

# “It Just Grinds You Down”

Persistent disruptive behaviour in schools  
and what can be done about it

Joanna Williams





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# Acknowledgements

Policy Exchange would like to thank the Law Family Educational Trust for their support, which made this report and the research involved possible. The policy recommendations in this report are those of Policy Exchange, and any errors or mistakes remain our own.

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Published by  
Policy Exchange, 8 – 10 Great George Street, Westminster, London SW1P 3AE

[www.policyexchange.org.uk](http://www.policyexchange.org.uk)

ISBN: 978-1-910812-56-3

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# Executive Summary

Ensuring children behave well in schools is essential. Most fundamentally, good behaviour is necessary to protect the safety of all in a school community. Beyond this, good behaviour is vital for pupils to engage with education, a school's key purpose. Good behaviour may also be considered an end in itself: self-discipline and the ability to concentrate and work constructively with others are important qualities in their own right.

Successive governments have made tackling misbehaviour a key priority. In 2011, new guidance for teachers on behaviour and discipline in schools was issued.<sup>1</sup> Most recently, Tom Bennett's 2017 independent review of behaviour in schools was published by the Department for Education with a government response.<sup>2</sup>

We recognise that behaviour is a key concern for teachers of even the very youngest pupils and in all school-types. However, our focus here is exclusively on secondary schools.

**This report evaluates what has changed in secondary schools since the 2011 guidance for teachers was published.**

The focus on improving behaviour in schools has had some degree of success. The evidence gathered in this report suggests that incidents of pupils engaging in violent, criminal or dangerous behaviour such as fighting, smoking or taking drugs in school are relatively rare.<sup>3</sup> Rates of persistent absence have fallen substantially since 2011.<sup>4</sup>

However, as our report shows, **there is clearly room for schools to go much further**, especially in tackling the persistent classroom disruption that damages the capacity for pupils to learn and teachers to teach. Persistent disruptive behaviour is the most common reason for permanent exclusions in state funded primary, secondary and special schools - accounting for 2,755 (35.7%) of all permanent exclusions in 2016/17.<sup>5</sup>

To this end, we welcome Education Secretary Damian Hinds' recent emphasis on the importance of freeing pupils and teachers from low-level disruption so they can focus on learning and teaching as well as his announcement of the first substantial review of government behaviour guidance in over three years.<sup>6</sup>

Disruptive behaviour includes arriving late for lessons, talking at the same time as a teacher, inappropriate use of mobile phones, chewing gum or not doing the work set. Single incidents of disruption may appear 'low level' or even trivial. However, when disruption occurs frequently, its cumulative impact presents a serious problem: it can significantly interrupt the process of teaching and learning. Although many teachers, parents and pupils are unhappy about the nature and impact of disorder within schools, such disruption can become accepted as inevitable.

1. See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/school-discipline-new-guidance-for-teachers>
2. Bennett, T. (2017) *Creating a Culture: How school leaders can optimise behaviour in schools* (London, DfE). Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/behaviour-in-schools>
3. Department for Education (2018a) *Permanent and Fixed Period Exclusions in England: 2016 to 2017*. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/726741/text\\_exc1617.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/726741/text_exc1617.pdf)
4. Department for Education (2018b) *Pupil absence in schools in England: 2016 to 2017*. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/692406/SFR18\\_2018\\_absence\\_text.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/692406/SFR18_2018_absence_text.pdf)
5. Department for Education (2018a) *Permanent and Fixed Period Exclusions in England: 2016 to 2017*. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/726741/text\\_exc1617.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/726741/text_exc1617.pdf)
6. See <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/hinds-pledges-10m-to-help-teachers-deal-with-bad-behaviour/>



As we outline here, there now appears to be a greater consensus than ever before among school leaders, teachers, parents and pupils that higher disciplinary standards and robust enforcement of behavioural codes are vital to educational success, particularly for pupils from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

Using evidence drawn from the polling of parents, pupils, teachers and the wider public, as well as focus groups, paired interviews and triad discussions with pupils, parents and teachers, this report concludes:

- **Persistent disruption in England’s schools is a serious problem.** Three quarters of teachers say they commonly experience disruption in their own school.
- **Persistent disruption has a negative impact on teaching and learning.** A majority of teachers think the quality of children’s education is affected by disrupted lessons.
- **Persistent disruption has a negative impact of teacher retention.** Almost two-thirds of teachers are currently, or have previously, considered leaving the profession because of poor pupil behaviour.
- **Persistent disruption has a negative impact on teacher recruitment.** Almost three-quarters of the teachers we polled agreed that potential teachers are being put off joining the profession by the fear of becoming victim to poor behaviour from pupils.
- **Teachers are not adequately prepared to tackle disruption with confidence.** Just under half of teachers polled claim their initial teacher training did not prepare them to manage pupil behaviour.

**Persistent disruption is damaging children’s learning by preventing effective teaching from taking place and by driving teachers out of the classroom.<sup>7</sup>**

Our research suggests that teachers, parents and pupils are aware that disruption can have a negative impact upon learning and are supportive of measures to improve discipline in schools. Likewise, parents, teachers and pupils generally agreed on the causes of disruption and what should be done to lessen its impact.

- **Teachers, parents and pupils consider disruption to be a problem.** A third of teachers think disruption that occurs even occasionally or less than occasionally is unacceptable and 7 per cent of teachers polled said there are no acceptable levels of disruption.
- **Behaviour management policies are interpreted and applied inconsistently.** A majority of schools have behaviour management policies in place but teachers say that in relation to many incidents of disruption, the consequences specified are mostly applied occasionally, rarely or never.
- **Initial teacher training leaves many new teachers unprepared to manage pupil behaviour.** 44 per cent of teachers polled said their

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7. In 2015, a BBC documentary invited five Chinese teachers to practice their craft in an English secondary school. Despite the children’s headteacher believing the students were normally charming and well-behaved, their response to their visitors’ teaching methods was to talk constantly, ignore instructions and even to physically fight with each other. It was, said one commentator, a “pitiful display”.



training did not prepare them well for managing pupil behaviour. 40 per cent of teachers said that they felt unable to access adequate ongoing training on behaviour management.

- **Teachers are not always confident they will have the support of senior staff when they discipline a pupil.** Only 27 per cent of teachers polled claimed to be very confident that they would have the support of senior staff in their school. A majority of teachers expressed reluctance to talk about behaviour management difficulties in case other members of staff thought their teaching ability was poor.
- **Teachers are not always confident that they will have the support of parents when they discipline a pupil.** Only 23 per cent of teachers polled felt parents fully respected a teacher's authority to discipline their child.

In making recommendations for changes in practice we keep in mind that the ability to enforce boundaries and tackle persistent disruption requires headteachers to exercise authority in the school and teachers to exercise authority in the classroom. It is important that neither senior management teams within schools nor external policy directives undermine the authority of other adults in schools. Head teachers, senior managers, Ofsted and Department for Education guidelines should work to support teachers in managing pupil behaviour.

### Recommendation 1

'Low level' disruption needs to be taken far more seriously. Higher standards of behaviour should be required of pupils for schools to achieve good or better Ofsted ratings. Ofsted inspectors need to be better trained in how best to evaluate and rate pupil behaviour.

### Recommendation 2

Behaviour management policies alone are not enough to ensure pupils behave well. Policies must be applied and interpreted consistently by all members of staff including senior managers. Ofsted need to evaluate not just a school's behaviour management policy but, importantly, its implementation.

### Recommendation 3

Annually, a proportion of staff professional development time (normally INSET, or in-service training days) should be dedicated to refreshing knowledge of and motivation for institutional behaviour management policies with teaching, support staff and senior managers.

### **Recommendation 4**

Initial teacher training must include a more thorough grounding in behaviour management techniques. During their first two years of practice, teachers must be offered a structured programme of support to ensure that they are able to manage pupil behaviour and thrive in their primary task of teaching.

### **Recommendation 5**

Unless there are highly exceptional circumstances, it should be assumed that senior managers will support teaching staff in applying the school’s behaviour management policy. Training for school leaders should make explicit reference to the headteacher’s responsibility for the behaviour of pupils in class and around school. Teaching unions should provide clear statements to their members highlighting their right to support in behaviour management from senior staff.

