

## **Behaviour in schools – evidence call**

October 2026

### **About us**

We're RCOT, the Royal College of Occupational Therapists. We've championed the profession and the people behind it for over 80 years; and today, we are thriving with over 37,000 members. Then and now, we're here to help achieve life-changing breakthroughs for our members, for the people they support and for society as a whole. Occupational therapists in Northern Ireland work in trusts, across health and social care services, they deliver services across housing, schools, prisons, the voluntary and independent sectors, and vocational and employment rehabilitation services.

Occupational therapy helps you live your best life at home, at work – and everywhere else. It's about being able to do the things you want and have to do. That could mean helping you overcome challenges learning at school, going to work, playing sport or simply doing the dishes. Everything is focused on increasing independence and wellbeing.

It's science-based, health and social care profession that's regulated by the Health and Care Professions Council.

An occupational therapist helps people of all ages overcome challenges completing everyday tasks or activities – what we call 'occupations'. Occupational therapists see beyond diagnoses and limitations to hopes and aspirations. They look at relationships between the activities you do every day – your occupations – alongside the challenges you face and your environment.

Then, they create a plan of goals and adjustments targeted at achieving a specific set of activities. The plan is practical, realistic and personal to you as an individual, to help you achieve the breakthroughs you need to elevate your everyday life.

This support can give people a renewed sense of purpose. It can also open up new opportunities and change the way people feel about the future.

### **Our response**

#### **Introduction**

Behaviour should be understood as a form of communication which arises through the interaction between the child, the environment, the tasks being demanded of them, and the support available. Effective behaviour policy therefore requires a preventative, relational and needs-led approach that addresses underlying factors such as communication, sensory processing, emotional regulation, trauma, neurodevelopmental differences and participation, rather than relying primarily on punitive or reactive responses.

#### **Theme 3: Underlying causes and influences**

##### **Unmet SEND and neurodevelopmental needs**

Challenging behaviour is often a sign that a child's needs are not being understood or met. Many children who struggle with behaviour have underlying SEND or neurodevelopmental differences, including autism, ADHD, communication difficulties, sensory processing differences and mental health needs. Behaviour may reflect distress, anxiety, sensory overload or difficulties communicating rather than intentional non-compliance. When schools adapt their environments and approaches to meet individual needs, behaviour problems are less likely to arise. The [Timpson Review of School Exclusion](#) demonstrated that children with SEND are significantly over-represented in exclusion statistics, underlining the importance of early intervention, inclusive practice and timely access to support.

### **Communication and emotional regulation difficulties**

Behaviour is often a form of communication. Many incidents occur when children and young people lack the skills, confidence or opportunity to express their needs, emotions or distress in other ways. Difficulties with emotional regulation, executive functioning, communication and social understanding can significantly affect a child's ability to cope with the demands of the school day. Schools should recognise that self-regulation develops through co-regulation, with trusted adults providing consistent support to help children understand and manage their emotions. Strengthening emotional literacy, communication skills and supportive relationships can reduce distress, improve participation and prevent behaviour from escalating.

### **Trauma and adversity**

Trauma and adverse childhood experiences can have a significant impact on a child's emotional regulation, attention, relationships and behaviour. Behaviour that is perceived as challenging may reflect a response to stress, threat, insecurity or previous traumatic experiences rather than deliberate non-compliance. Behaviour policies should therefore be trauma-informed and focused on understanding the reasons behind behaviour, not simply responding to the behaviour itself. Restrictive, exclusionary or punitive approaches risk increasing distress and damaging relationships, whereas safe, predictable and trusting environments are more likely to promote engagement, wellbeing and positive behaviour.

### **Sensory and environmental factors**

Behaviour can't be separated from the environment in which it occurs. Many behaviour challenges arise when the demands of the environment exceed a child's capacity to cope. Factors such as excessive noise, crowded spaces, unpredictable routines, frequent transitions, sensory overload and unrealistic expectations can increase stress and make participation more difficult. Schools should routinely consider whether behaviour is being driven or exacerbated by environmental barriers and make reasonable adjustments to reduce these demands. Creating supportive, predictable and sensory-informed environments can reduce distress, improve participation and help prevent behaviour challenges from occurring in the first place.

