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Successful reintegration of autistic pupils following school exclusion



Key features of successful reintegration:

- The whole school community accepting and adhering to a genuinely inclusive and accepting ethos.
- Pupils being listened to and having their point of view understood, especially how autism impacts on them as an individual.
- School staff building a stable, trusting and nurturing relationship with the pupil.
- Aiming to reduce an autistic pupil's anxiety/stress so that they increase their resilience and willingness to engage in learning.
- Working to facilitate positive peer relationships.
- Forming a positive and constructive relationship with parents, carers and other professionals.
- Staff working together as a team, supporting one another; looking for solutions together and agreeing consistent approaches.
- Good partnership work across education, health and care.
- Using strategies to help an autistic pupil to communicate in a way that meets their needs.
- Being clear what action will be taken if the pupil reaches crisis.



In this resource we talk about understanding the impact of exclusion and exploring reintegration preparation and strategies that schools can use following an autistic child or young person's exclusion from school. Families may also be interested in this information to ensure that their child is fully supported following an exclusion.

Understanding the impact of exclusion

Autistic pupils are [three times more likely to be excluded from school than pupils with no special educational needs \(SEN\)](#). The most common reason is 'Physical assault against an adult'.

However, disruptive behaviour can be a manifestation of a pupil's autism and exclusion can have a distressing and demoralising impact on the pupil, their families and the professionals involved in their education and wellbeing.

In order to consider strategies for reintegration, it's important for schools to understand the impact of exclusion on the autistic pupil, who may feel like a misfit in the social world of school, and believe that they are not welcome at school. This can result in mental health issues and limit their aspirations and opportunities in adult life. Their family may also feel confused, hopeless and find themselves ostracised by other parents and sometimes by the school itself. Exclusion may result in a strained relationship between home and school which needs to be mended for successful reintegration.

Preparing for reintegration

Exclusion is an opportunity for reflection, to rethink support, implement effective strategies and make reasonable adjustments.

The [statutory guidance](#) on exclusion states that 'Schools should have a strategy for reintegrating a pupil who returns to school following a fixed-period exclusion and for managing their future behaviour'. How that reintegration is planned and managed is critical to ensure successful outcomes for the pupil and other pupils. If the causes of the pupil's behaviour are not addressed, a cycle of behaviour that challenges, followed by exclusion can begin and repeat, until either the individual's needs are met, they are moved to another school, or are permanently excluded.

Reintegration is a journey, where breaking the negative cycle of exclusion is vital. The route will be different for each pupil, but the goal of making sure that the pupil feels safe and ready to learn will be the same.

A time for reflection

Reintegration needs to be productive and meaningful, not simply a return to school following exclusion. It's in everyone's best interests to spend time and effort in the short term to overcome the barriers to the pupil's inclusion.

Exclusion should be used constructively to resolve the situation and ensure positive and appropriate support is in place for everyone.

Understanding behaviour

Exclusion often occurs when a pupil's underlying SEN are not being fully supported and they [display behaviour that challenges](#) as a result of [anxiety and stress](#). Sensory sensitivities and the school environment often play a big part.

As a result, schools should aim to understand:

- the context of an incident that has led to exclusion and any contributing factors
- how the pupil's autism affected their behaviour and any triggers
- the pupil's actions from their perspective.

Pupils on the autism spectrum experience difficulties with [social communication and social interaction](#) and may have [repetitive behaviour and routines](#), highly focused interests and [sensory sensitivities](#). They need [preparation for change](#), such as an alteration to the timetable or a different teacher.

[Behaviour](#) is a form of communication. No child ever wants to be unhappy or anxious. They are often feeling lost, confused or simply can't cope. Focusing on and disciplining the behaviour rather than looking beneath it is often missing the point. To help analyse and understand the behaviour, resources such as ABC behaviour charts, functional analysis questionnaires or [STAR charts](#) may be useful.

Sources of stress should be identified and addressed. The aim should be to reduce a pupil's anxiety levels, so that they're able to re-engage with their education by feeling safe [in the classroom](#) and accepted by those who support them.

Understanding the individual

All autistic people share certain difficulties, but being autistic will affect them in different ways. It's important to understand how the individual sees and experiences the world. The [statutory guidance](#) on exclusion states: '*Excluded pupils should be enabled and encouraged to participate at all stages of the exclusion process, taking into account their age and ability to understand*'.

It's vital to get to know and understand the pupil as an individual, their interests, needs, likes and dislikes and how they would like to be supported in school. This includes [unstructured times](#) such as breaks and lunch times. '[All about me](#)' booklets may help with this.

