



**Autism
Education
Trust**

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Department
for Education

School Exclusions

A guide to help parents navigate equality law, rights and entitlements when their autistic child is excluded or at risk of exclusion from school



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**Autistic
Young
Experts**



Introduction

Behaviour is communication. What is your autistic child's behaviour trying to tell us?

If your child is at risk of being excluded, you need to know:

- Are your child's needs being met?
- Has the school listened to you?
- Have they adapted their behaviour policy?
- Have they taken reasonable steps to make things better?
- Is exclusion a fair decision?

If not, the exclusion might be unjustified.

[The Equality Act 2010 means that schools must be tolerant of disability related behaviour.](#)



Introduction

This guide outlines the legal duties the [Equality Act 2010](#) places on your child's school in relation to the exclusion of disabled pupils.¹ The Government has introduced the term 'suspension' to replace 'fixed period exclusion' and 'fixed term exclusion'. This new terminology is used in this guide. The word exclusion is used to refer to either suspension or permanent exclusion. The examples given relate specifically to autistic pupils and are intended to help you and your child's school avoid disability discrimination claims, where possible.

Autistic pupils are twice as likely to be suspended from school as pupils with no special educational needs (SEN).² The most common reasons given by headteachers are 'persistent disruptive behaviour' and 'physical assault against an adult'.³ However, disruptive behaviour can be a manifestation of a pupil's autism and excluding your child for exhibiting disability related behaviour can amount to disability discrimination.



Introduction

The meaning of disability

[The Equality Act 2010, section 6](#) describes a disabled person as someone who has:

- A physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

Mental impairments include autism and most autistic people are likely to fit this description, but you do not have to have a diagnosis to be considered a disabled person.

Detailed information is available on the [definition of disability](#).⁴

What is covered by the Equality Act?

A school must not discriminate against a disabled pupil in relation to:

- Admissions.
- How education is provided.⁵
- Exclusion.
- Any other disadvantage, denial of opportunity or choice.

What is unlawful disability discrimination?

The forms of disability discrimination that are unlawful under the school provisions of the Act are:

- Direct discrimination.
- Indirect discrimination.
- Discrimination arising from disability.
- Failure to make reasonable adjustments.

It is also unlawful for a school to harass or victimise a pupil, their parent, sibling or anyone else who has or is thought to have made or helped with a complaint about discrimination.



Disability discrimination

Direct disability discrimination

Direct disability discrimination occurs when a school treats a disabled pupil less favourably because of their disability than it treats, or would treat, a non-disabled pupil.⁶

Example: An autistic pupil is excluded from a school trip because the school believes that she will not be able to participate in the activities because of her autism, but no consideration has been made to make reasonable adjustments. This is likely to be direct disability discrimination.

Direct disability discrimination is always unlawful.

Indirect disability discrimination

Indirect disability discrimination is when a school policy or practice is applied in the same way to everyone, but puts a disabled pupil at a disadvantage. That is unless it can be justified as being a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim, such as to ensure the safety of pupils.⁷

Example: A school has a policy that if a pupil receives three detentions in a term, they will automatically be given a one-day suspension. Autistic pupils are much more likely to inadvertently break the school rules than other pupils. Rigid application of this policy is likely to amount to indirect disability discrimination because, where a reasonable adjustment has not been made, a school will find it very difficult to justify the treatment as a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim. This 'objective justification test' is explained in the next section.

Most discrimination in schools is unintentional and may come about because of rigid policies or practices. Reviewing all practices and policies will help a school to avoid discriminatory practices, as well as help it to comply with the public sector equality duty.⁸



Discrimination arising from disability

Discrimination arising from disability occurs when a school treats a disabled pupil unfavourably because of something connected with their disability (such as their disability-related behaviour) and cannot show that it is a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim.

Discrimination arising from disability will occur if the following three conditions are all met.

1. A school treats your child unfavourably – that is, puts them at a disadvantage – even if this was not the school’s intention.
2. This treatment is because of something connected with your child’s disability, such as their disability-related behaviour.
3. The treatment cannot be justified by showing that it is ‘a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim’.

However, if a school did not know, or could not reasonably have been expected to know, that your child was disabled, then the unfavourable treatment will not be unlawful.

Example: An autistic pupil was suspended from school for misbehaving in a lunchtime queue. The incident occurred following a sudden change to the order that the classes went into lunch. The autistic pupil did not respond to the instructions of lunchtime staff, who remarked on the pupil’s rudeness; intolerance and aggression when other pupils entered her personal space. The pupil covered her ears, hid in the kitchen, which was out-of-bounds to pupils and refused to move.