## **Theme 4: Current approaches and what works**

### **Creating environments that enable participation**

Behaviour is most effectively supported when schools proactively adapt the environment to meet children's needs. Many behaviour challenges can be reduced through relatively simple environmental modifications that lower stress, support regulation and improve participation. These include sensory-informed classrooms, opportunities for movement throughout the day, flexible seating arrangements, access to quiet spaces, predictable routines and the use of visual supports. Such approaches can be particularly beneficial for children with SEND and neurodevelopmental differences, helping to prevent dysregulation before it escalates into behaviour incidents. Occupational therapists can play an important role in identifying environmental barriers and recommending practical adaptations that support engagement, learning and wellbeing.

### **Relational and trauma-informed approaches**

Strong, positive relationships between children and trusted adults are one of the most effective protective factors for promoting positive behaviour. Approaches that prioritise co-regulation, attachment-informed practice and the development of trusting relationships can help children feel safe, understood and supported. These approaches recognise that behaviour is influenced by a child's developmental experiences, emotional wellbeing and sense of security. Schools that foster a culture of belonging and connection are more likely to support positive behaviour, engagement and attendance, particularly for vulnerable learners.

### **Working collaboratively through multidisciplinary support**

Behaviour challenges often arise from a complex interaction of educational, developmental, communication, sensory and mental health factors. As a result, effective support frequently requires collaboration between education staff and a range of specialist professionals. Occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, educational psychologists and mental health practitioners each contribute valuable expertise in understanding and addressing underlying needs., a principle that underpins the newly-established 'Experts at Hand' approach in England [Experts at Hand: developing and delivering the offer in year 1 - GOV.UK](#) . Access to timely multidisciplinary assessment and intervention can help identify the reasons behind behaviour, support preventative planning and reduce reliance on reactive responses, restrictive practices and exclusion.

### **Promoting school belonging and connectedness**

A sense of belonging is increasingly recognised as a key factor in supporting positive behaviour, wellbeing and engagement in learning. Children and young people who feel connected to their school, valued by adults and included within the school community are less likely to experience

behavioural difficulties, exclusion and disengagement. Schools should therefore consider belonging and connectedness as important outcomes in their own right and embed them within behaviour policies and practice. Evidence suggests that fostering positive relationships, participation and school connectedness can act as protective factors for both behaviour and mental health.

### **Theme 5: Challenges and gaps**

A key challenge for schools is moving from a culture of managing behaviour to a culture of understanding behaviour. Policies and practices that focus on identifying and addressing unmet need are more likely to improve long-term outcomes than approaches that rely primarily on punishment, exclusion or restriction.

#### **Reliance on punitive responses**

RCOT cautions against over-reliance on exclusion, isolation, seclusion, restraint and sanctions without understanding underlying need. While such approaches may provide a short-term response to immediate concerns, they don't address the factors driving behaviour and may inadvertently increase distress, disengagement and exclusion from learning. Effective behaviour support requires an understanding of the child's individual needs, strengths, circumstances and environmental context. Approaches that focus solely on managing behaviour rather than understanding its causes risk overlooking opportunities for early intervention and preventative support. Evidence shows these approaches often fail to address root causes and may worsen outcomes.

#### **Continued reliance on restrictive interventions**

RCOT's recent response to the Northern Ireland consultation on restrictive interventions highlighted concerns about the continued use of restrictive practices within educational settings. Restrictive interventions can be traumatic, particularly for children with communication difficulties, neurodevelopmental differences or previous experiences of trauma. Their use is often characterised by inconsistent understanding and interpretation across settings, with limited clarity around what constitutes restrictive practice in everyday school environments. There is also a risk that restrictive interventions are used as reactive responses to distress rather than as a last resort within a broader preventative and therapeutic framework. Reducing reliance on restrictive practices requires greater emphasis on understanding behaviour as communication, adapting environments, supporting emotional regulation and providing timely access to multidisciplinary support.

