was particularly the case when local authorities took a strategic, long-term approach to solving the problems, and tried to promote and support fundamental change within schools. One of the local authorities visited did not analyse or monitor well and another was not intervening strongly enough when a school had very high numbers of exclusions.

One local authority uses what it called the 'Butterfly Programme', which is focused on young children with challenging behaviour who are at risk of permanent exclusion. The project is regarded as a partnership between the child, parent and class teacher and emphasises the use of rewards, nurturing, consistency and the active teaching of positive behaviour.

The child attends a 'no exclusion' session for one day a week and school for the other days. Weekly training from facilitators is provided for parents and the teacher together, and also for the parent alone. Additionally, parents are supported by weekly home visits to help them with 'homework' and practising newly acquired skills. The local authority's records showed that of the 140 children who have taken part in the programme, 132 are still in a mainstream school.

On analysing its data, a local authority realised that significant change in managing young children's behaviour was needed in a group of schools. Concluding that exclusions were high mainly because the schools were lacking alternative strategies, the local authority organised a year-long project in which senior leaders received training, followed by coaching, to help them to develop new ways of working. Various professionals within the local authority were involved, including the educational psychology service.

The local authority found that a significant change took place in the understanding and attitudes of these leaders. For some, the training and

coaching altered their perception that children were at fault and made them reflect deeply on their practice. Several of the schools developed nurture groups, and all have concentrated on working with their staff to extend their understanding of child development.

None of these schools now has a high rate of exclusion.

47. A number of these local authorities saw the development of the social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) programme and nurture groups over the last two years as important factors in reducing exclusions.

## Notes

Two groups of infant or primary schools were selected for this survey, using the most recent information held by the DCSF from 2006/07. From those that had excluded several young children, often more than once, 30 schools were selected. Another 27 schools were identified, each near to one of the first 30 schools, in which exclusions had not occurred during the same period. Inspectors also visited a third group of 12 schools which, in the same period, had excluded only one young child but on several separate occasions.

Inspectors visited 10 local authorities where exclusions from primary schools were at a relatively high level. These authorities were spread across the South, Midlands and North and included both rural and inner-city authorities. Inspectors held discussions with senior officers about the strategies used by the authority to support the schools in managing behaviour effectively and reducing exclusion.

## Further information

Circle Time is an approach which some schools in the survey used to support their staff to manage a range of issues that affect children's learning. More information can be found in: J Mosley, *Quality circle time in the primary school*, LDA, 1993.

Nurture groups are small supportive groups of up to 12 children, usually located in a mainstream primary school. A nurture group focuses on social and emotional as well as academic development: [www.nurturegroups.org](http://www.nurturegroups.org).

The Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme is part of the Primary National Strategy. There is also a SEAL programme for secondary schools. More information can be found at: [www.nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/inclusion/behaviourattendanceandseal](http://www.nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/inclusion/behaviourattendanceandseal).