

‘...he was excluded for the kind of behaviour that we thought he needed support with...’  
A qualitative analysis of the experiences and perspectives of parents whose children have been excluded from school

## **Abstract**

Exclusion from school is associated with adverse outcomes for young people. There is limited research that explores parents’ perspectives, particularly in relation to the exclusion of primary school aged children. The present study used semi-structured interviews with 35 parents of 37 children aged 5-12 years from the Southwest of England. Parent’s experiences were captured in a conceptual model through three main themes. Exclusion was described as part of a complex journey of difficulties reflected by a continuum of coping. The child’s place on the continuum was determined by an interaction between the child, family, and school with communication a key determinant. The study also highlighted the wider implications of exclusion, including emotional and functional impacts on the child and parent and highlighted the importance of the parent’s voice in the identification and support of their child’s needs. It also presents the many complexities surrounding exclusion from school and the limited support parents felt their child was offered.

***Keywords: School exclusion, qualitative research, parents’ experiences, primary school***

## **Background**

The experiences of the parents/caregivers of children excluded from school are often unheard (McDonald and Thomas, 2003). Qualitative research on experiences of exclusion largely focuses on secondary school aged children and those who have been permanently excluded (*expelled*). Although there have been some studies that share the young person’s perspective of exclusion from school (Daniels et al., 2003, Hayden and Dunne, 2001), there is limited recent research that explores the views of parents of younger children and those who have experienced fixed-term exclusions (*suspension*). Current guidance suggests exclusion may highlight unmet need that should trigger an integrated assessment of the child (Department of Education, DFE, 2012). The perspective of the parent on the family context and the child’s history is key; yet the achievement of such a multi-disciplinary approach may be challenging (Parker and Ford, 2013). Studies that explore the perspective of parents with children who have Attention-Hyperactivity Deficit Disorder (ADHD), highlight the significant challenges that parents face and the pertinence of the parent’s voice in to this process (Gwernan-Jones et al., 2015, McIntrye and Hennessy, 2012). Parental reports provide important insight into the needs for their child and the impact of these on their development and wellbeing (Collishaw et al., 2009).

Parental engagement in children's education has a well-established positive impact on pupil's achievements, behaviour and improved teacher parent relationships (Department for Children, Schools and Families, DCSF, 2008, Desforges and Abouchar, 2003, Sylva et al., 2004), although positive engagement between the school and parent can be difficult. Smith (2009) interviewed parents of teenagers who had been excluded from school in New Zealand. Parents reported feeling '*powerlessness, of being talked down to, criticised and labelled as to blame, and expressed varying levels of anger, frustration and grief*' (Smith, 2009, pp95). Similar experiences were presented by McDonald (2003), parents felt '*judged as unworthy parents and mere observers to a decision that has radical implications for their sons/daughters future education*' (pp118).

Although government statistics in England report primary school exclusions to be rare, the proportion has increased with an over-representation of vulnerable groups; which include boys, those with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and some ethnic minority groups (DFE, 2015). Disruptive behaviour is the most common reason for exclusion from school (DFE, 2015) and research also suggests that exclusion is more common amongst children with psychosocial and mental health difficulties (Achilles et al., 2007, Bowman-Perrott et al., 2011, Parker et al., 2014, Wear et al., 2013). The accuracy of official school exclusion statistics has been questioned, the Children's Commissioner reported a number of '*hidden exclusions*', particularly amongst children with known difficulties (Children's Commissioner, 2012, Children's Commissioner, 2013).

The importance of school has been recognised for both the child's academic and social emotional development (Sellstrom and Bremberg, 2006), however some teachers have reported lacking skills to manage the challenges increasingly facing them regarding children's mental health and wellbeing (Kokkinos, 2007, Lebeer et al., 2011). Some teachers have recently argued cuts in children and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) has placed more pressure on schools to support children with increasingly complex needs (Association of Teachers and Lecturers, 2015). We know exclusion from school is associated with adverse outcomes including, anti-social behaviour and offending (Hayden, 2003, Pirrie et al., 2011). Parents of children who have been excluded in secondary school report contributory difficulties within the school context (Brown, 2007, Daniels et al., 2003, Gordon, 2001, McDonald and Thomas, 2003, Munn and Lloyd, 2005, Pirrie et al., 2011).

Parsons (2001) describes exclusion from primary school to be a serious, disruptive experience for children. Previous studies focused on the experiences of parents of children with ADHD have utilised a qualitative approach to capture the interaction between child characteristics and family circumstances (McIntyre and Hennessy, 2012, Gwernan-Jones et al., 2015). To fully understand parents' experiences and in order to inform support for children at risk of being excluded from school, we used a qualitative approach to explore the influences parents believed were important from their child's exclusion from school.

## Method

### *Ethics, participants and recruitment*

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Exeter Medical School Research Ethics Committee. The current study was part of a larger project, the *Supporting Kids, avoiding Problems, SKIP* study (Parker et al., submitted), that explored the relationship between school exclusion and children's psychopathology. Children who had been excluded from school or were *at risk* of exclusion (cases) were compared to peers of the same age and gender who were coping well with school (controls) and normative population data. The focus was primary school but advised by our professional steering committee that some children's problems can be adequately contained within primary school; we included children in Year 7 (first year of secondary school) as well.

