

At risk of being suspended or permanently excluded

When a child is suspended or permanently excluded it doesn't usually happen out of the blue. Usually, you'll see signs that they're finding school more challenging. And from the school's point of view, their behaviour becomes more disruptive and difficult to manage. This changing picture, and an increase in school sanctions, can give you a clear sign that things aren't right.

By working together with school staff, there are lots of things you can do to help prevent your child being suspended or excluded. For many parents and schools, it can be an opportunity to review the support that's in place for a child, and to work together to put more, or different, support in place.

Sometimes it's hard, but it's always better to deal with issues early on, before things reach crisis point. Sometimes that's easier said than done though. If you're seeing a change in your child's behaviour at school, they seem to be getting into difficulties more often and the sanctions being used seem to be getting bigger, it's a good time to act.

The information on this page can help you understand what might be behind your child's difficulties at school. There is also advice about talking to your child and school staff and the different options available to help a child or young person manage better when they're in school.

How do I know if my child is at risk of being suspended or excluded?

For most children and young people, there will have been a period before a suspension or exclusion where they have been struggling in

school. You might have noticed a change in their behaviour at home and at school.

There is also likely to have been an increase in sanctions. A sanction is an action the school staff take in order to make pupils obey the rules. So, that might be being sent out of class, then getting detentions and then being internally excluded or sent to 'reset'.

Every child is different, but you might see some of the following:

- Sanctions start to mount up, such as lots of behaviour points increasing from week to week, being sent out of class regularly and being 'told off' regularly.
- You might have an increasing number of informal chats about their behaviour with school staff. Teachers or TAs may contact you with their concerns. You might be called in for meetings or hear from pastoral staff or your child's head of year.
- Your child may start to avoid going to school, say that they don't feel well or ask to be collected part way through the day. Some may stop going in at all. You might find yourself going to extreme lengths to get your child into school.
- Some children and young people may actively behave as if they want to get more sanctions - to make the suspension happen.
- Your child's behaviour at home may change and they could become more easily angered, upset or frustrated.

Whatever happens, you'll usually see a change in how they are at school and at home. You might also hear school staff say that your child or young person is 'at risk' of exclusion or suspension.

If your child's behaviour is causing concern at school, then staff should talk to you about it. You may be asked to go to a meeting with the SENCO, head of year, teacher or member of the senior leadership team. You might be told that your child is at risk of suspension if their behaviour does not improve, or they continue to break the school's behaviour policy.

Is my child 'choosing' to behave badly?

This is something that quite a few parents hear said, because sometimes professionals believe that this is what their child is doing – making an active choice to behave in a challenging or disruptive way.

Behaviour doesn't exist on its own – there is always a reason for it. You might hear the phrase 'behaviour is a form of communication'. That means that children and young people are telling you what's going on for them, and what they need, through their behaviour. And that could be the emotional load that comes from anything - from finding the work too hard, being bullied or being anxious, to sensory difficulties, friendship issues or family break up.

For many children with SEND, their behaviour is part of their special educational need and not an active choice. They're not actively choosing to behave 'badly' – they're responding to the things that are happening in their environment or their thoughts and feelings. Children with communication difficulties, which may be unclear or unidentified, can also develop challenging behaviour, out of frustration and emotional stress.

The mental health charity Place to Be, sums it up this way.

"Often our behaviours can be out of our conscious awareness. We don't see the connection between our behaviour and the feelings that underlie it until it is pointed out by someone else or there is some other consequence. This is especially true for children because their experience is more limited. They may be dealing with a situation for the first time because they are growing and learning. When we are stressed or overwhelmed with strong feelings, we can be reacting from our emotional brain, not our thinking brain."

For many children with SEND, one of the main reasons why they get suspended or excluded is because they

cannot manage emotionally. And alongside that, for whatever reason, staff can find themselves unable to manage the behaviour that happens as a result. The school environment can be a difficult one to manage, especially if the right support isn't in place. When a child with SEND is showing increasingly challenging behaviour, it may come from anxiety about the situation they're in.

Anxiety sets off a 'fight, flight or freeze' response. Once that has been triggered, a child is in 'survival mode' and the part of the brain that does the thinking for them switches off. You might hear this called dysregulation. You might be able to see early physical signs of this in your child, such as enlarged pupils, fidgeting, and flushed red cheeks.