Depending on the length of the exclusion, a member of staff could deliver a home programme, including [Social Stories](#)[™] to help the pupil understand particular situations that they find difficult. This could include a situation relating to the exclusion, such as *Lining up for assembly*.

It's important to remember that even children who can't communicate verbally can express themselves. This can be through the use of the written word, [visual symbols](#), sign, facial expression or body posture. All children and young people should be supported to express their views and reasonable adjustments made to help them do so.

The Autism Education Trust's (AET) parents' guide [Working together with your child's school](#) is a useful tool to help parents identify what is important in their child's education and may help rebuild strained relationships with the school following exclusion.

Supporting staff

If an autistic pupil has been aggressive this can affect staff physically, emotionally and mentally. They may need a time to heal and exclusion can serve, not just as a sanction for the pupil, but also as recovery time for staff. Morale can be affected by behaviour that challenges. Staff can feel isolated and reluctant to come forward if they're struggling to cope. They need support and understanding and an opportunity to debrief. Looking for solutions amongst the team and agreeing consistent approaches is very important.

Successful reintegration is dependent on attitudes. Schools have different thresholds for exclusion and different levels of commitment to inclusion. Staff wellbeing and their readiness and willingness to teach and support the pupil are crucial.

Working together to reduce stress and anxiety

Careful planning is required to ensure effective reintegration. However, as most exclusions are short, this planning may have to take place after the pupil has already returned to school.

Schools are no longer obliged to hold a reintegration meeting, but it's considered good practice. It can be an opportunity for parents to express any concerns, rebuild strained relationships and discuss strategies.

Schools should ensure that the aim of reintegration is inclusion and not to place impossible demands on the pupil that they will never achieve as a result of being autistic. Find the best match between the individual pupil's needs and the educational provision and make the necessary reasonable adjustments.

Successful reintegration is dependent on establishing an environment where a culture of inclusion, commitment to serving the needs of all pupils and availability of appropriate resources (both financial and staff expertise) are in place.

Reintegration strategies

Reintegration is a transition

Autistic pupils generally dislike change and this can often lead to anxiety or other forms of distress, including aggression. Any period of transition, such as reintegration, is likely to cause anxiety and careful preparation will be required to help them manage this change.

Reintegration arrangements

To avoid repetition of behaviour that led to the exclusion, the pupil must be involved in the reintegration process and told of arrangements, including details that might seem trivial. For example, which room they will be going to first, what time, how long it will be for, what they will be doing there and what happens next? This could be reinforced with a visual timetable which should be shared with the child and their parents in advance of the reintegration. The pupil's return to school should also be viewed by all as a 'fresh start'.

Reducing anxiety and increasing confidence

Reducing a pupil's anxiety levels should be central to the school's approach. Before the pupil can access learning, work may need to be done on their emotional wellbeing, reducing stress and increasing self-confidence. A proactive approach can be adopted, identifying and addressing sources of anxiety, before these escalate into behaviour that causes staff concern. Observing the pupil in a range of settings can help identify where they are stressed or happy. Staff need to be highly attentive to the individual pupil's needs, motivations and interests, remembering that all autistic pupils are different. Reducing the demands placed on the pupil initially can help.

Strategies which can help an individual pupil to recognise and express emotions and identify the factors which might affect them, are available in the [AET Tools for teachers](#), and include: Stress bucket, Thermometer, STAR chart/analysis, 5 point scale, Turtle technique, and How fast does your engine run?

Staff shouldn't just focus on the negative behaviour that led to their exclusion, they also need recognition and rewards for achievements, even if they seem very small.

Involve the pupil

Schools should work with the individual pupil to help them to recognise stress and understand their behaviour. Fully involve the pupil in developing coping strategies as they will be more likely to adopt a strategy that helps them to self-regulate when they have had an element of choice or have created it themselves. Child-led approaches and non-pressurised strategies can help to overcome their defensiveness, getting them ready to learn and allowing participation, independence and resilience.

Make reasonable adjustments

Schools have a duty to make [reasonable adjustments](#) to enable disabled pupils to fully participate in all aspects of school and to ensure that they are not placed at a substantial disadvantage compared to non-disabled pupils. This duty is an anticipatory one, meaning that schools need to think in advance about what disabled pupils might require and what adjustments might be needed.