Data were collected from children and young people aged 5-12 years, their parents and class/head teacher. All parents were offered the opportunity to share their experiences, as were teachers with parents' consent (Parker et al. in preparation). Children were identified by an educational or mental health practitioner, and all but two children had experienced at least one exclusion. Of the 41 families invited to participate four parents declined and two families withdrew. The current paper discusses the parents who consented to be interviewed; 37 children were discussed as two families had siblings facing exclusion (Table 1).

### *Setting*

Families were recruited from the Southwest of England September 2011-July 2013. Depending on parental preference, interviews were conducted at home or over the telephone with the researcher (CP). The majority of interviews were conducted with the mother of the child (Table 1).

Table 1- Descriptive information of the SKIP sample

Subject	Variable	Mean	N	
Child	Gender	Female	-	2
		Male	-	35
	Age (years)	Mean	8.5	-
		Range	5-12	-
	Key stage	1	-	10
		2	-	24
		3	-	3
	Type of exclusion from school	Fixed-term	-	31
		Permanent	-	4
		At risk	-	2
SEN status <sup>1</sup>	School action	-	8	
	School action plus	-	13	
	SEN statement	-	10	
	None reported	-	4	
Parent/caregiver	Completing interview	Both parents	-	5
		Mother	-	27
		Father	-	0

<sup>1</sup> *School action* refers to a child who has been identified with SEN and receives additional support within the school setting. At *School action plus* external support services are consulted to support the child and advise the school.

	Guardian	-	3
Index of Multiple Deprivation <sup>1</sup> (quintiles)	1	-	4
	2	-	7
	3	-	16
	4	-	5
	5	-	3
Current mental health (EFQ <sup>2</sup> )	Mean (Standard Deviation) Range	16 (7.5) 0-34	- -

<sup>1</sup> Index of Multiple Deprivation (DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT 2007. The English Indices of Deprivation. A summary.) provides a measure of neighbourhood deprivation, parent's postcodes are ranked from the most deprived (1) to the wealthiest area (5) based on a combination of factors, including income, health, housing and living environment.

<sup>2</sup> Everyday Feeling Questionnaire (UHER, R. & GOODMAN, R. 2010. The everyday feelings questionnaire: the structure and validation of a measure of general psychological well-being and distress. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 45, 413-423.) provides a measure of psychological distress and wellbeing.

### **Data collection**

An open-ended interview following the topic guide (see Table 2) was conducted. Each question was asked of every participant, with the researcher prompting where necessary to ensure that each topic was discussed. This allowed discussion beyond researcher assumptions, and the parent and the researcher to co-construct an understanding of the struggles their child had faced at school (Lincoln, 1995). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and were on average 26 minutes long.

Table 2- Interview topic guide

Tell me about your child and school
Why do you think your child struggles with school?
What support has your child had?
What would you like to have been done differently (in reference to struggle/exclusion)
a) Before
b) After

### **Data analysis**

Two researchers (CP, AP) conducted the analysis based on thematic principles (Braun and Clarke, 2006), using Nvivo Version 10 (QSR, 2012). Initially eight transcripts were jointly coded to create a coding scheme. The scheme was tested on a further three transcripts in an iterative process where codes were reviewed, added, amended or removed. To ensure rigour and the level of agreement code boundaries were discussed, the amended coding scheme was then applied to the remaining 24 transcripts independently. Finally, CP and AP discussed overall themes; key extracts of the data were identified and helped to refine the themes in order to ensure concepts across the codes were well established and meaningfully reflected the parents' experiences. A reflexive approach with use of a research diary and discussions between researchers throughout aided and informed the theme development.

## Findings

The analysis generated three overarching themes, the *complex journey of exclusion*, a *continuum of coping* and *wider impacts*. These themes are demonstrated by the conceptual model (see Figure 1). The up and down dotted line illustrates the complexity and fluctuation of the difficulties that children and families faced. Parents described the point on this journey at any one time as a continuum of coping, determined by an interaction of factors involving communication, the child, the family and the school. Parents described the wider impacts of exclusion beyond education, which included impacts to their child's and their own emotions, identities, perceptions about the future, and relationships with others, as well as real practical and financial implications.

>>>>insert Figure 1>>>>

### *The complex journey of exclusion*

Within this 'complex journey', parents described their child along a continuum from coping, to struggling to exclusion, reflected in the peaks and troughs in the conceptual model (Figure 1). Parents' presented similarities and differences in their experiences that demonstrated the complex nature of exclusion. Although the difficulties were considered at a particular point in time there was a sense of a relentless turbulent struggle. Exclusion was not usually experienced as a discrete one-off event but highlighted a crisis point during a fluctuating level of difficulties.

*It just started like a seed, just started growing, and I think once you start then, the seed just really starts sprouting and its difficult then to start chopping it back isn't it? And it just gets bigger and bigger*

(Parents of 7 year old boy)

Some children might not have reached the threshold of exclusion, whilst for others this was a recurring event.