### **Recommendation 6**

Schools should have a clear policy on smartphone use that either restricts devices from schools altogether or limits their use to clearly delineated times and circumstances. This should be a key component of each school’s behaviour management policy.

# Introduction

## A crisis of authority

Education inducts young people into a conversation between the generations and, through passing on their intellectual birthright, enables them to understand better the nature of the world and their place within it. Education involves transmitting knowledge and inculcating the values that allow children to grow into fulfilled adults and informed citizens. More practically, education cultivates in young people the skills they need for success in life and in work. For the vast majority of children, formal education takes place within a school. However, schools do more than educate: they also play a key role in socialising children into society's values and attitudes.

The transmission of knowledge from teacher to pupil requires children submit to the authority of subject experts, their teachers. However, in the latter half of the twentieth century, talk of authority and submission, referring to teachers as experts and children as pupils rather than students or learners, came to be considered at best unfashionable and at worst dangerously authoritarian. The distinction between having authority and being authoritarian was lost. Both were considered equally negative qualities in a teacher.

At this time, teacher-directed instruction of pupils was largely rejected in favour of a seemingly more progressive child-centred style of pedagogy. The child - rather than the subject to be taught - became the focus of the educational experience. The received wisdom was that teachers - learners themselves - would guide children and facilitate the learning environment rather than instructing.

The egalitarian rhetoric of 'child-centred' or 'progressive' pedagogy denies the reality that teachers and pupils are not equals. Teachers have subject and pedagogic knowledge that pupils lack. Denying this limits children to their own experiences and existing horizons thereby replicating and reinforcing the disadvantages within some home environments. Submission to the authority of the teacher, on the other hand, can allow children access to an education that is truly liberating.

Since 2010 when Michael Gove became Education Secretary and 2013 with the establishment by Tom Bennett of ResearchEd, some of the excesses of 'progressive' pedagogy have been countered, often by teachers themselves.<sup>8</sup> However, the legacy of a negative perception of teacher authority persists and is cultivated in university teacher training departments and through influential voices within the teaching unions.

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8. <https://researched.org.uk/event/researched-2018-national-conference/>

This can bring key figures in the educational establishment into direct conflict with headteachers who are keen to take a firmer approach to discipline within their schools. A recent example of this is to be found in the public ‘shaming’ of a school that implemented a silent-corridors rule.<sup>9</sup> It seems that in the eyes of some, enforcing discipline within the school environment is still considered authoritarian.

The causes of the erosion of teacher authority are complex. Traditionally, a teacher’s authority in the classroom was premised on their subject knowledge. Put simply, teachers were assumed to have an intellectual expertise that gave them status not just within the classroom but also within the community. Child-centred approaches to pedagogy de-centred the significance of subject expertise and called into question this basis for teacher authority.

Importantly, schools do not operate in a vacuum and the crisis of adult authority extends beyond the school perimeter. As a society we no longer share in a collective understanding of which values to inculcate in children and we question our right to assert influence over future generations. In schools there is uncertainty as to whether teachers should discipline or nurture children and too often these are erroneously viewed as conflicting goals. As a result, children may grow up with little sense of adults sharing in a collective set of expectations and uncertain as to where exactly the boundaries on their own behaviour are set.

Uncertainty as to the moral and intellectual source of teachers’ authority in particular, in the context of a broader crisis of adult authority more generally, still leaves some teachers unable or unwilling to enforce discipline in the classroom. In turn, this can leave pupils uncertain as to the behavioural expectations of them and unaware of appropriate boundaries. The result, as our research shows, can be relatively minor incidents of disruptive behaviour which, individually, may be deemed ‘low level’ disorder but, when frequently occurring, may have a cumulative impact that is detrimental for teaching and learning.

In recent years there has been a turn away from child-centred pedagogy as orthodoxy with a growing number of teachers and schools questioning the impact of such an approach, particularly on children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Some schools, most notably some free schools and academies, have begun adopting far more rigid approaches to managing the behaviour of pupils. Although schools such as Michaela Community School and Great Yarmouth Charter Academy have hit the headlines for very strict, zero tolerance behaviour policies, many more teachers and schools are also shifting towards a firmer approach to dealing with behaviour issues and reasserting the importance of direct instruction in the classroom.

Across the education sector as a whole, there are inconsistent expectations in relation to pupil behaviour and, in particular, towards the persistent disruption that blights so many classrooms.

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9. See, for example: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/nov/06/what-is-school-shaming>

## The nature of the problem

The crisis of authority in the classroom is too often matched by a perception that children's behaviour is out of control. Anxiety about children's behaviour both in school and in society more broadly has a long history. It has been an area of concern for governments of all political stripes. In addition to research conducted by academics and campaigning organisations, numerous investigations into behaviour in schools have been commissioned by Education Secretaries stretching back over several decades.<sup>10</sup>

## School exclusions

Currently, the only formal data collected within the English school system specifically related to behaviour is concerned with pupil exclusions. This is when a child is either temporarily or, in the most serious cases, permanently barred from attendance at a particular school. This is not a measure that schools take lightly; exclusion generally only occurs in cases where the behaviour of the child poses a risk to the safety of staff and other pupils or seriously disrupts the working of the school.

Over a ten year period, the rate of school exclusions has fluctuated but, despite a recent upturn, decreased slightly overall.<sup>11</sup> The main reason given for school exclusions, both temporary and permanent, has consistently been 'persistent disruptive behaviour'. In 2016/17, 108,640 fixed period exclusions were issued to children in all state-funded schools for persistent disruptive behaviour. This made up 28.4% of all fixed period exclusions, equivalent to around 135 fixed period exclusions per 10,000 pupils. In 2010, persistent disruptive behaviour accounted for 29.0% of all permanent exclusions and 23.8% of fixed period exclusions.<sup>12</sup>

This exclusion data gives us some indication of the numbers of children demonstrating extremely challenging and complex behavioural issues; however, it does not provide us with a complete picture of the day-to-day behaviour children and teachers experience. It does not, for example, encompass 'managed moves', that see children transferred to new schools with the agreement of all concerned. Neither does it take account of the practice 'off-rolling', in which pupils are moved without clear reasons to other schools, alternative provision or home schooling prior to their GCSE examinations, thereby removing their results from the accountability measures of their original school.<sup>13</sup> Statistics on school exclusions are unlikely to provide an adequate representation of the scale and nature of even the most serious misbehaviour in our schools.

**Data on exclusions tells us only about extremes. It does not give us a more general insight into pupils' behaviour in schools and in particular the 'low level' disruptive behaviour that prevents teaching and learning from taking place.**

10. See pages 9 and 10 for a more detailed account of this history.

11. Department for Education (2018a) Permanent and Fixed Period Exclusions in England: 2016 to 2017. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/726741/text\\_exc1617.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/726741/text_exc1617.pdf)

12. Department for Education (2012) A profile of pupil exclusions in England. (London, DfE).

13. House of Commons Education Committee (2018) Forgotten children: alternative provision and the scandal of ever increasing exclusions Fifth Report of Session 2017-19 Report, together with formal minutes relating to the report. (London, House of Commons).

## Measuring pupil behaviour

Presenting an accurate picture of pupils’ behaviour - or misbehaviour - in schools is difficult. Teaching is a relationship between individual teachers and pupils; each class takes on its own dynamic. What constitutes good behaviour to one teacher might represent poor behaviour to another. What a particular teacher may find unreasonably disruptive on a Monday morning, she may tolerate come Friday afternoon. To some teachers, anything other than complete obedience is unacceptable; to others some degree of talking in class shows pupils are happy and engaged. For this reason, qualitative measures like ‘good’ and ‘acceptable’ can be interpreted differently depending upon who is asking and answering the question. Research into pupil behaviour, stretching back over decades, shows a wide variation in results.