#### **Gaps in provision:**

##### **Gaps in workforce knowledge and skills**

A consistent challenge across schools is ensuring that staff have the knowledge, confidence and skills to understand and respond effectively to behaviour that may be rooted in unmet need. There is a need for greater access to training and ongoing professional development in areas including trauma-informed practice, sensory processing, emotional regulation, neurodiversity, co-regulation

and de-escalation. Such training can help staff move beyond viewing behaviour solely through a disciplinary lens and instead develop a deeper understanding of the factors influencing a child's participation, engagement and wellbeing. Building workforce capability in these areas is essential if schools are to adopt more preventative, inclusive and needs-led approaches to behaviour support.

### **Limited access to therapy services and multidisciplinary support**

Schools also require timely access to specialist support to help identify and address the underlying causes of behaviour challenges. Occupational therapists, alongside speech and language therapists, educational psychologists and mental health professionals, can contribute valuable expertise in understanding the interaction between the child, their environment and the demands placed upon them. Earlier access to occupational therapy and multidisciplinary assessment can help identify unmet sensory, communication, developmental, emotional or environmental needs before difficulties escalate. Strengthening access to multidisciplinary support would enable schools to implement targeted, preventative interventions and reduce reliance on exclusion, restrictive practices and other reactive responses.

## **Theme 6: Solutions and future priorities**

### **Prioritise prevention over reaction**

A fundamental shift is needed from managing behaviour to preventing behaviour difficulties from occurring in the first place. Behaviour policy should focus on understanding and addressing the underlying causes of distress, rather than responding primarily once behaviour has escalated. Early identification of need, environmental adaptation, positive relationships and targeted support are more effective and sustainable than reactive interventions. This preventative approach should underpin future behaviour policy and practice across Northern Ireland.

### **Embed trauma-informed, neuro-affirming and relational practice**

Future behaviour guidance should be grounded in trauma-informed, neuro-affirming, relational and rights-based principles. Children and young people should be supported through approaches that recognise the impact of trauma, respect neurodiversity and prioritise safety, trust, participation and belonging. Evidence suggests that trauma-informed approaches can reduce distress, improve engagement and reduce reliance on restrictive and exclusionary practices.

### **Increase access to occupational therapy and multidisciplinary support**

Schools require timely access to specialist expertise to understand and respond effectively to behaviour that may arise from unmet need. Occupational therapists can make a unique contribution by supporting participation, emotional regulation, sensory processing, environmental adaptation and co-regulation strategies. Earlier access to occupational therapy and other health professionals would help identify needs before they escalate into behaviour challenges.

## **Create environments where children can succeed**

Behaviour improves when children are supported to participate successfully in school life. Future investment should prioritise sensory-informed environments, predictable routines, opportunities for movement, reasonable adjustments and approaches that promote engagement and belonging. Schools should be supported to make adaptations that reduce barriers to participation rather than expecting children to adapt to environments that do not meet their needs.

## **Measure success through participation, belonging and wellbeing**

Behaviour policy should move beyond a narrow focus on compliance and sanction. Success should be measured by the extent to which children and young people feel safe, connected, engaged in learning and able to participate meaningfully in school life. Promoting belonging and school connectedness has been shown to support positive behaviour, attendance, wellbeing and educational outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

The most effective route to improving behaviour in schools is not through increasingly reactive responses, but through earlier understanding and support. By understanding the child, adapting the environment, identifying and responding to unmet need, supporting regulation, and building positive relationships, schools can reduce distress, improve participation and learning, and minimise reliance on restrictive practices and exclusion. This preventative, relational and trauma-informed approach should be the cornerstone of future behaviour policy and practice across Northern Ireland.

## **RCOT calls for:**

- A shift from reactive behaviour management to preventative, needs-led support.
- Trauma-informed, neuro-affirming and relational approaches to behaviour.
- Earlier access to occupational therapy and multidisciplinary assessment.
- Greater investment in workforce training, including sensory processing, emotional regulation and co-regulation.
- Sensory-informed and inclusive learning environments.
- Reduced reliance on restrictive and exclusionary practices.
- Greater focus on participation, belonging and wellbeing as indicators of success.

## **Contact**

For further information on this submission, please contact:

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