

Relationships and behaviour summary paper

April 2024



Background

The Inclusion Ambassadors are a group of secondary school-aged pupils who have a range of additional support needs and attend a variety of educational provision across Scotland. Children in Scotland delivers the group, with support from Enquire.

There are currently 17 members of the group from across 15 local authorities. The group share their experiences of accessing additional support in school through online and in-person meetings. The group meets regularly to discuss their vision for additional support for learning, guided by their vision statement which can be read [here](#).¹

This paper explores the group's experiences of schools' approaches to relationships and behaviour. This topic has been a prominent feature in discussions about Scottish education in recent months. There has been research conducted which has explored the experiences of teachers and other school staff.² There has also been a focus on the issue in the press and a series of summits held by Scottish Government to consider responses. However, there has been less evidence relating to the views of children and young people and as a result, we have explored the topic with the Inclusion Ambassadors to understand their views in this area.

This paper highlights the impact on children and young people when schools focus on building relationships and recognise **all** pupils' achievements and successes. The paper also suggests changes that could be made to how schools approach relationships and behaviour in order to make improvements for children and young people with additional support needs.

The Inclusion Ambassadors have previously conducted work that is relevant to conversations about relationships and behaviour. In 2022, the group co-produced a Language and Communication Guide.³ They have also explored the importance of proactive, child-centred support planning. Throughout this paper we have highlighted where their previous work could support the development of policy and practice.



¹ Inclusion Ambassadors vision statement (2021), *Vision and overview* document.

² ScotCen (2023) *Behaviour in Scottish Schools 2023* report, Fifth Wave.

³ Inclusion Ambassadors *Language and communication* guide (2022).



Building relationships and approaches that work for young people

We asked the group to share their experiences of positive behaviour being recognised and promoted within their learning environment. We know through our delivery of the Success Looks Different awards how important this can be for young people.⁴

Verbal praise

Many members of the group were able to identify examples of verbal praise from staff in their schools. On some occasions, praise from staff recognised when young people put effort into their work.

"I did fantastic work and my teacher said they were proud of me"

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

On other occasions, members of the group have been praised for helping others. The group also shared their experiences of receiving a positive written message from a staff member, either through a social media post on the school account or through an email message.



As well as being the most common form of recognition, verbal praise was also recognised as being the most meaningful for the majority of the group. The group told us that receiving praise from teachers reinforces that they are doing well and makes them feel more positive about school.

"When a teacher compliments you, it lets you know you are doing well. Sometimes you feel like you aren't good enough, so this [positive praise] sets up the week"

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

The Inclusion Ambassadors also felt that this recognition can support more positive engagement in school longer-term, identifying that positive reinforcement in school is a key way to support children and young people with additional support needs.

"I think it does change the way you act, helps create a bit of confidence"

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

Certificates and Awards

The group all identified experiences of their schools recognising achievements with certificates and awards. For some members of the group, these certificates are given to pupils during assemblies. Other members shared that their individual certificates were sent to their school email addresses.



"Any teacher can give you an award for any way that you go above and beyond"

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

⁴ Inclusion Ambassadors, Success Looks Different webpage.

Most of the group felt that receiving certificates and awards as a result of their achievements was a positive thing. The group agreed that certificates and awards feel like a big achievement when they are for recognition of their effort. However, some members did feel that certificates and awards are less valuable when they receive them too often showing the importance of meaningful approaches to celebrating positive interactions within the school environment. The Inclusion Ambassadors want positive recognition to feel genuine and valuable, and not tokenistic.

"I saw my friend getting certificates, they worked really hard for it and were really happy with it"

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

"They don't keep track of how many awards you have, so it feels like it is just added onto the pile"

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors



Recognising 'positive behaviour' in schools – balancing recognition and inclusion

Merits and Points Systems

We heard that many members of the group have merits or a points system in their school. On most occasions, individual young people would be given a merit or point for 'positive behaviour'. This is then counted at the end of the year when a group of young people with the highest points is rewarded with a trip or a prize. The group mostly spoke positively about these systems.