*...he does have periods of good behaviour... but I mean he's been excluded, I mean this year already, and he's been excluded, February he was excluded, March he was excluded, April now he's excluded, June.*

(Mother of 5 year old boy)

In many cases the parents perceived the exclusion as anticipated as there had '*always been a need*'. However, for some parents the exclusion came '*out of the blue*'.

*Yeah that's probably why we were shocked by the whole thing and probably quite angry about it because I literally gone in to see the School Counsellor on my own and she said, he can't come into school tomorrow, we don't want him.*

(Parents of 10 year old boy)

Parents' were very aware of their child's needs but felt they had no control over the situation, some felt they were waiting for years for help they believed was crucial,

*...at the moment, we're just in limbo. I mean ... we're still waiting for a test that was applied for nearly two years ago ... can it be possibly right? You know; if you're diagnosed with cancer you need to be treated...*

(Parents of 7 year old boy)

The purpose of the exclusion itself was understood in diverse ways. Some parents perceived it was not in the child's best interest; occurring mainly to benefit the school.

*... when he got excluded I thought I wonder if there's anything coming up in the next few days like going over the church for a service or someone coming in to do something, cos I always think then they get rid of CHILD.*

(Guardian of 5 year old boy)

In other cases parents appeared to be in disbelief that the school were excluding the child despite known difficulties and before interventions had time to take effect.

*CHILD was excluded for the kind of behaviour that we thought he needed support with so um it didn't end very well primary school for him and I suppose our concern is that it will carry on.*

(Mother of 11 year old boy)

Our sample contained a number of parents who reported informal exclusions, which in some cases were seen as a method to avoid formal exclusions for the child and for the school; examples of the 'hidden exclusions' the Children's Commissioner acknowledged (Children's Commissioner, 2012, Children's Commissioner, 2013). In some cases parents agreed that 'not having it on his record' was beneficial for the child. These informal/illegal exclusions.

Some parents felt the school were 'building up a case' against the child, where more fixed-term exclusions would justify a permanent exclusion or a need for additional resources. This was evident in cases where the exclusion was in response to what parents saw as a seemingly minor episode, but following a history of disruptive behaviour. Crossing the exclusion threshold was sometimes paradoxically seen as a gateway to services, a trigger for action or an opportunity for a fresh start. In contrast, other parents perceived the exclusion as crossing a threshold into a negative trajectory, with potential implications for both the parents' and child's identities.

*Exclusion as a word is quite negative um the connotations of it are quite negative the fear as parent is that something of starting a journey of problem.*

(Mother of 11 year old boy)

Parents discussed various types of exclusions their child experienced (Table 3). Often children had experienced a number of informal exclusions before they were excluded formally. There were many instances where the child was officially 'included' yet still seemed to be excluded. Beyond the physical removal of a child there were a number of reports of psychological exclusions, such as threats of exclusion from the teacher in front of the child's peers, which often led to isolation and/or stigmatisation. Table 3 highlights the wide range of experiences described by the parents and the differences between these.

Table 3 – Types of exclusion from school experienced in the SKIP sample

Type of exclusion	Description	Quote
Informal	Encouraged to be absent from school; e.g. take a holiday, certain events at school, Ofsted visiting	<i>It was suggested to me that he should perhaps have the last few weeks as holiday...After the first exclusion, Oh he's never had any holiday, it sort of won't hurt, if you wanna? And I thought no that's not fair, I don't want to be responsible for ruining the last few weeks. (Mother of 11 year old boy)</i>
	Parents asked to collect their child from school	<i>I could drop him off at sort of 9o'clock in the morning and they could phone me at 10 o'clock to go and collect him on some days um other days he would get to lunchtime and they'd call me. (Mother of 8 year old boy)</i>
	An 'exclusion' from the classroom environment	<i>Well CHILD hasn't been taught for a full academic year because he refused to go into class; he was sat in the corridor all year... so he's not been taught. (Mother of 9 year old boy)</i>  <i>After he was excluded he was completely isolated at school it was almost sort of an exclusion within school. (Mother of 6 year old boy)</i>
	An 'exclusion' from specific subjects	<i>She wasn't allowed to go out; she had to sit in a room at lunchtime on her own. Break time she had to sit in a room on her own, she wasn't allowed to do PE, she wasn't allowed to technology, she wasn't allowed to do science. I was asked to keep her home on sports day because the whole school... which made her just feel like well; I'm not part of any of that. (Mother of 11 year old girl)</i>
	Building up a case, for further support or towards a statement of SEN	<i>...they said well we would like to statement him so we are going to expel him ... this will help our cause more if he has been seen to have behaved like this so say his behaviour was unacceptable rather than he hit a girl, that is quite a bad thing to have on his permanent record ... it suits the</i>



