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# Persistent disruptive behaviour and exclusion

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a highly prevalent condition affecting 3–9% of school-age children,<sup>1</sup> with boys being affected more than girls in a ratio as high as 9:1 in terms of clinic referrals (although the ratio in the community may be closer to 3:1 or even equal).<sup>2</sup> ADHD will provide many challenges for both children and their teachers in the school community. In some cases, specific incidents may result in decisions that will lead to a permanent or fixed-term exclusion from school. However, for most individuals with ADHD, early diagnosis and treatment can result in successful educational and social outcomes.

## Background of ADHD in schools

There were 8,680 permanent exclusions from primary, secondary and special schools in England during 2006–07 (see Table 1, page 9).<sup>3</sup> There were 363,270 fixed-period exclusions from state-funded secondary schools, 45,730 fixed-period exclusions from primary schools and 16,600 fixed-period exclusions from special schools. In 2006–07, the permanent exclusion rate for boys was nearly four times higher than that for girls, and this ratio has remained stable over the last five years, with boys representing around 80% of the total number of permanent exclusions each year. Pupils with special educational needs (SENs) are over nine times more likely to be permanently excluded from school than other students. The most common reason for permanent exclusion was persistent disruptive behaviour (PDB) (31.1%), the second was physical assault against another pupil (15.6%) or an adult (11.3%).

PDB accounts for 41.1% of all fixed-term exclusions. It is somewhat difficult to gain a consensus of what PDB actually means, as schools will have a 'policy on exclusion which will be largely idiosyncratic to each school'.<sup>4</sup> The Assistant Head of Rosset Secondary School in York, Mr Gavin Davies, stated on 28 November 2008 that: 'Persistent disruptive behaviour is a culmination of disruptive and distracting behaviours that affect the learning of other students and prevent teachers from teaching'.<sup>5</sup> In most cases, he said, 'the individuals concerned seem unable to follow the basic rules within the school community and they appear to be non-traditional learners who have poor concen-



*Children diagnosed with ADHD are more at risk of of exclusion from school. According to one survey, 39% of children in the UK with ADHD have had fixed-term exclusions*

tration skills and who are impulsive risk-takers'. Although many other factors would have to be taken into consideration, these two comments reflect much of what we understand the features of children within the ADHD spectrum to be.

Interestingly, it would appear that many of the individuals who are permanently excluded for PDB are not registered as having any form of SEN; as a result, it could be argued that, in a number of cases, children excluded from schools exhibiting PDB may be suffering from symptoms of unidentified ADHD and/or other comorbid conditions.

This issue has been raised before, and the link between ADHD and PDB was presented in 2004's *International consensus statement on attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and disruptive behaviour disorders (DBDs): clinical implications and treatment practice suggestions*.<sup>6</sup> However, the findings have not had any impact on England and Wales' preventive exclusion policy to date.

It is highly probable that early identification and treatment of children exhibiting PDB, but showing behaviours that could be more accurately classified as ADHD, could dramatically reduce the

numbers of children with permanent and temporary exclusions. A reduction in exclusions would, in turn, reduce their huge impact on our society.

This article does not argue that exclusion from school is never necessary. It is clear that, in some cases, schools will need to act with regards to specific individuals and incidents on behalf of all the members within the school community.

It must also be stated that most children behave well. Based on Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) figures from 2006–07, the number of children excluded permanently from school is 12 in every 10,000 or 0.12% of the school population.<sup>3</sup> Announcing the launch of *Back on Track. A strategy for modernising alternative provision for young people*<sup>7</sup> in May 2008, the Schools Secretary Ed Balls said: 'Whilst behaviour is good in most schools for most of the time, it is still a key concern that parents raise with me. That is why we are doing more to improve behaviour across the board. Of course Heads must exclude pupils where their behaviour has overstepped the

mark in a serious way, and young people and their parents must face up to the consequences of their actions, but we must also do more to help schools address poor behaviour earlier. We can then help them to access the right support before the behaviour spirals out of control and reaches the point of exclusion, so that young people causing problems can get back on track'.<sup>8</sup>

There is no doubt that children with diagnosed ADHD are more at risk of permanent or temporary exclusion. According to a survey of 526 families of children with ADHD, published in 2006 by the Attention Deficit Disorder Information and Support Service (ADDISS):

- 39% of children have had fixed-term exclusions from school
- 11% have been excluded permanently.<sup>9</sup>

This means that children with ADHD have more than a 100 times greater risk of being permanently excluded from school than other children.