In the example above, all of the pupil’s responses were in keeping with her diagnosis of autism. The unfavourable treatment of the autistic pupil (i.e. suspension) could only be justified if the school could show that it was a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim.

In the example, the legitimate aim is to ensure the safety of teachers and other pupils in the queue and the pupil whilst in the kitchen. The school would have to show that there were no alternative measures available that would meet the aim without too much difficulty and would avoid such a discriminatory effect. In other words, if proportionate alternative steps could have been taken, there is unlikely to be a good reason for the suspension.

Discrimination arising from disability

In the example, rather than suspending the pupil, reasonable adjustments could have been made. eg lunchtime staff training in autism; allowing the pupil to go to lunch five minutes before other pupils, as well as teaching the pupil about social situations, by using [Social Stories™](#).

A failure to make relevant reasonable adjustments is likely to make it difficult for a school to show that any potentially discriminatory treatment was a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim. Health and safety issues must not be used inappropriately to avoid making a reasonable adjustment. It is for the school to justify the treatment. It must produce evidence, such as an individualised risk assessment and not rely on mere generalisations about health and safety.

Examples of legitimate aims might include:

- Ensuring that education, benefits, facilities and services are targeted at those who most need them.
- The fair exercise of powers.
- Ensuring the health and safety of pupils and staff, provided that risks are clearly specified.
- Maintaining academic and behaviour standards.
- Ensuring the wellbeing and dignity of pupils.



What is disability-related behaviour

To help the school understand that your child's behaviour is a direct consequence of their disability, or affected by it to some degree, you may like to share your child's autism diagnostic report and/or education, health and care (EHC) plan, if applicable.

Reports from other professionals (occupational therapist, educational psychologist, speech and language therapist, autism specific teacher, SENCO etc) might also refer to this behaviour as being a part of your child's disability. Alternatively, it may be useful to refer the school to the [National Institute for Health and Care Excellence \(NICE\): Autism spectrum disorder in under 19s: recognition, referral and diagnosis](#).

Further information on the challenges that autistic pupils may face in school and how this can affect their behaviour can be found on [The National Autistic Society's website](#).

Headteachers should take account of any contributing factors that are identified after an incident of misbehaviour has occurred, before deciding to exclude.⁹ For an autistic pupil, in order to reduce or replace behaviour that causes concern, school staff need to understand why the pupil acts in a particular way. If they understand the cause, they can then provide appropriate support.

Disruptive behaviour can be an indication of unmet needs. In consultation with you, the school may consider asking the local authority to make an assessment of your child's education, health and care (EHC) needs, or, if your child already has an EHC plan, requesting an emergency review of the plan.¹⁰



Failure to make reasonable adjustments

The duty to make reasonable adjustments requires a school to take positive steps to enable disabled pupils to fully participate in all aspects of school life – to ensure that they are not placed at a substantial disadvantage compared to non-disabled pupils.¹¹ This duty is an anticipatory one and therefore schools need to think in advance about what disabled pupils might require and what adjustments might be needed.

Before 2018, a loophole in the Equality Act meant schools did not have to make reasonable adjustments for disabled children when they had a ‘tendency to physical abuse’ – even when that was caused by a lack of appropriate support. However, following an [Upper Tribunal ruling in 2018](#), this loophole no longer applies and schools and colleges must make sure they have made appropriate reasonable adjustments for autistic pupils, or those with other disabilities, aged under 18, before they can exclude them.¹²



Failure to make reasonable adjustments

The headteacher should take your child's views into account, considering these in light of their age and understanding, before deciding to exclude.¹³ For an autistic pupil, reasonable adjustments might be required to allow them to communicate their account of what happened, such as allowing them time to become calm following an incident; providing support to express their views through advocates such as parents or, if the pupil has one, a social worker; the pupil producing a comic strip representation of the incident; allowing the pupil time to process questions.

Where the governing board is legally required to consider your child's reinstatement, they should consider what reasonable adjustments should be made to support the attendance and contribution of all parties. For example, where a parent has a disability that has an impact upon their ability to make representations. They should also identify the steps they will take to enable and encourage your child to attend the meeting or how they may feed in their views by other means if attending the meeting is not possible.¹⁴

Regarding the incident that has led to exclusion, the governing board should consider whether the headteacher can demonstrate that their actions are justified and that no reasonable adjustments could have been made to prevent the incident which led to the exclusion.