"It's good to get rewarded for a year of hard work, it reassures you"

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

Generally, the group felt that the reward attached to merit systems can motivate young people to make positive choices about their behaviour at school.

However, some members of the group also shared experiences of school staff being inconsistent with their approach to awarding merits. Young people may feel that they did behave positively in school but did not achieve enough merits to be included in the reward due to differences in the way that staff use the merit system. This could lead to feelings of unfairness and demotivate some young people during their time at school.

It is also important to consider how these sorts of systems may negatively affect pupils who do not receive them. We know through the Success Looks Different Awards that awards and recognition of achievement work best when they are truly embedded whole school approaches and where all children and young people feel valued.



Recognition in the senior phase

The members of the group who are currently in their senior phase of school also shared that their experiences of staff recognising positive engagement in school has changed as they have got older. This reflects previous discussions we have had where the group have identified that they feel they received more praise in primary school.

"The only recognition I have had in the senior phase is from the SQA. Sometimes that's positive, sometimes not, if the qualification isn't achieved"

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

Although some members of the group shared that they did not mind having less praise from teachers in their senior phase, some members of the group felt that this has a negative impact.

"There is less praise for seniors and it can lead to negative feelings around the school"

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

We have heard from the group that recognition from school staff can motivate young people. The group agreed that without this incentive, there is a risk that some young people could become demotivated and lose confidence in themselves.

Rewarding attendance

Members of the group also described their experiences of school staff giving out awards, certificates or merits to pupils who maintain full attendance at school. Generally, the group felt that this could be unfair for children and young people whose attendance is impacted by their additional support needs. One member shared their experience of feeling excluded from awards because they needed to attend appointments out of school due to their disability.

"People got certificates for full attendance... my regular appointments meant I was either going in late or not going in at all, sometimes it would be marked down wrong"

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

This could also be unfair to young people who have additional support needs which are not being met in the classroom.

"When people don't go to classes, it could be because they're asked to do their work in a certain way and it's hard for them. That can be overwhelming"

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

Although the group recognised that consistent attendance is important, they felt that rewarding pupils for attendance is not an inclusive approach. Schools should instead focus their efforts on providing individualised support and inclusive environments to improve school attendance.



What happens when things go wrong?

The group highlighted their own experiences of distressed behaviour in school. Members of the Inclusion Ambassadors were able to identify the impact of this on their learning but also on their health and wellbeing.

We heard about incidences of young people distracting other pupils in class. They also identified examples of young people not following staff instructions and disagreements between young people and teachers. All of these made it difficult for people to focus in class and get work done.

"I have been in a class before when someone started arguing with the teacher... No one was going to get any studying done with that going on"

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

The group were also concerned about the impact of how some behaviour can lead to safety issues. They spoke about people setting off fire alarms regularly in school. These sort of incidents made people feel anxious and caused a continuous disruption.

"People at my school were all doing a TikTok challenge to see how many times they could set the fire alarm off without getting caught... Staff started telling pupils to keep jackets on in case the fire alarm went off again and that causes ten times more anxiety for people waiting for it to happen"

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

Members of the group also shared their experiences of bullying at school. They spoke about their experience of both physical and emotional forms of bullying. They described the negative impact of this on their wellbeing, safety and also their general happiness at school.

"I've been shoved into walls and into lockers"

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

"I used to wear a hat and stuff but now I don't because my bully grabbed my hat and threw it across the room"

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

They also spoke about experiences of feeling like these incidents had not been dealt with and where other people's needs had been prioritised. There is a range of existing guidance, such as Respect for All, in place to support teachers and other school staff to approach this in a rights-respecting way. Despite the existence of this guidance, it appears there is more work required to ensure rights-respecting approaches are consistent nationwide including across staff teams and education settings.





Understanding where behaviour and communication comes from

The group shared their own views on why young people can display distressed behaviour in school. In their discussions, the group recognised that there are a range of issues that can contribute to the way young people behave, and that support should reflect this.