If your child has a 'black and white' or literal way of thinking, or they've had trauma in the past, they can see things as a threat that other people don't. That means their brain and body will be pushing their alarm button again and again over small non-threatening things.

What can I do if I think my child is at risk of being suspended or excluded?

If you're worried that things aren't going well at school and being suspended might be around the corner, take the initiative and ask for a meeting to discuss your child and their support. We've got lots of tips and advice about preparing for, and getting the most out of, meetings.

It's a good idea to keep a record of your conversations with school staff, and your requests for a review of support. If the school agrees to put new or extra support in place, keep a note of what this is, who is putting it in place and when it should be done by. Schools are busy places trying to meet the needs of many and it can be easy for things to become delayed or forgotten. As a parent, you'll need to keep an eye on what's happening and stay on top of things. Keeping good records can also help if you need to challenge decisions later on.

For children with SEND, schools have a responsibility to make sure that they have the right support. That also means making reasonable adjustments in their day-to-

day school life, and to the behaviour policy, to support their needs and prevent exclusion.

Children and young people with SEND are sometimes suspended or excluded because their needs are not being met properly. If this happens, it might mean the exclusion is not fair or lawful. It's also a sign that they may have needs which need more investigation and/or help.

These are some of the things you can talk to school staff about or do.

- **Find out what your child thinks about what is happening.** Has anyone talked to them about their behaviour and what school, or home life is like for them? Work with the school to find a way to help them talk to someone they trust. Ask what's going on in school or happening at home or outside school that might in some way explain the change in their behaviour. This is an essential part of any plan to prevent suspension or exclusion. When something has happened at school, ask staff to have a restorative conversation about it when your child is calm and regulated. This should give your child's perspective on things and may be relevant to thinking about any change in their SEND support.
- **Share information with staff about your child.** You know them best, so pass on information about the situations they find difficult, the support you use that helps and what the signs are that they're struggling. This helps school staff understand your child better and be more mindful about spotting a potential difficulty before it gets bigger. It can help if you have one main contact at school. This can prevent you getting lots of calls about your child's behaviour. It also means one person is aware of the whole picture and can make the communication around support consistent. Keeping a diary can also help. Look for patterns as they're often there – there may be specific times and days, teachers, lessons, classrooms or other children that lead to challenging behaviour. You can share what you've noticed with school staff.
- **Think about whether your child's needs are clear.** Some children have unclear special educational needs, especially communication and language difficulties. Research shows that a large number of

children who are excluded have speech, language and communication needs. Ask whether this might need to be explored, or whether your child might need to be assessed. The same is true of social, emotional and mental health needs. The SEND Code of Practice is the legal guidance for schools about SEND. It says that schools and colleges have a duty to ensure they have clear strategies and processes in place to support children who have challenging behaviour because of an undiagnosed need.

- **Ask if their behaviour need a rethink.** Ask staff whether your child's behaviour can be explored in terms of what it's saying, rather than focussing on the behaviour itself. What is your child trying to tell you? Sometimes this is called reframing the behaviour. Some parents have found it works well if you can help staff see your child in a positive way, by painting a picture of the best of them. This helps staff see that their intentions are good.
- **Discuss whether their support in school needs changing.** A change in the level or type of support your child has could avoid the circumstances that may lead to a suspension or exclusion. If support is changed, then their support plan will also need to change. Sometimes it can help to have a specific and short-term plan with clear goals that can help to improve behaviour. Bear in mind that it can take time to show an improvement in behaviour, especially if the difficulties have been going on for a while. Ask the school to go at a pace that's led by your child and what they can manage. Sometimes small changes can help your child manage better. For example, this could be leaving lessons a bit early, sitting in certain place in class, being able to take a brain and sensory break when they're starting to struggle. Lots of regular small changes can help a child manage better.
- **Talk about whether learning or the school day could be more flexible for a while.** Sometimes children need breaks from the day-to-day stress of a full-time curriculum or have the demands on them reduced. Many schools offer some flexibility, including:
 - time out of lessons for mentoring or counselling
 - an alternative or reduced curriculum
 - alternative support outside of school and,
 - very occasionally, part-time timetables.

If this type of support is on offer, you will need to be part of that decision and agree to it. It's also important to have a clear plan in place for how long this kind of support will last, how it will end and what the aim is. Every child and school are different though, so ask what might be possible for your child. You can also talk to us for advice.