		<i>cause it will all work out better in the end. (Mother of 11 year old boy)</i>
	Part time time-tables	<i>...the last sort of two weeks of that school year he um was just going sort of 9 till 12 and then I was picking him up and bringing him home for the afternoon which was a nightmare. (Mother of 8 year old boy)</i>
	The child's choice to remove themselves	<i>Yes because I think he deliberately then disrupts the class or starts tapping or flicking things or whatever to get him out of doing that because he knows that they're given three warnings and that he gets sent outside and then he'll know that that work doesn't have to be done or he'll get sent to another class. (Mother of 12 year old boy)</i>  <i>He was excluded quite a lot and spent quite a lot of time in the head-teachers office which he thought was wonderful really, to the point where if he was in lessons he would just start to wonder off and they would find that he had left the classroom and gone to the head-teachers office out of choice. (Mother of 9 year old boy)</i>
Formal	Permanent exclusion	<i>But the only reason (CHILD)'s not there now is his violence because when he gets frustrated he gets very violent. Well as a mainstream school he couldn't stay there... because of other children obviously... and teachers and a risk to himself. So they permanently excluded him which they didn't want to do but they felt they had no choice. (Mother of 10 year old boy)</i>
	Fixed-term exclusion	<i>Um by the end of the last school year from about the beginning of June I would say until the end of school year It just escalated out of all proportions and he would totally lose control... I was called in on a regular basis to go and collect him for fixed term exclusions and um by the time I got there he would be in the reception area the whole area would have been trashed. (Mother of 8 year old</i>

		<i>boy)</i>
Managed move		<i>... We just said look you know, this isn't gonna work... and they said look well, I'll suspend him at the moment and then it was agreed. They called it, initially they called it an exclusion, but they changed it to a managed move, at the moment it doesn't look like he will attend a proper school, possibly not until the new year. (Parents of 7 year old boy)</i>

### *A continuum of coping*

Parents described their children's ability to cope, as resulting from an interaction between the child, the family and the school. Communication was regarded by the parents to foster or hinder relationships, which also influenced how the child coped.

### *The child*

Many parents described their child to have a number of underlying mental health and emotional well-being issues; recognised to have implications on the child's ability to cope in school. These included anxiety, low mood and confidence, obsessive compulsive behaviour, and attachment difficulties, but the most common was behavioural problems. These were seen to 'mask' or be precipitated by underlying needs that resulted in the child '*not being understood*'.

*If you're not looking at what's behind the behaviour, then you're not going to gain any sort of resolution to it all.*

(Mother of 11 year old daughter)

Some children had diagnosed disorders including Autism or ADHD, however there were many examples of children who were awaiting a diagnostic or statement of SEN assessment. Some were described as having a history of hearing problems, speech and language difficulties or comorbid physical health problems. Academic difficulties discussed included specific learning problems such as dyslexia, as well as examples of bright children who parents felt were not adequately challenged. Academic difficulties and behavioural problems were inter-linked in a reciprocal relationship, with each thought to be exacerbating the other.

There was evidence that many children struggled with peer relationships. This may related to pre-existing difficulties with social communication and interaction as well as an isolating effect of the child's poor behaviour. Bullying was also common within this group, both as a victim and/or bully.

### *The family*

Examples of negative family and home factors included domestic violence, family breakdown, parental mental health problems, parental alcohol misuse, chronic illness or disability in family members, multiple moves, bereavement, and stressful life events (e.g. car crash).

Positive aspects of family involvement included parents who were knowledgeable about '*the system*', the support or resources their child required, and their legal rights and responsibilities. Parents varied in their ability to advocate for their child. Their perceived ability to advocate often related to their level of empowerment and confidence; these parents saw themselves as the drivers of any action and strongly highlighted the role they had played.

*I've done all the running; I was the one who rang the school in the first place asking for a meeting. I have instigated all the meetings and pushed and pushed and pushed, not the school.*

(Mother of 12 year old boy)

Some parents however, did not want to be stigmatised or perceived as interfering and saw the school or services as the expert. Others were distrusting or fearful of services, or were struggling with their own difficulties which impacted upon their ability to advocate.

*You know, and in hindsight, I just think... well I don't know what I could have done there, that's the thing. It's not a path I've been down so I don't know what I could've done... but hindsight can be a wonderful thing, and knowing what I know now... I wish I'd been more educated and maybe stronger. But when you're going through a traumatic time with your child, that... I suppose you feel vulnerable yourself.*

(Mother of 11 year old boy)

### *The school*

School factors were discussed explicitly, including the physical school environment, and more implicitly with descriptions of the 'school ethos'. The latter was discussed in relation to the 'school:pupil fit', parents felt schools had recognisable differences in their approach that meant that pupils were able to *fit* better in certain schools over others.

*You know I feel hugely responsible that we didn't just say actually you shouldn't be in this school this school doesn't suit, at the moment doesn't meet your need.*

(Mother of 11 year old boy)

Parents discussed 'reactive' and 'proactive' examples of the way schools identified and supported their child's needs. The norm seemed to be a reactive approach or sometimes a resistance to act. Parents perceived schools responded to behaviour at face value rather than addressing underlying difficulties. Many children had high levels of school mobility, reflecting official exclusions, managed moves or the parents opting to change the child's school in the hope of a more appropriate environment. Discussion about the school ethos also occurred in relation to the school routine, disciplinary approach (often reported as rigid), attitudes towards and expectations for their pupils, and focus of outcomes (e.g. Ofsted, targets, and results). The school environment included how the physical space (e.g. space for play, size of school, transitions between classrooms) and class context (e.g. class sizes, levels of SEN within the class, availability of teaching assistants (TA), teacher's capacity to give time, general classroom management) served to exacerbate or support the child's needs. The structure of the school day was also seen to influence behaviour. Parents reported incidents were more common in unstructured or 'free time', such as lunchtimes and break times.