Unfair expectations

The group shared their own perspectives of school staff's expectations and told us that sometimes school rules do not feel reasonable or fair for everyone. One member told us about a time they were reprimanded for eating in class without permission from school staff.

"It was a mistake, because I was hungry. I got into trouble for that"

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

Another member of the group told us about their experience of adapting to new rules when changing schools and on college visits.

"Every time I go to a new school or college, I have to learn the rules again, for example putting your hand up to go to the toilet. I don't always remember what I am supposed to do... it is up to teachers to explain to someone what the rules are and why"

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

Lack of support

The group told us that young people might behave in particular ways to communicate that their needs are not being met. They also highlighted that more distressed behaviour and communication may be a result of a member of staff giving them a task which they are struggling to complete.

"If someone has a disability and they are struggling because the support has never been there or they have lost their support, they might act up"

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

"They might not like the teacher because they are forcing them to do too much work"

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

The group told us that young people might behave in particular ways to communicate that their needs are not being met. They also highlighted that more distressed behaviour and communication may be a result of a member of staff giving them a task which they are struggling to complete.



Stress

The group also discussed how stressful situations can make young people behave in different ways. One member of the group told us about a time when one of her peers had an argument with her teacher.

"I think it was because she [my friend] was stressed and had other tests coming up"

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

We also heard about how some young people might not follow school rules around attendance because they are feeling overwhelmed. In some cases, they may choose not to come to classes because they are having difficulty completing the work and require additional support.

"There could be a variety of reasons for patching class. People get overstimulated or overwhelmed by stuff"

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

Relationships

We also heard about how a breakdown in relationships between school staff and pupils can lead to young people behaving in ways that staff do not like. This can often be the result of disagreements between staff and pupils that have escalated. The group shared examples of school staff shouting back at pupils and engaging in arguments. In some cases, a member of staff has shouted at a pupil in the first instance, leading to an argument.

"When the teacher will say something to them [young person] and they get so angry that they don't know what they are saying... when the teacher shouts at them like that, they can't stay calm"

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

The group also shared their experiences of losing trust in school staff because they have not felt supported by a staff member when they asked for help. This affects whether people feel confident and supported to reach out for support in the future.

"My school says you can tell a teacher about it if something happens but they just say 'ok cool' and don't do anything"

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors



What can schools do?

The group told us about what their schools do to respond to what is perceived as negative behaviour and communication. Whilst there were some things that members of the group liked, the majority of the group felt that many of the current strategies being used in their school did not support or motivate young people to make positive behavioural choices.



Calm and inclusive approaches

The group were clear that school staff who embrace a calm approach to communicating with pupils are more supportive when responding to communication and behavioural issues in school. One member shared that staff who speak in a quiet and calm voice make the rest of the class behave in a calm way.



The group also discussed the range of approaches staff take when things go wrong. The group agreed that arguments between pupils and staff often escalate when they happen in front of a class. A few members felt that when staff have a quiet and more private conversation with an individual, the situation is less likely to escalate.

We also heard that the group preferred staff who consider individual needs before reacting to a young person's behaviour.

“Teachers should understand people with different abilities and know how to handle it when someone has a meltdown”

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

Support from staff

The group shared that in some cases teaching staff will seek support from senior staff members and pupil support staff. In some instances, this can lead to more positive outcomes for young people. One member of the group shared that this can sometimes allow the young person to get a break from the classroom and support from a different member of staff.

However, we heard that staff do not always work together effectively, and this can be demotivating for young people.

“I remember another staff member saw into the class and said to the teacher, “I can’t control them any more than you can”... How does that help?”

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

The group have previously agreed in their discussions about support planning that it is critically important that staff work together to make sure that pupils are getting the right support that meets their needs.⁵

Exclusion

The group also discussed exclusion as an approach to ‘stopping negative behaviour’. On one hand, a member said that removing a young person from the classroom if they are behaving in a way that disrupts the learning of others could be an immediate solution to allow the rest of the class to continue learning. However, the group also agreed that a young person who is excluded from the classroom will miss learning and might be more likely to behave in a similar way in the future because of the stress, lack of support, and strained relationship with the teacher.