Failure to make reasonable adjustments

Where a school decides that there are no reasonable adjustments that it can take, it is important that it sets out its reasons for this decision so that, if it is challenged by you or your child, it can explain to you and, if necessary, a tribunal why it has acted in the way that it has. In a case involving disability, if a school has not complied with its duty to make relevant reasonable adjustments, it will be difficult for it to show that the treatment was proportionate.

In the earlier example involving the autistic pupil in the lunchtime queue, as the school had not put in place the agreed reasonable adjustments to help the pupil overcome her difficulties (regarding social interaction, coping with changes to routine, processing information, sensory processing) and it was this that led to the pupil's distressed behaviour, this would be classified as a failure to make reasonable adjustments. An exclusion is unlikely to be justified in circumstances in which the school has not complied with its duty to make reasonable adjustments for that pupil.



Failure to make reasonable adjustments

The duty to make reasonable adjustments also applies to school policies. Autistic pupils are much more likely to break the school rules than pupils who are not autistic. This means that your child could be placed at a substantial disadvantage if schools rigidly apply their behaviour policy. The Equality Act requires schools to make reasonable adjustments for disabled pupils both to the exclusions process and to the disciplinary sanctions imposed. This might mean applying different sanctions, or applying them in a different way, to avoid putting your child at a substantial disadvantage in relation to their non-disabled peers.

Example: An autistic pupil is excluded for repeatedly getting up from his seat during lessons and disrupting other pupils by going up to them and flapping his arms. It is the school's policy that repeated disruptive behaviour is punished by exclusion. However, the school is under a duty to make reasonable adjustments to its policy, which might mean disregarding some of the disruptive behaviour and working with the pupil to help reduce his anxiety and to develop his social skills.

The flapping arms in the example is 'stimming' or self-stimulatory behaviour and a characteristic of autism that can be an individual's way of self-regulating or calming themselves, but can also indicate that a person is in a state of heightened anxiety and stress. Excluding a pupil for exhibiting this behaviour would be discrimination arising from disability (punishing them for their disability-related behaviour), unless it could be justified.



Failure to make reasonable adjustments

A common misapprehension is that all pupils must be treated the same way and that exceptions cannot be made to behaviour policies. It is true that the overriding principle of equality legislation is generally one of equal treatment, but for disability it is different. Schools may, and often must, treat a disabled person more favourably than a person who is not disabled. It is never direct discrimination against a non-disabled pupil to treat a disabled pupil more favourably.

Example: An autistic pupil can sometimes act in a disruptive manner in class. The school does not take disciplinary action, but uses agreed strategies to manage his behaviour. A non-disabled pupil who is also disruptive in class is punished for his behaviour. This difference in treatment would not be direct discrimination against the non-disabled pupil.

The law requires schools to balance a number of duties which will have bearing on their behaviour policy and practice, particularly where a pupil has SEND that at times affects their behaviour. In particular schools have duties under the Equality Act 2010 to take such steps as is reasonable to avoid any substantial disadvantage to a disabled pupil caused by the school's policies or practices.¹⁵





Your child's school should:

- Be aware of the different forms of disability discrimination and their legal duties under the Equality Act 2010.
- Understand autism and how it impacts on your child (for example, sensory sensitivities, anxiety).
- Try to understand why your child acts in a particular way and provide appropriate support.
- Understand that behaviour is a form of communication and disruptive behaviour can be an indication of unmet needs.
- Ensure collaborative working between parents and other professionals/ services.
- Consider whether exclusion is an appropriate and proportionate measure and whether alternatives have been explored.





- Is your child disabled for the purposes of the Equality Act 2010?¹⁶
- Is your child's behaviour a direct consequence or manifestation of their autism, or at least affected by their disability? Look for references to this particular behaviour being part of your child's autism in professionals' reports.
- Did the headteacher listen to your child's views before taking the decision to exclude and were reasonable adjustments made to allow them to do so?
- Does the exclusion amount to discrimination arising from disability (punishing your child for their disability-related behaviour)? It will not be unlawful if it was a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim or the school did not know, and could not reasonably have been expected to know, that your child was disabled.
- If your child has an education, health and care (EHC) plan, consider whether the support being provided is sufficient to meet their needs.
- What reasonable adjustments is the school making to its practices to avoid placing your child at a substantial disadvantage compared to their nondisabled peers?
- What reasonable adjustments have been made to the school's behaviour policy to avoid claims of indirect disability discrimination and discrimination arising from disability?
- Has the headteacher applied a blanket behaviour policy in the same way to all pupils, which has the effect of putting a group(s) of pupils who share a protected characteristic (disability) at a disadvantage and is not able to justify this treatment as a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim (i.e. indirect disability discrimination)?
- Does the school's behaviour policy acknowledge the requirements of the Equality Act 2010?
- Has account been taken of any contributing factors, such as bullying? What were the triggers and other factors that may have made your child more anxious and therefore less tolerant of people and environments and more susceptible to exhibiting distressed behaviour?
- Is exclusion providing an effective sanction? Are there more proportionate ways of achieving a legitimate aim that would avoid the need for exclusion?