Schools should try to understand the source of the child's anxiety and explore ways to minimise it eg letting the pupil to enter school or the lunch hall five minutes before other pupils, allowing them to sit at the same table, or in a quieter room. Some autistic pupils are able to learn more about social situations, by using [social stories and comic strip conversations](#)™

Arranging [autism awareness](#) training for playground staff and [teaching autism acceptance](#) to their peers can also help.

Be clear what you will do if the pupil reaches crisis

Autistic pupils require consistent approaches. Staff need to work together and to be clear what their roles are when managing behaviour that causes concern. They need to support the pupil and each other. De-escalation techniques should be employed and physical restraint should always be a last resort. Techniques should be discussed with the pupil's parents, and if appropriate, the pupil at the reintegration meeting.

Adopting a consistent approach is not the same as applying a 'blanket' behaviour policy to

all pupils, regardless of disability. Zero tolerance behaviour policies can indirectly [discriminate](#) against autistic pupils, as they are much more likely to break the school rules than non-disabled pupils, for reasons relating to their disability.

Assessing risk

Where head teachers exclude a pupil on the autism spectrum to ensure the health and safety of pupils and staff in the school, they should justify that by carrying out an individual pupil behaviour risk audit or an individualised risk assessment.

For a pupil whose behaviour can cause staff concern, an acknowledgement of the pupil's potential to cause harm should be tempered by risk reduction options (proactive interventions to prevent risk; early interventions to manage risk and reactive interventions to respond to adverse outcomes).

The risk assessment should not only list those potentially harmful behaviours, how likely they are to occur and how serious the adverse outcomes could be, but also what the possible triggers might be and what strategies and interventions (also known as controls/measures) the school could employ to reduce those risks.

By thoroughly exploring the risks of a pupil's potential behaviour, triggers may be either eliminated altogether, through reasonable adjustments, or staff made aware of the early warning signs and be able to take timely action to avoid escalation of behaviour. Remember schools are not required to eliminate all risk nor should they make generalisations about health and safety to avoid making reasonable adjustments.

Building relationships

The pupil

Staff who have a positive relationship with an autistic pupil can revolutionise their experience of school life. A key member of staff eg a teaching assistant (TA), SENCO, teacher or mentor, can help identify needs, reduce anxiety, improve confidence and learning, facilitate independence and work in collaboration with the family.

To do this staff will need to:

- Build and maintain trust and help the pupil to try to regulate their behaviour.
- Accept the individual and not judge them for their behaviour.
- Show empathy and help the pupil to navigate the social world of the school, thinking about potential difficulties and what can help.
- Adopt a calm manner, even through crisis situations, and don't take incidents personally or assume they were intentional.
- Consider approaches that are appropriate to the pupil's needs eg pupils with a [demand avoidant profile](#) (PDA) may require different approaches to those required by children with a diagnosis of autism or Asperger Syndrome.

Expertise and responsibility should be shared across all practitioners in the setting. If only one or two staff work with the pupil, it makes them vulnerable when staff are absent or leave. If too many staff work with the pupil, it can create unnecessary anxiety. Rotation of staff and gradual fade out of staff members is advisable.

Peers

All pupils have the right to be protected from harm. For pupils who don't understand autism, an autistic [meltdown](#) can appear frightening. Fear and ignorance can combine and manifest as prejudice. If this prejudice is condoned or ignored by the school, then the autistic pupil is likely to experience further difficulties with interacting with others and lack the social skills to build bridges with their peers.

The school must adopt a genuinely inclusive ethos where difference is not tolerated but celebrated. Teaching [understanding and acceptance](#) can be done in a number of ways, including through stories, visiting speakers, school assemblies, or fundraising for particular charities. The curriculum should also include lessons on respecting [equality and diversity](#) and the importance of forming positive relationships.

Autistic pupils are likely to need help with forming and sustaining peer relationships eg Friendship circles, the indices of friendships and conversation starters suggested in [AET Tools for Teachers](#).

Families

Following an exclusion, parents should be invited to express their views, concerns and knowledge of their child's strengths and difficulties. They know their child better than anyone and will be key in identifying potential triggers and can share strategies that they use at home. Schools should be receptive to their suggestions and adapt their practice accordingly. Reintegration strategies should meaningfully involve the parents and pupil and be clearly communicated to all staff.

The AET parents' guide ['Working together with your child's school'](#), may be useful in encouraging a positive and constructive relationship with families. Home school diaries may help, although care needs to be taken to make sure the child doesn't read negative comments. Email, text and regular face-to-face meetings can also be used.

Families may need further support and can be signposted to [NAS local branches](#), parent and carer groups, sibling support, autism groups and charities.