The TA was described as an important member of school staff and often the staff member the child spent most time with. Parents recognised the conflicting experiences faced by TA's when implementing appropriate boundaries of support and encouraging independence for the child.

*...but in hindsight it's almost like the teaching assistants hemmed him in too much and he gets really frustrated about being hemmed in. And then because he's getting frustrated he's lashing out in his anger and of course, that's making them segregate him even more from the other children and he's getting frustrated so it's like one big vicious circle going round and round isn't it .*

(Parents of 7 year old boy)

*...fantastic and really supportive and really working towards building his relationship with his key worker, but equally I sort I feel quite strongly that there is an element of him being able to negotiate the classroom [by himself], and working with his peers and you know those sort of things are really quite critical for him being able to feel safe and comfortable at school and you know... for the other kids to be able to sort of understand him and work with him.*

(Parents of 10 year old boy)

Some parents initially perceived support as helpful, but developed a more nuanced understanding with experience. Even support that was helpful in one way was discussed as potentially harmful in another way. Staff skills, training, expertise and experience to deal with complex needs were seen as important, with many parents giving examples where this was lacking with negative consequences. A key member of staff, such as the TA, who knew the child well and was able to act as their advocate to disseminate support strategies to other staff was seen as particularly beneficial.

*Yeah, her role has been as much around educating some of the school staff and the meal time assistants as well as you know, doing the work with CHILD himself... but that's only just because we've been absolutely lucky that that learning support assistant had that expertise and background.*

(Parents of 5 year old boy)

Parents recognised schools also needed support and avenues for advice when managing the child exceeded their capacity and resources as a school.

*... the school tried their best to support they don't really know what they are doing mind... they have admitted several times they are struggling.*

(Mother of 7 year old boy)

Parents discussed how their children were labelled formally and informally within the school context and the benefits and drawbacks of this. Some parents resisted formal diagnoses and statements of SEN, seeing them as stigmatising and a barrier to their child's strengths and needs. Many parents described informal labels given to their children from an early age, such as being described as the *naughty child*.

*I've put it down and a lot of other people have put CHILD down as naughty little boy but it obvious that there's more to it than that.*

(Mother of 9 year old boy)

Many parents felt the school were unable recognise the potential difficulties that were underlying the disruptive 'naughty' behaviour. A significant group of these children had additional needs but did not have any formally recognised diagnoses, and seemed to be in a state of limbo; bouncing between services, just under thresholds for diagnosis or support. When viewed positively, formal labels such as diagnoses were seen to help manage uncertainty around a child's difficulties. They validated the families concerns, enabling the parents and others to gain knowledge, and develop management strategies. One family described a diagnosis as 'useful currency' or a gateway to accessing support. In some cases achieving a diagnosis or a statement was seen as the ultimate goal; *a golden ticket*.

*I think once there's some sort of label ... then there's specific help that fits with that. But when there's no label there's no specific help.*

(Mother of 11 year old boy)

Parents who had been through the diagnosis/statement process reported that it did not always lead to adequate support as they had hoped it would. Parents discussed different types of support that they had received for their child, including statements of SEN, the application of different management strategies, and input from other services such as CAMHS or community child health. Some parents reported that they had 'no support'; . Parents linked the presence, level and appropriateness of support to the ability of their child to cope in school or not as reflected on the coping continuum.

Parents also expressed frustrations in failures in integrative working.

*The school know he's got problems, but they don't get involved in the medical side of things. They know what his problems are and you know, are dealing with it, as best they can.*

(Mother of 7 year old boy)

When parents alluded to difficulties in accessing adequate support for their child, they reported varied routes and timeframes, but generally described it to be an incredibly long and frustrating process. They reflected this process to be a 'battle'. Again, paradoxically, exclusions were perceived to be an effective route to support, by elevating the child's place on waiting lists or providing evidence for a statement.

*It was mentioned in a multi-agency meeting that we had at the beginning of this year that if exclusions had been put in place, ... then it would have an impact on his placement on that list...and I'm hoping that the three exclusions that he's had will propel him up a little bit quicker.*

(Mother of 9 year old boy)

*Communication*

Communication that occurred between the parents and school around the child was perceived to have an impact on the child's ability to cope. The quality of information shared between the school and parents impacted the way parents evaluated the situation and their role within it.

Parents often felt their voice was not heard by the school or services and their opinion as an 'expert' on their child was not valued.

Mother: *If they listened... then perhaps*

Researcher: *Listened to you?*

Mother: *Yeah... I'm only mum. Insignificant it would seem.*

(Mother of 9 year old boy)

These communication difficulties hindered relationships, which in turn could escalate problems for their child and heighten the sense of blame between parties. Parents had different expectations and experiences about the level of detail and mode of communication used with the school. Parents highlighted a need for open and honest communication.