What you can do about discrimination

If you think your child has been discriminated against you can:

- Ask to meet with the headteacher to discuss the situation.
- Write to the governing board to express your views and concerns about the suspension or permanent exclusion (make a written representation) and, if the suspension(s) total more than five days in one term, request a meeting, where the governors would consider the headteacher's decision to suspend your child.
- If the discrimination does not relate to an official exclusion (eg exclusion from a school trip), ask to see, and then follow, the school's written complaints procedure.
- Contact [The National Autistic Society's School Exclusions Helpline](#).
- Make a claim for unlawful discrimination to the [First-tier Tribunal for Special Educational Needs and Disability \(SEND\)](#). A tribunal may order remedies such as a letter of apology, staff training, changes to policies and procedures or additional education for a pupil who has missed some learning.

Useful links

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) [Technical Guidance for Schools in England](#) outlines the legal requirements of the Equality Act 2010 for schools.

The Autism Education Trust (AET): [Working together with your child's school: a guide to help parents identify priorities to encourage a positive and constructive relationship with school](#).

Further help

[The National Autistic Society's School Exclusions Helpline](#) provides advice on preventing and challenging exclusions to parents/carers of schoolchildren and college students. Complete our online enquiry form, or leave a message on our 24-hour answering service and we will call you back – 0808 800 4002 (free from landlines and most mobiles).

Legal aid is available for disability discrimination cases. The Civil Legal Advice helpline (0345 345 4345) can advise you on whether you are eligible for legal aid.

References

¹The term ‘pupils’ is used to apply to autistic children and young people of compulsory school age (approx 5-16).

²National statistics. Permanent exclusions and suspensions in England: 2020 to 2021 <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-exclusions>

³School census 2018/19 (FOI Response – FOI2020-0051802)

⁴Equality Act 2010, section 6 and Equality Act 2010 Guidance on matters to be taken into account in determining questions relating to the definition of disability

⁵This includes school activities, such as extra-curricular and leisure activities, afterschool and homework clubs, sports activities and school trips, assessments and internal exams, behaviour and discipline and school facilities, including libraries and IT.

⁶Equality Act 2010, s13

⁷Equality Act 2010, s19

⁸The public sector equality duty (Equality Act 2010, section 149) requires schools to consider how their policies or decisions affect people who are protected under the Equality Act, including disabled pupils. Schools must have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination; advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not; foster or encourage good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

⁹Department for Education (DfE), Suspension and permanent exclusion guidance (2022), para 4

¹⁰DfE, Suspension and permanent exclusion guidance (2022), para 56

¹¹Equality Act 2010, s20

¹²C&C v The Governing Body of a School, The Secretary of State for Education (First Interested Party) and The National Autistic Society (Second Interested Party) (SEN) [2018] UKUT 269 (AAC)

¹³DfE, Suspension and permanent exclusion guidance (2022), para 4

¹⁴DfE Suspension and permanent exclusion guidance (2022), para 110

¹⁵DfE, Behaviour in schools – advice for headteachers and school staff (2022), para 37

¹⁶Equality Act 2010, section 6 and Equality Act 2010 Guidance on matters to be taken into account in determining questions relating to the definition of disability





Explore our resources and guides for parents:

- Parent Guide for Working Together with Your Child's School

Our Parent Guide gives ideas on questions you might want to ask when choosing a school for your child.

- Top Tips, Strategies and Resources for Parents

A collection of 10 practical strategies and additional tips to support parents of autistic children and young people.

- A guide to help parents navigate equality law, rights and entitlements when their autistic child is excluded or at risk of exclusion from school

This resource outlines the legal duties the Equality Act 2010 places on your child's school in relation to the exclusion of disabled pupils.

Visit www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk to find out more information about our training modules, including the Autism and Inclusion module.

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