

Key Issues Paper No. 8



The Impact of School Exclusions on Families¹

Exclusionary practices, which include a range of formal and informal disciplinary measures where the student is removed from school for a set period of time, are commonly used throughout Australia to manage student behaviour (Quin 2019; Bleakley & Bleakley 2019). As disciplinary strategies, recent evidence suggests that they are largely ineffective in supporting students to behave appropriately (Graham et al. 2020; Hemphill, Broderick & Heerde 2017). Furthermore, a growing body of research has documented the range of negative academic, social and emotional outcomes that they can have for the children and young people involved (e.g. Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Skiba, Arredondo & Williams 2014).

While understanding the 'cost' of exclusion has been an important focus for research, much of this attention has been placed on the child. Less understood is whether exclusionary practices also impact on the families of children involved, and in what ways. Through a review of academic literature published during the last 20 years, 15 studies were found which examined the impact of school exclusions on the families of children and young people who had been suspended or excluded from school. The findings suggest that the effects of school exclusion are not limited to just the children involved, but also extend to their families, by impacting on their economic situation and psychological wellbeing.

Economic impact of school exclusions on families

Of the 15 studies identified, six reported that having a child excluded from school had impacted upon their families' economic situation.

Parental employment

Several studies found that the process of exclusion took up a considerable amount of time for parents, which necessitated them having to take leave from work, or missing out on employment opportunities (Macleod et al. 2013; Parker et al. 2016; Smith, 2009). Gazeley (2012) reports that among mothers of children with long and complex histories of school exclusions, the time

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commitments required to look after their child during the suspension, as well as time spent preparing and participating in an appeal process, resulted in them spending a significant amount of time away from work, and subsequently experiencing a marked reduction in income. Similarly, Mitchelson, Simpson and Adams (2021) report that school exclusions partially contributed towards a reduction in working hours and income among parents of children with autism. In fact, it meant parents were unable to seek employment due to the frequency of requests to immediately collect their child from school. Both Macleod et al. (2013) and Parker (2016) found that parents were required to give up employment in order to care for their children, with the latter noting that parents in the study had either lost jobs or reverted to part-time work to care for their child while they were suspended from school.

Financial cost

While most studies focused on the impact on parental employment, school exclusions also presented other financial challenges. Mitchelson, Simpson and Adams (2021) note that moving children between schools was costly, with their study finding that additional school fees, purchasing new resources such as uniforms, and potentially having to move house, all placed further financial demands on the parents of children with autism who had been suspended from mainstream schools. Furthermore, Hodge and Wolstenholme (2016) found that when parents chose to appeal against a school exclusion, the time taken away from work to prepare the appeals, as well as the cost of hiring legal support had additional financial implications. While very few parents in their study made the decision to hire legal support, a small number wanted to but were unable to afford it.

Psychological impact of school exclusions on families

For the families of students who are excluded from school, the process of exclusion is one marked by feelings of stress, victimisation, judgement and self-doubt (Mitchelson, Simpson & Adams 2021), an experience Smith (2009) equated to 'David going up against Goliath'. Despite limited research in this space, the psychological impact of exclusions on families, and specifically parents of children involved, emerged as a key finding in eight of the 15 studies reviewed.

Mental health

Several papers noted that having a child excluded from school had affected parents' mental health, including stress, anxiety and depression (Hodge & Wolstenholme 2016; Lally 2013; Macleod et al. 2013). Concerns over their child's wellbeing and educational future, including finding a new school or continuing their education during the period of suspension, contributed towards parents' anxieties (Lally 2013; Smith 2009). This was particularly pronounced for parents of children with additional learning needs (Macleod et al. 2013; Mitchelson, Simpson & Adams 2021; Spronston, Sedgewick & Crane 2017). Furthermore, the increased level of interaction with school administrators and teachers (Mitchelson, Simpson & Adams 2021), as well as the amount of time required to prepare and participate in the appeals process also increased parents' stress (Hodge & Wolstenholme, 2016). As Gazeley (2012) notes, the stress of school exclusions was particularly pronounced for single mothers, who struggled to find time to communicate with the school and were given no respite from looking after their child during the period of suspension.

Isolation

A consistent finding across studies was the sense of victimisation that many parents experienced during the process of exclusion. Parents commonly reported that through their interactions with the school they had been made to feel a sense of blame or responsibility for their child's behaviour (Gazeley 2012; Hodge & Wolstenholme 2016; Smith 2009). This negative stigmatisation had led to families and parents becoming isolated from the rest of the school community (Parker et al. 2016), and contributed towards feelings of failure (Parker et al. 2016), particularly for parents of children with autism who struggled to find ways to manage their child's behaviour (Spronston, Sedgewick & Crane 2017). Gazeley (2012) suggests that, despite the attempts of education policy, there remains a tendency for schools to 'associate the behaviour of the child with the parent' thus judging the quality of parenting based on the child's behaviour within the school.

Relationships with schools

Several studies found that the stigmatisation and sense of blame implied by schools had a negative impact on existing relationships between parents and staff, with some parents being ignored, or responded to impolitely when they attempted to advocate for their child (Martin-Denham 2020; Parker et al. 2016; Spronston, Sedgewick & Crane 2017). Smith (2009) found that these interactions served to cultivate a feeling of 'them and us' between parents and schools which caused parents to question whether the school continued to care about their child. In a study of 35 parents of excluded primary school children in England, Parker (2016) notes that many parents felt the school was actively trying to exclude their children unnecessarily. In another study, it was this perception that led to several parents of students with autism to remove their children and home-school them instead to ensure that they would be cared for and provided with an education (Truman et al. 2012).

Impact on siblings

Although much of the extant research has focused on the mental health impact on parents or carers, one study by Wenham (2020) considered how school exclusion affected the social and emotional wellbeing of siblings. The case study of one family showed that when a child was excluded from school, their siblings experienced 'persistent and severe marginalisation' within the school as a result of having been negatively labelled by staff and students. Wenham explains:

'He [the excluded child's sibling] was boxed in, through being physically confined to the unit and additionally his identity, his permissible learner identity at school, was similarly constrained; he was a bad kid's younger brother.' (Wenham 2020, p.180)

To escape labelling and stigmatisation, siblings were required to either socialise with other groups of peers, or move to a different school, where knowledge of the exclusion was unknown and they could start anew (Wenham 2020).

Conclusion

Despite limited research, the studies reviewed above show the damaging impact of school exclusions on the parents and families of children who are removed from school. Currently, the findings are sparse and highly context specific. Indeed, several of the studies focus exclusively on the families of children with autism, or with additional learning needs. This highlights the need for further research to better understand how the impact of exclusions is felt across different systems, schools and families. However, the consistency of the findings across studies suggests a

clear need to understand the wider costs of school exclusion, and the way in which they can impact on not just the child, but their parents and siblings.

School Exclusions Study Overview

The School Exclusions Study aims to investigate how and why Australian schools use exclusionary practices to manage disorderly students. This project expects to generate new knowledge in the area of school discipline about the extent and impact of these practices. It will provide a detailed analysis of the political, legislative and policy frameworks that impact on exclusion rates. Expected outcomes of this project include alternative policy and practice recommendations for legislatures and education systems. This should provide significant benefits, such as reducing youth alienation from schooling; creating inclusive schools; reducing the financial burden of exclusion on individuals and governments; and improving the health and wellbeing of young people.

For further information please see www.schoolexclusionsstudy.com.au

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