In 1994 Michael Barber, later Chief Adviser to the Secretary of State for Education on School Standards during Tony Blair’s first Labour government, surveyed 10,000 secondary school pupils in the Midlands. One quarter of those polled acknowledged behaving badly themselves and one third said they encountered disruption in class on a daily basis. Barber concluded that a ‘disruptive minority’ (10- 15%) of pupils are seriously undermining the quality of education in as many as half of all secondary schools.<sup>14</sup>

Yet in 2005, a government-commissioned report by Sir Alan Steer, *Learning Behaviour: A review of behaviour standards and practices in our schools* indicated: ‘there is strong evidence from a range of sources that the overall standards of behaviour achieved by schools is good and has improved in recent years. The steady rise in standards needs to be celebrated and the achievement of teachers and pupils recognised.’<sup>15</sup> In contrast, a 2010 survey of over 1000 teachers carried out by the *Times Educational Supplement* suggested that 60% believed they had disruptive pupils in their classrooms.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, views expressed in the House of Commons Education Committee, *Behaviour and Discipline in Schools, First Report of Session 2010-2011* varied so much, that, according to Tom Bennett, ‘it was difficult to say to what extent the problem existed (or even if there was one).’<sup>17</sup>

Ofsted have reported mixed findings on pupil behaviour. In 2012, Ofsted declared behaviour to be at least satisfactory in 99.7% of schools.<sup>18</sup> But just two years later, in *Below the Radar*, Ofsted reported on the results of a YouGov survey suggesting that low-level disruption is ‘prevalent’ and that pupils were potentially losing up to an hour of learning each day because of disruption in the classroom. In *Below the Radar*, low-level disruption is defined as:

- talking unnecessarily or chatting
- calling out without permission
- being slow to start work or follow instructions
- showing a lack of respect for each other and staff
- not bringing the right equipment
- using mobile devices inappropriately

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14. In Haydn, T. (2014) ‘To what extent is behaviour a problem in English schools? Exploring the scale and prevalence of deficits in classroom climate’ in *Review of Education* Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 31–64.

15. Steer, A. (2009) *Learning Behaviour: Lessons learned, a review of behaviour standards and practices in our schools*. (London, DCSF).

16. House of Commons Education Committee (2011) *Behaviour and Discipline in Schools First Report of Session 2010–11 Volume III Additional written evidence*. (London, House of Commons).

17. Bennett, T. (2017) *Creating a Culture: How school leaders can optimise behaviour in schools* (London, DfE).

18. In Bennett, T. (2017) *Creating a Culture: How school leaders can optimise behaviour in schools* (London, DfE).

By contrast, in 2013, a National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) survey reported that over three quarters of teachers felt student behaviour was good or better and 87 per cent described themselves as well equipped to deal with student behaviour and 93% believed their school had a clear and comprehensive behaviour policy.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, in 2015, a survey carried out by the teachers union NASUWT claimed that nearly three quarters (73%) of teachers thought there was a widespread behaviour problem in schools today with 42% believing there to be a behaviour problem in their own schools. More than four out of five of the teachers polled claimed to have been subject to verbal abuse by a pupil in the past 12 months and more than a third (38%) said they had experienced verbal abuse by a parent or carer in the last year.<sup>20</sup>

It is difficult to draw conclusions from such mixed findings. However, the very fact that pupil behaviour is such a frequent topic for investigation suggests it represents a perennial concern for teachers.

## Tackling bad behaviour

Research undertaken on pupil disorder has led to recommendations and official guidance to schools on how best to improve pupil behaviour.

The Education and Inspections Act 2006 provides the statutory underpinning for disciplinary policy in maintained schools in England. Additional regulations published by the DfE bring academies and free schools in line with the 2006 Act. The 2006 Act places responsibility for discipline within a school's governing body: 'The governing body of a relevant school must ensure that policies designed to promote good behaviour and discipline on the part of its pupils are pursued at the school.'<sup>21</sup>

The Education and Inspections Act 2006 charges headteachers with responsibility for determining school behaviour policies:

The head teacher of a relevant school must determine measures to be taken with a view to—

- promoting, among pupils, self-discipline and proper regard for authority
- encouraging good behaviour and respect for others on the part of pupils and, in particular, preventing all forms of bullying among pupils
- securing that the standard of behaviour of pupils is acceptable
- securing that pupils complete any tasks reasonably assigned to them in connection with their education
- otherwise regulating the conduct of pupils

The key requirement of the 2006 Act is that a school should 'promote good behaviour and discipline on the part of its pupils.' There is no attempt to specify what good behaviour and discipline mean; instead, headteachers are free to define good behaviour and to determine particular sanctions that should be applied for misbehaviour, in the context of their particular

19. Weaving, H. and Aston, H. (2013) Teacher Voice Omnibus Pupil Behaviour Research Report, NFER. (London, DfE).

20. NASUWT (2015) 'Teachers are reporting increasing concerns over pupil indiscipline, a survey by the NASUWT, the largest teachers' union in the UK, has found' at [politics.co.uk](https://politics.co.uk) (07/04/15).

21. Education and Inspections Act (2006) 'Changes to Legislation' at [legislation.gov.uk](https://www.legislation.gov.uk). Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/40/section/88>



school and in consultation with their governing body.

However, more specific guidance is provided on the Department for Education’s website:

Schools can punish pupils if they behave badly.

Examples of punishments (sometimes called ‘sanctions’) include:

- a telling-off
- a letter home
- removal from a class or group
- confiscating something inappropriate for school, eg mobile phone or MP3 player
- detention<sup>22</sup>

The effectiveness of such sanctions clearly lies not just in their definition but, more importantly in their implementation. Although schools were made aware of what sanctions they were able to issue there is no research to show how this changed practice at the time.

Since 2010, in a change to existing legislation, ‘Schools don’t have to give parents notice of after-school detentions or tell them why a detention has been given.’ Additionally, although corporal punishment is not permitted, ‘School staff can use reasonable force to control and restrain pupils. This could include leading a pupil by the arm into a classroom.’

Existing legislation leaves individual governing bodies, headteachers and teachers with considerable freedom to determine both acceptable standards of behaviour and appropriate sanctions for misbehaviour. This recognises the unique composition and context of each school and, importantly, the autonomy and authority of individual governing bodies and headteachers within the broader education sector. However, alongside statutory legislation, recent years have seen a wealth of official advice and guidelines issued to schools regarding behaviour management.

In his 2005 report *Learning Behaviour*, Sir Alan Steer declared that all schools should have a behaviour management policy.<sup>23</sup> The government’s 2010 White Paper *The Importance of Teaching* reiterated the importance of school behaviour management policies and the 2011 *House of Commons Education Committee Report: Behaviour and Discipline in Schools* argued ‘A good school behaviour policy, agreed and communicated to all staff, governors, pupils, parents and carers, consistently applied, is the basis of an effective approach to managing behaviour.’<sup>24</sup>

Significantly, at this time, there was recognition that the existence of a behaviour management policy was not, in and of itself, enough to ensure change. The 2011 report noted, ‘Teachers need to feel that they have the support of the school leadership in applying the behaviour policy, and we therefore support proposals in the to reform the National Professional Qualification for Headship, to give clearer emphasis on leading and supporting staff in maintaining and improving standards of behaviour in schools.’ By 2013 and the time of the NFER research (discussed above) it was claimed that almost all schools did have behaviour management

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22. <https://www.gov.uk/school-discipline-exclusions>

23. Steer, A. (2009) *Learning Behaviour: Lessons learned, a review of behaviour standards and practices in our schools*. (London, DCSF).

24. House of Commons Education Committee (2011) *Behaviour and Discipline in Schools First Report of Session 2010–11 Volume III Additional written evidence*. (London, House of Commons).

policies in place.