*...very supportive they keep us really well informed. We're having monthly updates with the head, Mrs Headteacher...and that's all brilliant stuff because we feel as if we're in the loop and we understand what's going on.*

(Parents of 10 year old boy)

Importantly, those who experienced better communication with the school seemed to evaluate the school's and other's actions more positively, even when their child continued to struggle. Although parents described accessing support as difficult, some did report positive experiences or relationships with certain individuals, such as a helpful parent support advisor, school counsellor or a supportive GP.

*I think the process was not helpful, I think individual people were.*

(Mother of 10 year old boy)

Some gave examples of when communication was very minimal or misleading.

*Even the one to one walks past me in the afternoon, puts a thumbs up says 'great day' and keeps walking. No I need a debrief... I want to know what's happened today. More than just thumbs up, great day, that means nothing. Because in those thumbs up, great day... what actually happened is that he threw three chairs and punched a child.*

(Mother of 9 year old boy)

In certain cases this led to a state of apathy on the parents' part as they perceived their input was not respected, whilst other parents reacted by communicating in an exaggerated or forceful way. Some parents felt schools just *'didn't seem to care really didn't, didn't seem to care'* and this led to some avoiding communication with the school altogether.

*The teachers didn't really communicate that well with me. They'd only call me in if CHILD [had] been naughty. But that's about it really. I mean, parents evenings I didn't really go to cos I knew exactly what they would say, you know it was the same.... Which I knew it anyway so there's no point having someone there saying, yes he's struggling which I already knew anyway*

(Mother of 11 year old boy)

Parents described that the child's voice was also often not heard or considered;

*...they weren't interested in what CHILD wanted... not one person has ever interviewed CHILD regarding the incident, which I find quite odd*

(Mother of 10 year old boy)

There was often a sense from parents that discussions about the child went on without the child being at the centre, with limited exploration of the situation with the child themselves.

### **Impact**

The short term and longer term impacts of the exclusion event and the complex struggle around the child's difficulties on the child, family and school, were clearly apparent. Beyond missing time from school, wider impacts included their child's and their own emotional distress and the practicalities of dealing with unexpected time out of school. Impacts were apparent preceding and persisting after the exclusion itself, as depicted (Figure 1).

*...the thing is when a child gets excluded as a parent you feel as though you have failed, well I certainly did and I think a lot of people would think I've failed as a parent...I've brought up a child that can't go to school without being excluded so you don't necessarily want to talk to people about it and you don't necessarily want to talk to school about it because you feel they may judge you or whatever.*

(Parents of 6 year old boy)

Parents described feeling guilty, and often conveyed a sense of failure, sadness and disappointment that they could have prevented the exclusion by advocating more for their child. There was a sense that exclusion might bring about a change in their parental identity by sharing the burden of exclusion with their child, almost like a transfer of *failure* from the school to the family.

*...for us it was absolutely um heart-breaking actually...it was um I think him being excluded felt as if we'd failed him as if school had failed him as if we'd let him down*



*by not kind of either advocating for him enough in school or by not moving him really so he had a positive end to his primary schooling it was absolutely horrible really really horrible...*

(Mother of 11 year old boy)

Stigma was commonly experienced, which sometimes led to parents isolating themselves. Ostracisation was frequently reported and added to parent's distress.

*It was just a bit of a nightmare really to the point where they were excluding him permanently from school and we had a petition from the other parents and we would walk into the playground and no other parents or children would speak to us.*

(Mother of 9 year old boy)

Some parents lost jobs either due to constantly having to pick their child up from school or because their child was not in school full time. A practical shift of burden from the school to the parents was described, which had repercussions on the parents financially and psychologically.

*... we have hugely sort of structured everything around this situation for sure...like I say I no longer do the same job all the time, I've got a part-time job now and we've you know we've sort of tightened our belts and we've managed to make that work for us financially as well... it has changed the whole dynamic of our family.*

(Parents of 10 year old boy)

They described numerous impacts of their child's difficulties and/or the exclusion on the child's education, which meant their children, missed out on both academic and non-academic aspects of school.

*... he says he's enjoying school but I think once he's left when he looks back I am not so sure that he will think it's the happiest days of his life to be honest.*

(Mother of 9 year old boy)

The impact on the child's mental health and emotional well-being, and their social and peer relations were apparent. In some cases the child demonstrated extreme distress and low mood.

*So now I've got an angry, depressed, upset, violent, unhappy boy. Who absolutely despises anything to do with authority.*

(Mother of 7 year old boy)

Despite exclusion being seen to be used by the school as a disciplinary tool, parents did not understand it as a successful means of deterring poor behaviour. Exclusion was perceived to be ineffective, occurring multiple times. Some parents reported that the exclusion reinforced

the very behaviour that the child was being disciplined for. As school was a place of distress and struggle for many of these children, some parents described their child experienced exclusion as positive in the short term, almost like a 'holiday', and consequently the disciplinary message of exclusion was lost or misinterpreted.