Other professionals and services

[Statutory guidance](#) states that *Disruptive behaviour can be an indication of unmet needs* so an assessment of whether appropriate provision is in place to support any SEN or disability that a pupil may have may be necessary. A multi-agency assessment should also be considered for a pupil who demonstrates persistent disruptive behaviour

To prevent further exclusion, staff can:

- undertake analysis for underlying special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). When SEND is identified, implement a SEN Support Assess-Plan-Do-Review cycle
- for complex needs or advice, consult the [Local Offer](#) and engage professionals from outside of the school.
- ask the local authority (LA) to make an [assessment of the pupil's education, health and care \(EHC\) needs](#)
- call for an early/emergency annual review, if the pupil already has an EHC plan
- arrange autism training for staff

Professionals from education, health and care must work in partnership to overcome barriers to a pupil's inclusion.

Curriculum and Learning strategies

Readiness to learn

Exclusion can negatively impact the pupil's confidence. Dealing with their emotional well-being and alleviating stress or anxiety is essential if they are to learn. A bespoke package may need to be designed around the needs of the pupil, which fosters resilience and promotes self-awareness and regulation. This can mean that accessing the curriculum may need to be delayed, or adapted and individualised. To help the pupil re-engage with their learning, teaching may initially be based on their strengths and special interests.

Control over learning

Some pupils will only engage with their learning if it's on their terms. There needs to be purpose and meaning to why they are learning a subject. Pupils with a demand avoidant profile may need to have some control over their education, so negotiating their day and ensuring that there are alternatives on offer will give them an element of choice.

For others, providing structure and predictability will help. Answering these basic, but essential questions can significantly reduce anxiety and increase focus:

- What am I doing and how long am I doing it for?
- What will I be doing next?
- When will I get to do the things that I really want to do?
- How do I know I have started and finished?
- How will I know if I have been successful?

Part-time timetable

In exceptional circumstances a part-time timetable may be required as part of the reintegration process. This should be time limited with clear timescales of when the part-time timetable will be reviewed and when the child will be reintegrated back to full time education. Part-time timetables should not be used as a disciplinary sanction or an alternative to exclusion.

Alternative provision

Some autistic pupils will require different provision before they are reintegrated into mainstream, or instead of it, such as outdoor learning, life and social skills, employability skills, personal and social development, home tuition services and online/virtual schools. These can help to foster independence, self-esteem, coping strategies and positive interaction. For example, see [ASDAN Courses](#) and [Academy21](#).

Pupils may also be given a placement in a [pupil referral unit](#) and careful consideration needs to be given as to whether or not this is appropriate.

Teacher training and teaching approaches

The Government's Expert Adviser on behaviour in schools recommended that head teachers should *ensure that staff understand special needs of pupils*¹. Schools need access to autism-specific knowledge, expertise and support and staff need to have an understanding of autism relevant to their role as well as the skills and confidence to differentiate the curriculum.

There are various resources available from the [Autism Education Trust](#) (AET) and the [National Autistic Society](#) to help staff develop their understanding of autism.

Enabling Environments

Behaviour is affected by the [environment](#), not just the physical, but also the sensory and communicative environment. The social model of disability says that a person is not 'disabled' in themselves; they are disabled by their environment. For an autistic pupil, when barriers are removed, stress can be reduced allowing them to learn and ultimately reach their full potential.

Physical environment

Schools have a duty to plan better access for disabled pupils, including in relation to the physical environment of the school. One of the most common reasonable adjustments to make for autistic pupils is simply to allow them access to a quiet room, where they can become calm, away from any source of anxiety. If accommodation is problematic, a safe space can instead be a pop up tent in a quiet corner of the classroom; access to the library; a blanket; a trampoline or even simply being in the presence of a trusted member of staff. Providing a safe space can enable an autistic pupil to regulate the amount of social interaction they engage in.

Sensory environment

It's important to understand how the environment impacts on the senses of an autistic pupil. To identify triggers the pupil can colour code areas in a plan of the school where they feel comfortable and uncomfortable so that reasonable adjustments can then be made. For example, if the playground is overwhelming the pupil could use a quiet room with one or two friends, have access to a calmer outdoor space, or a club which would ideally be based on their special interest.

Communicative environment

Many autistic pupils have difficulties with [communication](#), either understanding others or expressing themselves appropriately. Improving communication may help to reduce behaviour that causes staff concern. Teaching social skills, using visual supports or Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) supports may help.

¹ Getting the simple things right: Charlie Taylor's behaviour checklists, DfE 2011