Alongside the focus on behaviour management policies there have also been frequent restatements of appropriate and effective ways of improving behaviour in school. In 2009, then Secretary of State for Education, Ed Balls, launched *Behaviour Challenge* to encourage and support all schools to achieve consistently higher levels of behaviour and attendance.<sup>25</sup>

As incoming Secretary of State for Education in 2010, Michael Gove initiated a further focus on behaviour and attendance. He issued updated guidelines designed to help schools improve attendance and to give heads and teachers greater powers to tackle bad behaviour. Such measures included:

- reducing the threshold by which absence is defined as persistent from 20% to 15%.
- making clear that teachers can use ‘reasonable force’ to maintain behaviour
- extending teacher searching powers
- allowing teachers to impose same-day detentions
- In 2014, Gove issued further updates to school guidelines specifying sanctions schools could employ with misbehaving pupils, such as:
  - school-based community service - such as picking up litter or weeding school grounds, tidying a classroom, helping clear up the dining hall after meal times, or removing graffiti
  - writing lines or an essay
  - loss of privileges - for instance the loss of a prized responsibility or not being able to participate in a non-uniform day
  - being ‘on report’ for early morning and other scheduled times

At the time of publication, Gove said:

*Our message to teachers is clear – don’t be afraid to get tough on bad behaviour and use these punishments. The best schools already ask pupils who are behaving poorly to make it up to their teachers and fellow pupils through community service. I want more schools to follow their example by making badly behaved pupils pick up litter or help clear up the dining hall after meal times. Standards of behaviour are already improving in schools but there is much more still to do. These new guidelines will give teachers the confidence to be tougher on bad behaviour and ensure every child has the chance to learn in a controlled, orderly environment.*

Most recently, *The Bennett Report* (2017) has further emphasised the value of clear, consistent rules in generating a productive learning environment for all children. In particular, Bennett points to the role of headteachers and school governors in establishing an ethos of discipline and order: ‘How a school was run was an even greater determinant of school behaviour than any one of a number of well-trained staff working in isolation.’

25. Balls, E. (2009) Speech to Labour Party Conference. Available at: <http://www.ukpol.co.uk/ed-balls-2009-speech-to-labour-party-conference/>

## Why Has Policy Exchange Undertaken This Research?

The evidence we have gathered suggests that some progress has been made in improving the behaviour of pupils but that there is a need for schools to go much further in order to allow teaching and learning to take place without disruption.

There is, for example, a general consensus among teachers, parents and pupils that good behaviour is vital for teaching and learning to occur. There is overwhelming support among parents and pupils of a teacher's right to enforce behavioural standards. Indeed, a number of parents and pupils urge schools to go further than they are at present and enforce higher behavioural expectations. There appears to be growing support among teachers, parents and pupils for ‘zero tolerance’ behaviour policies.

In addition, there is a large degree of awareness from teachers of their power and responsibility to discipline children. Most are well versed in the protocols for implementing school behavioural policies. This is to be welcomed. Now, only a minority of teachers and parents feel that schools lack the power to tackle problems of misbehaviour. This suggests that schools already possess the powers and policies necessary to enforce appropriate pupil behaviour and problems arise not because of a lack of policy or weak policy but because existing behaviour codes are not rigorously and consistently implemented. This represents a considerable and important step forward since 2010.

Our research also suggests there is a growing awareness from teachers and parents of the importance of leadership at school - rather than a national - level. Rather than looking to Ofsted or the Department for Education to produce policies and enforce expectations, parents and teachers are increasingly looking to headteachers to determine school culture and assert expected standards of behaviour. Again, this is very much to be welcomed.

However, we also note that despite many positive developments there remains a problem with persistent classroom disruption that has an impact upon teaching and learning and therefore demands to be taken seriously. Frequent disruptions undermine a teacher and take time away from teaching. Children learn little if teachers are frequently distracted by an accumulation of small incidents. In addition, many teachers believe persistent misbehaviour is the major cause of colleagues leaving the profession. In the context of a growing crisis over teacher recruitment and retention, the deleterious effects of poor pupil behaviour cannot be ignored.

**In this report we set out the nature and scale of misbehaviour in**

**schools; the impact of misbehaviour; and what needs to happen to improve behaviour.**

## Method

This report is based on research into parents, teachers and pupils' experiences of, and attitudes towards, 'low level' disruptive behaviour in secondary schools. Policy Exchange commissioned DeltaPoll to gather both qualitative and quantitative data.

743 teachers completed the school disorder survey; all were currently employed in state secondary schools. The sample represented teachers of varying levels of experience. Likewise, the sample represented a range of subject specialisms; the largest was English (41%) followed by maths (25%).

Teachers' school type	
Maintained by local authority	46%
Free school	13%
Academy school	38%
Other	1%
Don't know	1%

How long have you been a fully qualified teacher?	
Less than 5 years	31%
6 – 10 years	32%
More than 10 years	36%

In addition, 1051 parents were surveyed. All had a child currently in an English state secondary school aged 12 – 18.

46% of parents surveyed were male; 54% were female. The largest proportion (44%) were between 35 – 44 years old.

Finally, 1043 school pupils completed the school disorder survey.

The pupils surveyed were all between 15 – 19 years old and were divided evenly along gender lines. The largest group was comprised of 16-year-olds.

## Qualitative data

The focus groups and interviews recruited parents, teachers and pupils who reported differing levels of disruption at their school: low, moderate and high.

- Six focus groups were conducted with parents: two each in Newcastle, Halifax and London.
- Six 'triad' interviews were conducted with teachers: two each in Newcastle, Halifax and London.
- Six paired interviews were conducted with pupils: two each in Newcastle, Halifax and London.

Combining qualitative and quantitative data enables us to draw conclusions from our research that combine the rigour of statistics with insight into the human impact of disruptive behaviours upon different constituents within the school community.

# What is Happening?

## Bad behaviour

Bad behaviour, disruption and disorder are a feature of school life for all the pupils, teachers and parents covered by this research. However, the range and severity of misbehaviour and, significantly, the nature and effectiveness of schools in responding to it, varies widely.

We asked respondents to our research to rank a range of potentially problematic behaviours in order of seriousness. Teachers, parents and pupils regarded different types of misbehaviour as having differing degrees of seriousness. Some, such as occasionally being cheeky to a teacher, occasionally being late or even smoking - were considered by a proportion of parents and teachers to be a normal feature of adolescence and an inevitable part of school life. Other examples of bad behaviour were considered to be far more serious.

The following behaviours were described as serious by over 90% of the teachers and parents we polled:

- Taking drugs
- Physically attacking a teacher
- Smoking or drinking alcohol
- Physically attacking another pupil
- Shouting or swearing at a teacher

This seriously bad, indeed potentially criminal behaviour, does not occur frequently in the schools covered by this research. The most serious bad behaviours occur least often.

Of the teachers we polled:

- 43% had not seen a pupil physically attack a teacher. 21% had witnessed this once in the past year.
- 41% had not seen a pupil taking drugs. 19% had witnessed this once in the past year.
- 26% had not seen a pupil smoking or drinking alcohol. 15% had witnessed this once in the past year
- 31% had not seen a pupil threatening to physically attack a teacher. 18% had witnessed this once in the past year

Clearly, even one incident of a pupil taking drugs, attacking or threatening to attack a teacher or another pupil is one too many. However, most schools

today appear largely to be dealing effectively with such offences.

As a result, most members of a school community feel safe in school.

- Of the teachers we polled, 84% said they felt safe in school; 13% reported feeling unsafe.
- Of the parents we polled, 84% said they felt their children were safe in school, 11% felt their children were unsafe.

Feeling safe in school is a minimal expectation - all adults and children should feel safe in a school environment. However, in order for schools to educate and socialise children successfully, the environment must not only be safe but conducive to learning.

Furthermore, teachers and parents identified other disruptive behaviours - many of which were still considered to have a serious impact - and which occurred more frequently than the worst examples of bad behaviour listed above. These included:

- Shouting or swearing at another student
- Mocking another student
- Mocking a teacher
- Defacing school resources such as textbooks or tables
- Truanting a lesson

Many schools have behaviour management policies in place and deal with such misbehaviour effectively.

### Low level disruption

Behaviours considered by parents and teachers to be ‘low level’ disorder occurred far more frequently in schools.

Examples of low level disorder include:

- Arriving late for lessons
- Leaving a lesson without permission
- Talking over a teacher
- Not doing work set
- Chewing gum
- Listening to music
- Using a mobile phone

This disruptive behaviour was considered to be ‘low level’ in comparison to the more serious misbehaviours identified above. However, as we go on to show, the impact of even one incident can disrupt the course of a lesson and the cumulative impact of numerous incidents can have serious consequences for learning and teaching. For this reason, many of those we polled also considered low level disorder to be a serious problem.

Low level disruption and disorder occurs frequently. It was a feature of school life for all the respondents in this research.



A majority of teachers, parents and pupils think low level disruption occurs frequently in their or their child's school.

75% of the teachers we polled think low level disruption and disorder occurs frequently or very frequently in their schools.

We asked teachers: How often, if at all, do you think low level disruption and disorder occurs in your school?

How often, if at all, do you think low level disruption and disorder occurs in your school?