⁵ Inclusion Ambassadors, *Support planning evidence paper* (2023).

Shouting

When asked what staff do when a pupil does something that they do not like, most of the group said “shouting”. Overall, the group did not feel that shouting was an effective or rights-respecting strategy for addressing distressed behaviour. In some cases, members of the group felt that some staff members will resort to shouting earlier when interacting with someone who they perceive as having a reputation for behaving negatively.



“If someone has a track record of doing bad things their first instinct is to shout at them”

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

We also heard about the negative impact that school staff shouting at an individual can have on other young people present. One member said this can have a particularly negative impact on young people with additional support needs.

“I remember a time that a teacher raised their voice so loudly it started to really upset me. A pupil support assistant had to take me out of class”

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors



Summary

This evidence summary adds to the ongoing discussions about behaviour and relationships in schools by drawing directly on the lived experience of young people who are accessing additional support.

The use of positive reinforcement, particularly verbal praise, stood out to the Inclusion Ambassadors. The group felt that these are impactful strategies for promoting positive relationships and behaviour in schools and for building young people’s confidence and self-esteem. However, the group raised concerns about the fairness of rewarding attendance, particularly for those with additional support needs.

The Inclusion Ambassadors were clear that when schools get communication and inclusion right it can have a positive effect for young people and make them more motivated. There is clear learning from the first two years of the Success Looks Different Awards and would encourage all practitioners to engage with the case studies and evidence to inform their practice. We know the impact that simple interventions can have in creating an inclusive environment and how this affects children and young people.

It is clear to the Inclusion Ambassadors that there are a range of issues that contribute to the way that young people behave, including unfair expectations, lack of support and stress. As we have recognised throughout this response, there are existing resources developed with the Inclusion Ambassadors on support planning and good communication which can support practitioners. There is also already existing policy to support school staff in these areas.

The group are clear that school staff should take a calm and inclusive approach to supporting all children and young people. Staff should also work together to support pupils to make safer and more positive decisions in school. We heard that shouting and exclusion are strategies that are sometimes used in schools but these often lead to negative outcomes for pupils.

To get it right for all children and young people, school staff should focus their attention on celebrating achievements of individuals and take a supportive approach when things do not go to plan. All strategies for addressing children and young people's behaviour should be child-centred and rights-based, in line with the Getting it right for every child and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). We hope that this work with the Inclusion Ambassadors and the following recommendations can support schools to be safer and more positive environments for all children and young people.



Recommendations

These recommendations have been proposed by Children in Scotland, based on what we heard from the Inclusion Ambassadors.

- **Take a rights-based and child-centred approach to addressing issues relating to behaviour and relationships in school.** This aligns with wider policy approaches to supporting children and young people including GIRFEC and UNCRC.
- **Recognise the positive achievements, actions and decision making of all pupils.** Children and young people of all ages should be recognised for both their academic achievement and their wider engagement in school. Every child's success should be celebrated with consideration of their individual needs and circumstances. This will build a young person's confidence and motivates them to make positive choices for themselves and others.
- **Take a relationships-based approach.** Build and maintain trusting relationships. School staff should ask, listen and act on what young people have to say. This will allow young people to feel respected and in turn will be motivated to respect others and their environment.
- **Communicate in a calm and inclusive way.** Using a calm voice will support young people to regulate their emotions and reduce the risk of escalating a situation that may be distressing for the young person. When things go wrong, explain your expectations to the young person to avoid confusion. This will support the young person to make informed choices.
- **Expectations should be tailored to individual needs.** Consider the individual support needs of a young person before applying general expectations to their engagement in learning and school life.
- **Be supportive, not punitive.** Recognise that all behaviour is communication. When a young person behaves in a way that challenges school staff, staff should pay attention to what the young person is communicating and offer support.



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