The social impact of exclusion is well established, with evidence from the UK and USA show-

**Table 1. Permanent exclusions from primary, secondary and special schools in England in 2006–07**

	Primary schools (1)		State-funded secondary schools (2)		Special schools (3)		Total	
	Number of permanent exclusions (4)	% of all permanent exclusions (4)(5)	Number of permanent exclusions (4)	% of all permanent exclusions (4)(5)	Number of permanent exclusions (4)	% of all permanent exclusions (4)(5)	Number of permanent exclusions (4)	% of all permanent exclusions (4)(5)
Physical assault against a pupil	170	17.4	1,160	15.4	30	14.7	1,350	15.6
Physical assault against an adult	260	26.6	680	9.0	50	26.6	980	11.3
Verbal abuse/threatening behaviour against a pupil	50	5.1	320	4.2	10	3.3	370	4.3
Verbal abuse/threatening behaviour against an adult	110	11.2	780	10.3	10	6.6	900	10.3
Bullying	10	1.0	80	1.1	#	#	90	1.0
Racist abuse	10	1.0	40	0.5	0	0.0	40	0.5
Sexual misconduct	20	2.0	120	1.6	#	#	140	1.6
Drug and alcohol related	#	#	400	5.3	#	#	400	4.6
Damage	20	1.5	140	1.8	#	#	160	1.8
Theft	#	#	210	2.7	#	#	210	2.4
Persistent disruptive behaviour	300	30.3	2,360	31.4	40	22.8	2,700	31.1
Other	40	4.2	1,260	16.7	20	12.8	1,320	15.2
Total (6)	980	100	7,520	100	180	100	8,680	100

Key: (1) = Includes middle schools as deemed. (2) = Includes both City Technology Colleges and Academies. Information is as reported by schools. (3) = Includes both maintained and non-maintained special schools. (4) = Estimates based on incomplete pupil level data. (5) = The number of exclusions by reason expressed as a percentage of the total number of exclusions. (6) = There were 6 permanent exclusions from primary schools and 14 permanent exclusions from special schools for which circumstance was not known – these were included in the 'total' column only. # = Less than five or a rate based on less than five. Please note: totals may not appear to equal the sum of component parts because numbers have been rounded to the nearest 10.

Source: School Census

ing an increased likelihood of antisocial and criminal behaviour. Figures reported in 2006 by Harriett Sergeant in *Handle with Care. An investigation into the care system*<sup>10</sup> outlined that:

- Boys are four times more likely to be permanently excluded from schools and three times more likely to have temporary or fixed-term exclusions.
- Three out of ten murders are committed with a sharp instrument and the most likely person to be equipped with this is a boy aged 14–19 excluded from school.
- Forty-nine per cent of male and 33% female sentenced prisoners were excluded from school.

Though it would be incorrect to suggest that ADHD is synonymous with antisocial behaviour, the Youth Crime Action Plan, published in June 2008,<sup>11</sup> identified seven main risk factors of criminal offending during childhood:

- Temperament
- Maltreatment

- Mother with low IQ
- Child with low IQ
- Parental criminal record
- ADHD diagnosis
- Low socioeconomic status.

Although this report is to be welcomed, it would be much more effective if we could ‘close the stable door before the horse has bolted’. In other words, it would be an improvement if all students who receive more than one fixed-term exclusion for PDB (and are therefore at risk of permanent exclusion) underwent a comprehensive assessment of needs to prevent a negative final outcome.

The current law on exclusions is governed by a complex combination of the Education Act 2002,<sup>12</sup> and various DCSF regulations. The DCSF also issues detailed guidelines and offers training packs to schools, outlining how the law should be interpreted and the procedure applied. Other legislation of relevance includes the Sex Discrimination Act 1975,<sup>13</sup> Race Relations Act 1976<sup>14</sup> and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.<sup>15</sup>

At present, there are two specific types of exclusion: fixed-term (previously known as suspension), where schools can decide to exclude a child for a fixed number of school days; and permanent (previously expulsion), where the child is completely removed from the school roll.<sup>16</sup>

However, since September 2007, there have been a number of highly important changes to the law regarding exclusion from school. Schools must now make full-time educational provision from the sixth day of fixed-term exclusion. Schools must inform parents that, for the first five days of any exclusion, a penalty notice can be imposed on them if the pupil is found in a public place without reasonable justification.<sup>17</sup> With the time pressures and resource issues bound with fixed-term exclusions, schools could be forced to permanently exclude more students with ADHD/PDB.

In a study of both permanent and fixed-term exclusions in Bedfordshire Local Education Authority (LEA) in 2006–07 there were 67 permanent exclusions (0.10% of the population), in line with national figures.<sup>18</sup> Of these 67 permanently excluded children, only 42 were listed as having some form of SEN. Although two permanent exclusions were the result of drug- and alcohol-related issues, the most significant reason for permanently excluded children 22 cases was PDB (22 cases accounting for almost one-third of all exclusions). Furthermore, 56% of the upper school excluded students were on the SEN register.