Very frequently	31%
Frequently	44%
Occasionally	21%
Rarely	2%
Very rarely	1%
Never	1%

80% of the teachers we polled think low level disruption and disorder is a daily occurrence.

- 83% experienced pupils arriving late at least once a week; 11% said this occurred every lesson
- 77% experienced pupils talking over a teacher at least once a week; 20% said this occurred every lesson
- 78% experienced pupils not doing work set at least once a week; 20% said this occurred every lesson
- 80% experienced pupils chewing gum at least once a week; 17% said this occurred every lesson
- 78% experienced pupils using a mobile phone at least once a week; 15% said this occurred every lesson

We asked, how often, if at all, have you seen this behaviour in your school in the past year?

How often, if at all, have you seen this behaviour in your school in the past year?

	Every lesson	Every day	Every week	At least once per term
Arriving late for a lesson	11%	38%	34%	13%
Talking over a teacher	20%	32%	25%	15%
Not doing the work set	11%	31%	36%	15%
Chewing gum	17%	35%	28%	15%
Using a mobile phone	15%	39%	24%	15%

Pupils think low level disruption occurs frequently.

We asked pupils: How often, if at all, do you think low level disruption and disorder occurs in your school?

How often, if at all, do you think low level disruption and disorder occurs in your school?	
Very frequently	19%
Frequently	32%
Occasionally	28%
Rarely	10%
Very rarely	5%
Never	10%
Don't know	4%

A pupil from London told us:

Definitely (there is disruption) in the younger years especially ... So when I am in art, we have our classes close together ... I can hear year 8s and 9s in other classes. They actually cause a lot of disruption for my teachers and stuff. I always hear them shouting.

Parents also think low level disruption occurs frequently.

We asked parents: How often, if at all, do you think low level disruption and disorder occurs in your child's school?

How often, if at all, do you think low level disruption and disorder occurs in your child's school?	
Very frequently	14%
Frequently	26%
Occasionally	34%
Rarely	9%
Very rarely	10%
Never	2%

Many of the teachers, parents and pupils we polled considered low level disruption to be unacceptable and thought that schools should take it seriously.

One third of teachers think even occasional low level disruption is unacceptable and 7% of teachers say no disruption at all is acceptable.

We asked teachers: How often, if at all, would low level disruption and disorder need to occur within your school for you to consider it unacceptable?

How often, if at all, would low level disruption and disorder need to occur within your school for you to consider it unacceptable?	
Very frequently	24%
Frequently	42%
Occasionally	20%
Rarely	5%

How often, if at all, would low level disruption and disorder need to occur within your school for you to consider it unacceptable?

Very rarely	1%
No disruption is acceptable	7%

We asked teachers: How serious do you consider the following behaviours?

How serious do you consider the following behaviours?

	NET serious	NET not serious
Arriving late for a lesson	56%	43%
Talking over a teacher	71%	29%
Not doing the work set	75%	25%
Chewing gum	33%	67%
Defacing school resources	83%	17%
Using a mobile phone	60%	39%
Physically attacking a teacher	96%	4%
Physically attacking a student	95%	4%
Smoking or drinking alcohol	95%	5%
Taking drugs	96%	3%

As this chart shows, with the exception of chewing gum, a majority of teachers polled think all pupil misbehaviour is a serious matter. Although criminal behaviour is most serious, a majority of teachers think all disorder should be dealt with seriously.

Parents also think low level disruption is unacceptable and should be taken seriously.

We asked parents: How often, if at all, would low level disruption and disorder need to occur at your child's school for you to consider it unacceptable?

How often, if at all, would low level disruption and disorder need to occur at your child's school for you to consider it unacceptable?

Very frequently	18%
Frequently	40%
Occasionally	20%
Rarely	6%
Very rarely	4%
No disruption is acceptable	9%

## Dealing with bad behaviour

A minority of parents and teachers were very happy with the way their schools dealt with disruption and disorder. They felt their schools were well run and any minor disruption was dealt with effectively so that learning was not adversely affected.

A minority of parents, teachers and pupils were extremely unhappy

with the way their school dealt with disruption and disorder - they felt that the school had lost control of discipline and that this was having a severely detrimental impact on teaching and learning.

Between these extremes were parents, teachers and pupils who felt that learning was being disrupted to some extent and that their schools 'could do better' in relation to disorder and disruption.

All the teachers we interviewed claimed their school had a behaviour management policy in place and that they were familiar with its contents. However, a common complaint was that such policies were not always put into practice effectively or applied consistently.

We asked teachers: How often do you think the consequence indicated by your school's behaviour policy is actually applied?

How often do you think the consequence indicated by your school's behaviour policy is actually applied?					
	Very frequently	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Very rarely
Arriving late for a lesson	18%	32%	24%	11%	5%
Talking over a teacher	17%	28%	25%	12%	7%
Not doing work set	16%	33%	26%	12%	4%
Chewing gum	19%	27%	22%	13%	7%
Using a mobile phone	19%	31%	23%	11%	4%
Physically attacking a teacher	23%	18%	16%	11%	14%
Physically attacking a student	21%	24%	22%	11%	10%
Smoking or drinking alcohol	17%	24%	23%	12%	9%
Taking drugs	19%	21%	15%	12%	13%

This shows that even for the behaviours identified by our respondents as most serious, schools often do not apply the sanction indicated by the behaviour policy.

There may be many reasons why teachers or senior leaders do not apply the behaviour policy in practice. It might be that the particular pupil is thought to have extenuating circumstances, perhaps special educational needs or a specific problem stemming from the home environment.

It may also be the case that teachers get overwhelmed by the sheer

volume of work created by implementing the behaviour policy consistently. Sanctioning a pupil may bring with it a requirement to complete paperwork, inform parents and senior staff, or supervise a detention. Teachers may become further demotivated if they do not see other colleagues or senior leaders also applying the behaviour policy consistently.

Teachers told us:

I think part of that [not applying behaviour policies] is that staff are absolutely dead on their feet, because we cannot be pushed anymore as staff at this point, in regards to revision, intervention, using your frees. I think that's why some people, they're just on their knees, they're just like, can't be doing that, and doing that.

**Teacher, Halifax**

Pupils will have walked halfway through school and I'm probably the first one to say, 'Why have you got your coat on?' While they've walked past three members of staff. You get to the stage, which I'm probably at now, when I'll just let them carry on walking. If those three have already let them ... I find that lack of consistency drives me mad, because I'm very strict.

**Teacher, Halifax**

When behaviour policies are not applied consistently, the behaviour of pupils deteriorates further.

I think that's where a lot of disruption comes from, if a pupil feels like they're not being treated fairly with other pupils. It's like, well, he didn't get told off for doing this, so why are you telling me off for doing this? That kind of thing. I feel like it's important to have equal treatment for everyone.

**Pupil, Halifax**

As the term starts to go on and people start to wane, things start bubbling up at the surface, and what the kids can get away with starts to come back up to the surface. They know what they can get away with.

**Teacher, Newcastle**

We brought in a new behaviour policy as of September and I think it has had a positive effect on behaviour. I'd certainly have said it would have been worse before that, but it's still not perfect. It certainly has had a positive impact on the school. It's far more nailed down, whereas before it was very much, we have a behaviour policy and some people follow it to the letter, some people, you know, don't. Some people let classes get away with stuff, where they wouldn't in others, whereas now it's far more regimented, in terms of this is what we expect, this is what happens if this behaviour is happening, and it's more followed through, whereas before kids were sort of getting away with it.

**Teacher, London**

## Mobile phones and social media

Mobile phones and social media provide a particular source of disruption in schools. Phones going off during lessons cause an immediate distraction that may last some time and have a considerable impact on the lesson.

*I think teachers most likely get really aggravated with pupils when they're using their phones, because your phone is quite distracting in general, and when you're sitting in the lesson they're trying to teach you.*

**Pupil, Halifax**

Further, mobile phones can be used by pupils to listen to music during lessons, play video games or take photographs.