Researcher: *Yeah, who do you think the exclusions benefits?*

Mother: *The school because they're getting rid of that behaviour for a day, a couple of days... and it doesn't help. You know cos she, well they're just reinforcing [the poor behaviour with] a really positive time [at home].*

(Mother of 11 year old girl)

## **Discussion**

This paper highlights the experiences of the parents of young children who have been at risk of or excluded from school, and describes the wider implications of this for the child, family and school. Parents in this study experienced their child's exclusion from school occurring on a complex journey of difficulties, which implies there should be points along this journey that successful intervention to remediate or support the family, child and school. Parents were agreed on the immense impact exclusion had on them as a family, both emotionally and practically on their day to day lives, similar to studies conducted with parents of children excluded from secondary school (Gordon, 2001, McDonald and Thomas, 2003, Smith, 2009). Parents also acknowledged the negative impact their child's disruptive behaviour had on the school.

Parents reported a number of factors that contributed to and / or compounded difficulties for the child within the school environment, which reflected the vulnerabilities amongst this group already established in the literature (Achilles et al., 2007, Bowman-Perrott et al., 2011, Daniels et al., 2003, DFE, 2015). The model of complex journey presented within this paper emphasises the interplay of individual, school, family and community that may have contributed to the child's ability to cope as well as the importance of systemic influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The implementation of support that encompasses learning and mental health needs of children is acknowledged as important through changes in the code of practice and recent government guidance (DFE, 2014a, Department of Health, 2015, DFE and DOH, 2014). Recent cuts in CAMHS and voluntary section mental health provision may have compromised the support of such vulnerable children, but timely support may reduce or prevent later costs and escalation of difficulties for the young person (Association of Teachers and Lecturers, 2015, DFE, 2014a, Taggart et al., 2006).

Parents discussed the use of formal exclusions as a gateway to further support for the child and the school, but there were also a number of informal exclusions described. . The Children's Commissioner highlighted these *hidden exclusions*, which may inadvertently reduce or delay access to support for both the child and the schools supporting (Children's Commissioner, 2012, Children's Commissioner, 2013). Indeed should exclusion from school be a requisite to gain access to support? Some parents' perceived exclusion as an ineffective

means to discipline or improve the child's behaviour, indeed, some thought exclusion reinforced their child's disruptive behaviour although recognised the importance of the safety of their child and others. Many parents highlighted the important role key staff such as TAs played in supporting their child in school, but accounts described both benefits and disadvantages. The Deployment and Impact of Support Staff project (Blatchford et al., 2009) reported that lower attaining children and those with SEN were more likely to spend time with a TA than the teacher and these interactions were often reactive rather proactive. A number of parents in this study discussed the valuable input from TAs but others commented on a reactive approach to the child's difficulties within the classroom. Time and support for teacher-TA teams to formulate a behavioural plan and review its implementation would allow a proactive focus and it is imperative that TAs have adequate training and supervision to effectively undertake the support of our most challenging children (Taggart et al., 2006).

Parents in the current study emphasised the importance of communication, and those who reported good communication expressed more positive views of the school. Ensuring timely and effective communication should be a priority for those working with children at risk of exclusion. Communication is essential for effective parental engagement, which is widely regarded as important (DCSF, 2008, Desforges and Abouchar, 2003, Sylva et al., 2004, DFE, 2014b). Despite this, some parents within the present study felt their views were ignored, echoing findings from a systematic review of the parent-teacher relationship among children with ADHD (2015). A recent study that explored the implementation of mental health strategies across secondary schools in England reported attitudes of parents as possible barriers in supporting pupils (Taggart, 2014).

Concerns about the health, safety and learning environment for other children and staff can influence decisions about exclusion. Such concerns are difficult for parents of children facing exclusion to challenge particularly because it is grounded in the guidance given to headteachers by the DfE (2012). However, the findings from the current study suggest that exclusion simply shifts the burden of difficulty from the school to the parent, and may reinforce or indeed encourage behaviours to escape school in the child. Further, the increased stress and distress for the family may also exacerbate the child's behavioural difficulties. It leads us to question the role and benefits of exclusion. In addition, we suggest that 'support' strategies implemented by the school need careful consideration to avoid implicit exclusion with similar disadvantages such as, part time timetables, 1:1 support, and separate teaching areas.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This study elicited views from a reasonably large group of both mothers and fathers, although was constrained by the allied quantitative study. As is true for qualitative research, we do not claim generalisability of findings beyond the experiences of the parents interviewed but readers may recognise findings as transferable to their own situations. A further limitation is the exclusion of the teacher and child views which future research should address.

Quantitative studies alone are not able to elucidate the perceived impact of the contextual factors and the meanings parents attach to their child's exclusion from school. The open-ended questions allowed parents the opportunity to share their experiences without being restricted by the researchers. This present study has also enabled the development of a theoretical model depicting parents' views of exclusion from school in a holistic manner. The findings from this study contribute to our growing understanding of exclusion from primary school exclusion and the implications of these events for the child, family and school.