Although permanent exclusions in this LEA had reduced significantly over the previous two years (2004–05 and 2005–06),<sup>18</sup> in the academic

**Table 2. Permanent exclusions from Bedfordshire Local Education Authority in 2007–08<sup>19</sup>**

Special Educational Need (SEN) stage	Reason	Total
School Action	Physical assault against a pupil	5
	Persistent disruptive behaviour	4
	Verbal abuse/threatening behaviour against an adult	4
	Verbal abuse/threatening behaviour against a pupil	3
	Damage	2
	Physical assault against an adult	2
	Sexual misconduct	1
<b>School Action total</b>		<b>21</b>
School Action Plus	Persistent disruptive behaviour	8
	Physical assault against a pupil	6
	Physical assault against an adult	5
	Verbal abuse/threatening behaviour against an adult	5
	Verbal abuse/threatening behaviour against a pupil	3
	Drug- and alcohol-related issues	1
	Racist abuse	1
	Theft	1
<b>School Action Plus total</b>		<b>30</b>
Statemented	Physical assault against an adult	5
	Damage	2
	Physical assault against a pupil	2
	Verbal abuse/threatening behaviour against a pupil	2
	Verbal abuse/threatening behaviour against an adult	2
	Persistent disruptive behaviour	1
<b>Statemented total</b>		<b>14</b>
Not on SEN List	Persistent disruptive behaviour	15
	Physical assault against a pupil	10
	Verbal abuse/threatening behaviour against an adult	5
	Drug- and alcohol-related issues	4
	Verbal abuse/threatening behaviour against a pupil	2
	Damage	2
	Sexual misconduct	1
<b>Not on SEN list total</b>		<b>39</b>
<b>Grand total</b>		<b>104</b>

year 2007–08<sup>19</sup> the number of students permanently excluded rose to 104 (an increase of nearly 60% on 2006–07). Of the 104 permanent exclusions, 65 students were recorded as having some form of SEN. However, 39 students (38%) excluded did not have any recognised form of SEN (see Table 2, page 10). The year before, in 2006–07, 37% of students permanently excluded were not on the SEN register.

Of the 104 students who were permanently excluded in 2007–08, 28 were listed as having PDB yet less than half of these were included on the SEN register and only one had a full statement. Of 104 students permanently excluded, nine were diagnosed with ADHD and all were on the SEN register. This means that, of the 210 students in this LEA with ADHD, less than 5% were permanently excluded. The Bedfordshire data lead us to conclude that diagnosis, treatment and formalised educational support can significantly reduce the risk of permanent exclusion of students with ADHD.

ADHD as a term struggles for recognition within the current educational climate in the UK. The term is not listed in the SEN and Disability Act,<sup>20</sup> the Disability Discrimination Act<sup>15</sup> or the Disability Discrimination Code of Practice<sup>21</sup>, nor was the term mentioned in *Learning Behaviour: The Report of the Practitioners' Group on School Behaviour and Discipline* by Sir Alan Steer in 2005.<sup>22</sup>

The government White Paper: *Back on Track. A strategy for modernising alternative provision for young people*, tells us that: 'School leaders and other education professionals have told us that we need to do more to intervene early to support and challenge young people who are starting to cause difficulties in school and to improve educational provision for those who are permanently excluded'.<sup>7</sup>

The White Paper also highlights that 66% of permanently excluded children and 75% of children in pupil referral units (PRUs) have SENs. In addition to the long-term effects of exclusion, the report also indicates that, in the short term, it costs £4,000 per child per annum to teach a child in a mainstream school and £15,000 per child per annum in a PRU. The paper emphasises the key role for schools in identifying children with challenging behaviour early on, and the importance of being able to access the right support before they reach the point of permanent exclusion.

### What we need to do next

Exclusion is a complicated and emotive matter and many issues need to be addressed to both understand and reduce the numbers of excluded children. Exclusion is a school's most powerful disciplinary tool and should remain as one of a

range of options available to head teachers to tackle unruly students.

Guidance makes it clear that the removal of a pupil from the school environment should be used only as a last resort in response to 'serious breaches' of a school's behaviour policy, or to safeguard the welfare and education of other pupils. However, there is a definite case to investigate further whether or not a number of students who are being excluded for PDB, who are not registered as having any form of SEN, may in fact be students who have unrecognised ADHD. As a result, the following suggestions should be made:

- That the term PDB is fully investigated, so as to understand which behaviours are being identified within the current guidance on school behaviour policy
- That every child who receives more than one fixed-term exclusion from school for PDB is screened for ADHD
- That all new and existing teaching and non-teaching staff in schools are trained in the understanding, management and support of children with ADHD
- That all schools should have a designated staff member to liaise with parents and carers of children with ADHD/PDB issues
- That all multi-agency services and school parent support groups are aware of issues resulting in both fixed-term and permanent exclusion in schools (due to ADHD/PDB) to support both children and families affected.

We know that, with early recognition, management and support many children with ADHD can be successful in school.<sup>23</sup> It is therefore hoped that, by highlighting the link between ADHD, PDB and exclusion, we can gain a better understanding of children who display PDB and prevent them from deteriorating with serious consequences for themselves, their families, their school communities and society as a whole ■

#### References

For a full list of references, please visit [www.adhdinpractice.co.uk](http://www.adhdinpractice.co.uk)

### Key points

- There were 8,680 permanent exclusions from primary, secondary and special schools in England during 2006–07 and 425,600 fixed-period exclusions.
- Many of the individuals who are permanently excluded for persistent disruptive behaviour (PDB) are not registered as having any special educational needs (SENs).
- The link between attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and PDB is well established. There is no doubt that children with ADHD are more at risk of exclusion.