*When we were in Year Seven and stuff, we were allowed our phones at like, lunch, breaks between lessons, as long as we weren't actively using it in a lesson, but nowadays we're not allowed them out at all, because I think someone took a photo of a teacher, and so then we did a flat out ban on phones anywhere.*

**Pupil, Halifax**

*One of the more challenging aspects is not social media, per se, within the classroom, it's also the hardware that is the mobile phone, that is something that is frustrating beyond all belief. I would rather be told to F off, yes, than to have to deal with somebody's mobile phone.*

**Teacher, Halifax**

All of the teachers we polled said that their school had a policy that specifically addressed pupil mobile phone use. At some schools, pupils are allowed to keep their devices as long as they are turned to silent. Occasionally, they may even be used by teachers as an additional learning resource in the classroom.

*I mean, my school, we're actually pro-device, we're a WiFi school, we encourage our kids to bring their phones in, and that's quite unique for a school to do that... [In other schools], you see a phone, you confiscate it, but we actually encourage it. As long as it's controlled, so the teacher will say you're allowed to get your phones out and research something online, but I do agree with your point there, that it's got out of hand now, hasn't it?*

**Teacher, London**

*they're allowed it at break time, at lunch time, they're allowed it before lessons, they're allowed it after lessons. So, as you can imagine, the kids have just constantly, in my eyes, got it in their hand. We have now got to the stage where, they're now allowed to use their phones to use it as a dictionary because they've got a resource that they're wasting, and it drives me mad. It is the bane of my life, in teaching, that.*

**Teacher, Halifax**

Often, phones are used to access social media. This means that problems and disputes between pupils can carry on beyond the school day and, likewise, incidents that have occurred outside of school are continued

inside the school.

Although the negative impacts of social media exchanges - such as bullying or creating a forum for arguments - happen largely outside school, this has an impact on relationships and behaviour inside school.

*It's like their contact out of school. When they didn't have social media their contact was just at school.*

*Now, even if they didn't want to know them, they can find them, they can contact them after school during holidays. It spreads quickly as well ... Everything can just get spread so quickly. Something that's not true.*

### **Parents, Halifax**

*Social media has made that (bullying) a whole different world ... I think that's changed the whole dynamic of how bullying happened. I'm picking up on issues that that have got nothing to do with what happened in lessons; it's actually outside of school via a Tweet or Facebook. Then they come together in that lesson.*

### **Teacher, Newcastle**

*I'd be surprised if a single person here doesn't feel the same, social media has made it not 8:30am until 3:30pm at school any more. It means that bullying, everything is a 24 hour thing. The pressures to fit in, the pressures to conform and everything ... I went to school, I came home and I forgot about it. Now it's non-stop.*

### **Parent, Newcastle**

Some schools have a far more strict approach and either ban mobile phones entirely or severely limit their use.

*You'll all know the experience of (School X), you wouldn't dare take a mobile phone into (School X) and use it in your classroom, it has to be switched off. Where my son is now, they're openly just using their phones.*

### **Parent, Newcastle**

The majority of teachers we interviewed argued that the possibility of distraction outweighed the possible benefits of mobile phones in schools. Many claimed that their usage was largely unnecessary.

Certainly, the benefits of having some form of restriction on mobile phone use appear to be clear. A 2015 study by the London School of Economics claimed that after schools banned unrestricted access to mobile phones the test scores of pupils aged 16 improved on average by 6.4%.

Education Secretary Damian Hinds has said that he is fully supportive of schools that ban mobile phones from the classroom but that he is also supportive of the autonomy of head teachers and that they - rather than government directive - are best placed to determine phone use in their schools. We welcome this clear directive from Hinds which supports the findings of our research.



## Erosion of teacher authority

Persistent low level disruption poses a direct challenge to the authority of the teacher. In what can easily become a vicious circle, it also stems from a perception of the teacher as lacking in authority.

Few teachers think that parents fully respect their authority today.

We asked teachers: To what extent, if at all, do parents respect a teacher's authority to discipline pupils?

To what extent, if at all, do parents respect a teacher's authority to discipline pupils?

Fully	23%
Partially	60%
Not at all	17%
Don't know	1%

The impact of this perceived lack of authority is to undermine teacher's attempts to discipline pupils.

*I feel like we have to justify what we're doing quite a lot, in terms of behaviour. Like, if something happened in my lesson, I feel like kids can question it, their parents can question it, heads of year might sometimes even question it, and I feel like, at the end of the day, I wouldn't have made that decision if I didn't feel it was fair, or necessary, or whatever.*

**Teacher, Halifax**

*The last twenty years, just in general, not just the teaching profession but, like, the police, the respect just isn't there. The parents don't have the respect they used to, and I think that's a really big thing.*

**Teacher, London**

## Conclusions

Almost all schools now have a behaviour management policy in place. As a result, the most serious, potentially criminal bad behaviour, is not a common occurrence.

However, low level persistent disruptive behaviour does occur frequently. The cumulative impact of numerous incidents makes it a serious problem for pupils, teachers and schools.

Teachers, parents and pupils all consider persistent low level disruption to be a problem that needs to be dealt with seriously.

While some schools are managing pupil behaviour highly effectively, others are not. Where problems arise it is often as a result of the inconsistent application of institutional behaviour management policies.

Mobile phones, and access to social media, are a particular problem in schools. All schools deal with mobile phones differently: some operate an outright ban, others limit use to certain times and places; others actively encourage use as a means of meeting educational objectives in the classroom.

A broader problem underpinning the rise of persistent low level disruption in the classroom is the erosion of teacher authority, not just among pupils but among parents and even senior leaders within the school environment.

## What is the Impact?

### Learning and teaching

The most obvious impact of persistent low level disorder in the classroom is that it interrupts teaching and learning.

- 54% of teachers polled agreed that the quality of young people’s education is affected by disrupted lessons.
- 44% of teachers polled agreed that low level disruption and disorder prevents effective teaching and learning.

Disruption - and, importantly, dealing with disruption, takes time away from teaching.

*I think in the whole class, like I said, you might have ten, twenty disruptions, how many minutes does that take off an hour that you’ve got with that class? How many lessons over the year does that take off? It’s not fair on the kids that are in there to learn. It just disrupts their learning.*

**Teacher, Halifax**

Disruption does not just interrupt the learning of the misbehaving pupils but of all pupils.

*like in my GCSEs, I wasted a lot of time with the teachers that couldn’t control the class.*

**Pupil, London**

*Whenever I hear anyone, like just mumbling or giggling at the back, and when it’s constant as well, I feel like that’s all you can focus on when you’re trying to listen to the teacher.*

**Pupil, Halifax**

Pupils and teachers are aware that when teachers are distracted by having to deal with disorder it makes it more difficult for the remaining pupils to get the attention they need.

*It affects the whole class, because if you’ve got a question that you want to ask the teacher, and the teacher’s attention is being taken by someone who’s being disruptive, then nobody can really learn from that.*

**Pupil, Halifax**

Disruptive behaviour can have a disproportionate impact on some pupils more than others. Schools that practice setting or streaming, for example,

may find that lower sets contain a disproportionate number of disruptive pupils. Likewise, some schools routinely seat disruptive pupils next to well-behaved pupils as a means of lessening disorder. However, this can again mean that a small proportion of pupils experience an inordinate amount of disruption.

*So, one girl, for example, could be with this group of naughty boys for all eleven lessons every day, and I think it grinds them down, as well... you can sense that frustration, you can visibly see that frustration, and sometimes they do verbalise it and they just turn around and just go, 'Why don't you shut up?' I've even heard decent, very good, well-mannered kids swear at them and go, 'Why don't you just shut up?'*

**Teachers, Halifax**

## Teacher retention and recruitment

Dealing with low level disorder and disruption adds to teachers' workload. Implementing a behaviour policy requires time to speak to the pupil and issue an appropriate sanction. In addition it may oblige teachers to spend time filling in paperwork; speaking with members of the school senior leadership team; speaking with a child's parents; or overseeing the sanction.

*It's quite a stressful job because you deal with stuff all day long and this means you don't get other stuff done. .... A lot of that comes home then, because you are dealing with all the incidents (of disorder) in school.*

**Teacher, Newcastle**

For some teachers, dealing with disorder became the main focus of their job and came to override other roles.

*the workload ... was just focused on, you know, making sure that the kids behave. That was the real sort of focus of the school, and doing that took so much energy out of you, and the negativity of that whole environment took so much of a toll on you that yes, some members of staff just used to need to take some days off, just to get out of that environment.*

**Teacher, Halifax**

When disruption and disorder prevents teachers from teaching, it can be experienced as exhausting and frustrating.