- **Ask if more specialist help is needed.** There are teams of SEND specialists in Devon that can help schools to support children with learning, communication and social, emotional and mental health needs. There is also an inclusion team in Devon, programmes to reduce the risk of a child being excluded and Early Help support. It may also be a good time to talk about whether your child may need an Education, Health and Care (EHC) needs assessment, if they don't already have an EHC plan.

What is off-site direction?

This is when a governing board of a maintained school sends a child or young person to another education setting to improve their future behaviour. It should be used as a support measure, and not as a sanction.

The law about off-site direction applies specifically to maintained schools. However, academy schools also have the power to send children off-site to improve their behaviour, as long as they follow the law. You can find out more about the law on the IPSEA website.

Off-site direction is used where other support has already been tried, and it hasn't worked, and a child is at risk of being permanently excluded. It should not be used because a school cannot meet your child's special educational needs.

Unlike a managed move, the school does not need to have your agreement to put an off-site direction in place. However, the school staff should work with you and your child to agree it wherever possible.

Your child may be sent to another mainstream school or to an alternative provider. When your child is at the alternative school or educational setting they should get support for their special educational needs.

Off-site direction placements are for a limited amount of time, and it should be clear how long your child is likely to be there. They can be there full-time, or they can be part-time, where they spend part of the time at their current school and part of the time at an alternative. It's meant to be a short-term measure that is properly planned before it starts. It should also be monitored and reviewed to see how well it's working. You and your child should know what will happen after the off-site direction finishes – that could include a return to school or a permanent managed move to another school.

If your child goes to a maintained school the governors must make sure that you are told in writing and given information about the off-site direction. If your child has an EHC plan the local authority should also be told. This should be done as soon as possible after the direction has been made and no later than two school days before the starting day.

What is a managed move?

A managed move is a move to another school or setting done in a controlled way. It's a voluntary agreement between parent carers and staff from the current and future school. You, staff from both schools, and ideally your child too, should agree to the move. If your child has an EHC plan, the local authority will also have to agree, and the plan will need changing.

Managed moves are sometimes used as an alternative to permanent exclusion. They can give a fresh start to a child and because they're planned, they're often easier for a child to manage than going to a new school after an exclusion. The move is a permanent one. If a child needs a temporary move and will return to their original school, that is off-site direction (see above).

Moving school is a major thing for any child and their family. So, the decision to go ahead with a managed move must always be made with the child or young person's best interests at heart.

The school your child is currently at should have tried other ways to support your child. Where it's needed, they should also have involved professionals and services from outside school. That might include getting specialist advice and support and arranging for assessments, including an EHC needs assessment.

A managed move should be carefully planned. Both the current and next school should exchange information. There is usually a written agreement and a managed move meeting with everyone involved. It's important for you and your child to have a clear plan to settle into their new school. That includes making sure the right support is set up before they start.

You or your child shouldn't feel pressured into agreeing to a managed move. If you feel like that is what's happening, or you want to know more about whether it's an option for your child, you can contact us for advice.

What is off-rolling?

Off-rolling is when a child is informally and illegally permanently excluded from their school. Ofsted describes it as "removing a pupil from the school roll without using a permanent exclusion, when the removal is primarily in the best interests of the school, rather than in the best interests of the pupil. This includes pressuring a parent to remove their child from the school roll."

Sometimes schools pressure families to take their children out of school and off the school roll, to avoid a permanent exclusion. This can sometimes lead to a child being home educated, when usually this isn't what the parent or the child wants. This is a clear example of off rolling and is never lawful. If you think this may be happening to your child, contact us for advice.

Need more information?

SEND Code of Practice

Department for Education guidance on the special educational needs and disability system
www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25

IPSEA

SEND law charity
www.ipsea.org.uk/

Devon County Council Education Inclusion Service
www.devon.gov.uk/educationandfamilies/school-information/education-inclusion-service/

Place2Be

Children's Mental Health charity
www.place2be.org.uk/



DiAS information that may be helpful.

These resources are on our website or available as a document by contacting us.

- About suspension and permanent exclusion
- Suspension
- Permanent exclusion
- Top tips for reintegration meetings
- Getting the most out of meetings

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Published September 2024

Due for review: September 2026