*It just wears you down, doesn't it?*

*Yes, it just grinds you down. You feel the energy zapping.*

*It does wear the good kids down too.*

**Teachers, Newcastle**

Teachers are all too well aware of how they could be better spending their time in the classroom if they did not have to deal with persistent disruptive behaviour.

*If there was no low-level disruption, just for argument's sake, it was a Utopia and everybody did everything you asked and everyone arrived on time... you*

could engage in conversation and challenging issues. The thing is, wouldn't the other aspects ... just be a little bit easier to deal with, because you're not stressed out with the low-level disruption?

Teacher, London

### Teacher retention and recruitment

The damaging impact of dealing with low level persistent disruption on a regular basis is one of the main reasons teachers give for leaving the profession.

We asked teachers: Are you currently, or have you ever previously, considered leaving the teaching profession because of poor pupil behaviour?

Are you currently, or have you ever previously, considered leaving the teaching profession because of poor pupil behaviour?	
Yes - currently	24%
Yes - previously	26%
Yes - both currently and previously	12%
No	37%

We asked teachers: Have other teachers you know left the teaching profession because of poor pupil behaviour?

Have other teachers you know left the teaching profession because of poor pupil behaviour?	
Yes	72%
No	20%
Don't know	8%

In addition to the teaching profession losing members because of persistent disruptive behaviour, the perception of unruliness and indiscipline may be preventing people who might otherwise be good teachers off from applying to teach in the first place.

71% of the teachers we polled agreed that people are put off from becoming teachers because of poor pupil behaviour.

### An escalating problem

Teachers are aware of the consequences of not dealing with low level disruptive behaviour effectively that go beyond costs to their own time and energy. Young people themselves, both perpetrators and their classmates, suffer if persistent disruptive behaviour is not dealt with effectively.

74% of the teachers we polled think that because low level disruption is tolerated, young people are not learning boundaries.

This means that the socialisation processes society has relied upon for decades are failing to help children develop into young adults able to play a full role as members of a community and citizens of a nation.

At worst, this could mean that serious and violent crime become more likely.

67% of the teachers we polled agree that tolerating low level disorder and disruption makes serious violent misconduct more likely.

### Conclusions

Low level disruption and disorder has a negative impact upon teaching and learning. At its most straightforward, it directs a teacher's time and attention away from teaching and onto dealing with bad behaviour. It distracts pupils and deflects concentration from the task in hand.

Teachers find dealing with low level disruption and disorder time consuming and exhausting. Teachers find being prevented from teaching to be a frustrating experience.

Low level disruption is having an impact on teacher retention. The perception of misbehaviour may also have an impact upon teacher recruitment.

Not dealing effectively with low level disruption and disorder may have further consequences for the children concerned who are not taught appropriate boundaries. At worst, children who are not challenged when they demonstrate low level disorder may come to be involved with more serious, potentially criminal, bad behaviour.

## What Should Be Done?

### Consistent application of behaviour policies

As set out in the introduction to this report, the past two decades have seen the publication of numerous government reports and research papers into the problem of bad behaviour in schools. As a result, there is a great deal of awareness among teachers and school leaders about how disruption and disorder can be dealt with effectively.

It is important to note that all the schools covered by this research had behaviour management policies in place designed to tackle disruption and disorder.

Behaviour management policies generally set out a clear guide to what is considered to be inappropriate behaviour and the specific sanction that will be met if pupils demonstrate such behaviour. Often this involves a points system where a certain number of points accrued will lead to further sanctions. Such sanctions often encompass a sliding scale of escalating action from telling off, litter picking, being made to report to senior staff, detentions of differing lengths, notifying parents, to temporary, and ultimately permanent, exclusions.

In most cases, institutional policies were well understood by students and teachers alike. Teachers generally seemed well informed about their powers to discipline children and well versed in the protocols for implementing sanctions. Schools where disruptive behaviour occurred frequently were not lacking policies, or knowledge or understanding of policies: they simply did not implement the behaviour management policies consistently and effectively.

*I can't let anything go at all and the kids know that. It's consistency that is the thing that they respect. If I say, 'You're going to regret that!' they know they're going to regret it because they've seen what happens.*

#### Teacher, Newcastle

*At my children's school, they have a very bad Ofsted report, and one of things that was said was about low-level behavioural disruption, so they implemented a zero tolerance policy which was meant to go right across. So, anything would get you a sanction, the wrong uniform, the wrong look, arriving late, whatever. Everything had an immediate sanction, and that really, really stamped down on it for a while until it just got watered down and watered down... and then as soon as the children sensed there was a lack of consistency, they were saying, 'Well, so and so is getting rid of it so I'm not going to bother wearing my school uniform. I'm not going to do this because it's not fair.'*

**Parent, Halifax**

**Most felt that schools have the powers and policies in place needed to tackle disorder but they are not always diligently and consistently implemented.**

For this reason, very similar policies could be successful in one school and a failure in another – the difference was the consistent implementation of the policy across the school and with the full support of senior management (to back up and implement the more severe sanctions for the worst offenders).

**Support from senior staff**

Not all the teachers we interviewed expressed confidence that senior leaders within the school would support them when they disciplined a pupil.

We asked teachers: How confident are you that senior leadership staff will support you when you discipline a pupil?

How confident are you that senior leadership staff will support you when you discipline a pupil?

Very confident	27%
Quite confident	47%
Not very confident	18%
Not confident at all	7%
Don't know	1%

In some instances, the capacity for pupils to undermine the disciplinary sanctions applied by teachers was an integral part of the school's approach.

*If you gave them C3 or C4, they felt they were unfair, they could go to the behaviour management team to appeal it, and then you'd get someone coming to you saying, 'Oh, so-and-so's appealed the detention, can you tell me what they did?' Like, no, I haven't got time to respond to your email to tell you what this kid did in my lesson. They were messing, do you know what I mean?*

**Teacher, Halifax**

Elsewhere, a perceived lack of support from senior leaders could contribute to the demoralisation of teaching staff.

*[If] there were individuals who were particularly badly behaved and got away with some quite serious things, then in general, the morale of the staff and the expectations of the staff also came down, because, well, it was just happening all over the place and they didn't really see that the hierarchy was, sort of, backing them up. So, then, in turn, [standards] just gradually started creeping down.*

**Teacher, Newcastle**

*The worst is when someone in SLT [senior leadership team] just comes up to you and says, 'But did you follow that?' It's like, 'Oh, for God's sake. Are you on my side?'*

**Teacher, London**



### Training in behaviour management

Teachers generally do not think that their initial teacher training left them well prepared to manage pupil behaviour.

We asked teachers: To what extent do you think your initial teacher training prepared you to manage pupil behaviour?

To what extent do you think your initial teacher training prepared you to manage pupil behaviour?	
Very well	18%
Quite well	36%
Not very well	34%
Not well at all	10%
Don't know	1%

Some teachers commented directly on the absence from teacher training programmes of guidance in managing pupil behaviour.

*There's no unit in any teacher training programme. I'm part of our teacher training scheme at my school and there's no unit anywhere that teaches you how to deal with a disruptive pupil in your lesson at all.*

**Teacher, London**

Elsewhere, new teachers learn about behaviour management informally or by simply copying more experienced colleagues.

*We do a lot of buddy copying, that's what we call it. Where they'll go in and they'll observe a member of staff teaching, and they'll say what their body language is like while they're teaching, and how a member of staff comes over to a group of pupils and just stand next to these pupils and they'll stop talking, and then move away, and they'll try and emulate that to get control of that class.*

**Teacher, Newcastle**

Learning about behaviour management needs to go beyond initial teacher training and become a routine part of continuing professional development. At present, some of the teachers we polled do not think they have access to adequate training on behaviour management.

We asked teachers: Do you feel you can access adequate training on behaviour management?

Do you feel you can access adequate training on behaviour management?	
Yes	60%
No	29%
Don't know	11%

In addition, some teachers expressed reluctance to speak about behavioural management difficulties they were experiencing in case other members of staff thought their teaching ability was poor.

We asked teachers: How reluctant are you to talk about behaviour

management difficulties in case other staff think your teaching ability is poor?

How reluctant are you to talk about behaviour management difficulties in case other staff think your teaching ability is poor?

Very reluctant	15%
Quite reluctant	44%
Not very reluctant	22%
Not at all reluctant	17%
Don't know	2%

This suggests a need for a broader cultural shift within schools in order to take away any stigma from discussing behavioural management issues. Again, continuing professional development sessions could be used to enshrine a culture of more supportive discussion.

## Zero tolerance

Our research suggests that there is growing support for 'zero tolerance' behaviour policies among teachers, parents and pupils. In other words, there was support for far stricter behaviour management policies, often underpinned by an assumption that minor behavioural infractions can lead to a greater and more serious misbehaviour if allowed to go unchallenged.

*Because they haven't been strict enough to knuckle down on those little things, that's why they've no respect and they think they can just do what they want in lessons, and so can be disruptive... So, that is the bigger problem in the long run really, because they need to sort those little things out.*

**Parent, Newcastle**

Teachers with experience of working in 'zero tolerance' schools speak positively of the change that has ensued.

*Until this year, that [arriving late to lessons] used to be constant, didn't it? They get an automatic [sanction] now, so it's not as much of an issue... [N]ow it's 'I really don't want to go to [internal exclusion], because I have to stay for an hour after school.*

**Teacher, Halifax**

*Our workplace has improved because we've got a new Head Teacher who has zero tolerance on it [disruption]. Before that it [disruption] was high purely because the Head Teacher wasn't willing to remove problematic kids, so then they genuinely have an influence on others.*

**Teacher, Newcastle**

However, zero tolerance policies were occasionally thought to lead to silly or overzealous outcomes – for example, one-hour detentions for not having the right pen or sharpening a pencil into the wrong bin.

*Some teachers, experienced teachers, get it right and they understand pupils, but you're getting really, really, young teachers coming in that are being told zero*

tolerance and they’re constantly down on students. Sometimes the students have a good point to make, but they’re not allowed to do it because it’s considered to be disruptive.

**Parent: Halifax**

I think the focus has moved from teaching and the disruption of teaching to, are they wearing the right uniform? Are they wearing the right shoes? Is their tie, is their blazer on? Is their jumper on? You know, have they got their planner? I think the focus has moved from the teaching to how they’re looking and their behaviour.

**Parent: Halifax**

## Conclusions

Most schools have behaviour management policies in place. The main difference between schools that are dealing effectively with disruption and disorder and those that are not is in the **implementation** of the adopted policy.

Teachers, parents and pupils all agree that for a behavioural management policy to be successful it needs to be implemented consistently. This means all teachers must be expected to play a part in identifying bad behaviour and applying the appropriate sanction.

Most importantly, teachers need to know that behavioural management policies are being applied consistently by members of a school’s senior leadership team. Some teachers expressed concern that senior leaders were not only not implementing policies themselves but were actively undermining classroom teachers who enforced disciplinary sanctions.

Teachers need to gain a thorough grounding in approaches to behaviour management through their initial teacher training. At present this does not occur with any degree of consistency.

In addition, teachers would welcome opportunities to refresh their knowledge and understanding of behaviour management through continuing professional development. This could usefully help instigate a broader cultural shift whereby discussing problems with disruption comes to be seen as a responsible means of seeking solutions rather than an admission of individual failure.

Our interview data suggests there is increasing support among teachers, parents and pupils for a zero tolerance approach to school discipline. However, as with all approaches to behaviour management, where this approach works best is when it has support from all members of the school community and will be consistently applied.

Many schools are dealing effectively with behavioural issues without implementing zero tolerance policies.

## Conclusions

The behaviour of pupils in schools has been a cause for concern for many decades now. During this time and particularly since the 2011 guidance for teachers on behaviour and discipline in schools was issued, notable progress has been made.

All schools now have behaviour management policies in place. The most serious bad behaviours, including criminal acts, violence, or threats of violence, occur rarely at most schools.

However, what is often erroneously termed 'low level' disruption appears to be a persistent problem. It is a daily fact of life for many teachers and pupils. Some individual disruption may appear fairly trivial, such as a child caught chewing gum, others may be more serious, such as a child using a mobile phone inappropriately during a lesson. However, even single incidents of misbehaviour can interrupt a lesson and when disruption occurs persistently the cumulative impact can have a negative impact on teaching and learning.

Persistent low level disruption takes distracts pupils from learning and takes teachers' time away from teaching. Pupils looking for support with their learning are less likely to be able to access it if their teacher is busy dealing with disruption.

Dealing with persistent low level disruption is exhausting and frustrating for teachers. It may contribute to teachers leaving the profession and the perception of unruly classrooms may deter potential recruits from taking up a career in teaching.

Most schools now have policies and procedures (institutional behaviour management policies) in place to deal with disruption and disorder. However, not all schools effectively implement the policies they have. A lack of consistency in the application of policies demoralises teachers and leads pupils to identify the system as being 'unfair' and to push boundaries as a result.

In particular, teachers are looking for senior leaders within their school to support, rather than, on occasion, undermine the decisions they have made.

In addition, teachers would welcome dedicated time both at the start of their careers, and throughout, to receive up to date advice and guidance on best practice in behaviour management. This could be part of regular continuing professional development.

'Zero tolerance' behaviour management policies are currently garnering a great deal of attention. In some schools, such an approach has proved to be highly effective. However, it is not the only effective approach to

behaviour management and some schools are well-run, orderly and disciplined environments without zero-tolerance policies.

In order for pupil behaviour to improve further, what is needed now are not more government directives from the Department for Education but for more diligent and consistent enforcement of existing school behaviour policies. We need a cultural shift where high standards of behaviour are assumed to be the norm and, for teachers, discussing behaviour management is considered a professional responsibility rather than a source of failure.

Our research shows that parents, pupils and teachers all want a school environment in which all pupils are expected to behave, are challenged and sanctioned when they do not.

Mobile phones and social media pose a particular problem in the classroom. However, rules that are enforced at a national level, such as the ban on children taking mobile phones to school recently implemented by the French government, take no account of the circumstances of individual schools, the philosophy of a governing body or the preferred pedagogical approach of teachers. They risk undermining, rather than reinforcing the authority of teachers who are left as deferential to externally imposed rules as their pupils.

There are many schools where high standards of behaviour are effectively maintained. Some, but by no means all, adopt a zero tolerance approach to discipline. We concur with the conclusion of the Bennett Report that Bennett: ‘Schools vary enormously in composition and context. Their challenges are similarly varied. It is therefore impossible to prescribe a set of leadership strategies that will guarantee improvement in all circumstances.’ The Department for Education and Ofsted should, as at present, support the work of all schools that are effectively managing pupil behaviour, rather than looking to hold such schools to a new set of expectations.

# Recommendations

## Recommendation 1

'Low level' disruption needs to be taken far more seriously. Higher standards of behaviour should be required of pupils for schools to achieve good or better Ofsted ratings. Ofsted inspectors need to be better trained in how best to evaluate and rate pupil behaviour.

## Recommendation 2

Behaviour management policies alone are not enough to ensure pupils behave well. Policies must be applied and interpreted consistently by all members of staff including senior managers. Ofsted need to evaluate not just a school's behaviour management policy but, importantly, its implementation.

## Recommendation 3

Annually, a proportion of staff professional development time (normally INSET, or in-service training days) should be dedicated to refreshing knowledge of and motivation for institutional behaviour management policies with teaching, support staff and senior managers.

## Recommendation 4

Initial teacher training must include a more thorough grounding in behaviour management techniques. During their first two years of practice, teachers must be offered a structured programme of support to ensure that they are able to manage behaviour and thrive in their primary task of teaching.

## Recommendation 5

Unless there are highly exceptional circumstances, it should be assumed that senior managers will support teaching staff in applying the school's behaviour management policy. Training for school leaders should make explicit reference to the headteacher's responsibility for the behaviour of pupils in class and around school. Teaching unions should provide clear statements to their members highlighting their right to support in behaviour management from senior staff.

### **Recommendation 6**

Schools should have a clear policy on smartphone use that either restricts devices from schools altogether or limits their use to clearly delineated times and circumstances. This should be a key component of each school’s behaviour management policy.

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£10.00  
ISBN: 978-1-910812-56-3

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