## **Conclusion**

The findings emphasise the contributions that parents can make in the identification and support of children's needs both within the home and school environment. The early identification and effective intervention for children's difficulties is a key theme in education and health policy, parents in this study were highly aware of their child's needs but did not feel listened to or supported in accessing appropriate assessment and support. Exclusion in very young children should be avoided; the current study highlights the wide implications of exclusion and reiterates the importance of further multi-disciplinary assessment where difficulties are identified. Parents emphasised the need to ask what lies behind children's disruptive behaviour and, as experts on their children, can offer essential insights to underlying needs.

*Well to listen, to listen more to the parent, to listen more to the children instead of dismissing them that they've got a behaviour problem or they don't want to learn, take time to know, to get to know them what is making them angry? Why is that child in that class bored? Is it because they're struggling or it is because it's too easy? Could be weighing that up, is it that they can't bear the environment, there's too many people in that room. They could be looking at it that way ... or is somebody doing that, is somebody doing that but not telling me?*

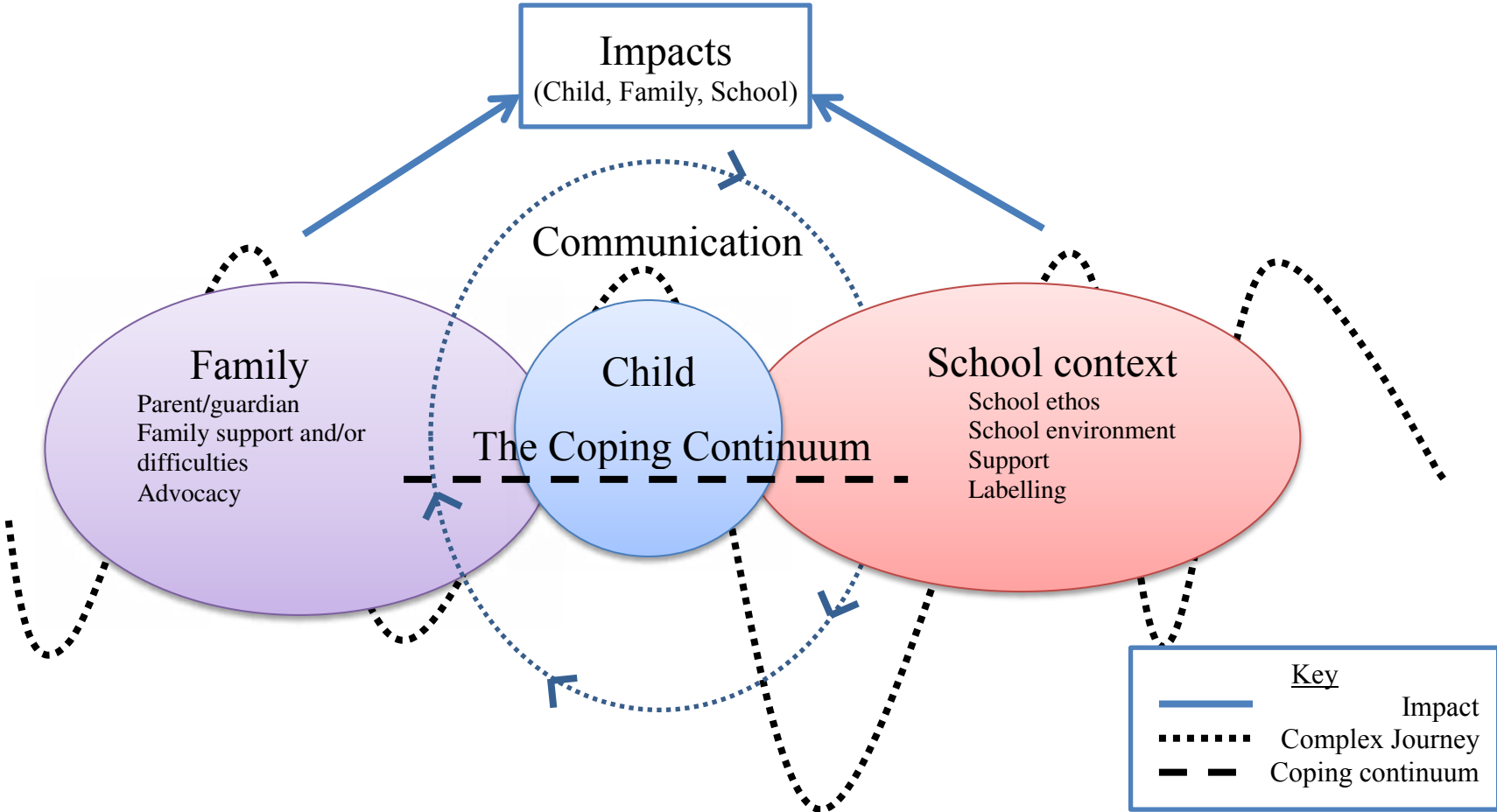
(Mother of 12 year old boy)

## **Acknowledgements**

### **Funding**

Figure 1- Model of exclusion from primary school

The up and down dotted line captures the complex journey of difficulties, the place their child found themselves on this journey at any one time was described by parents as a continuum of coping, determined by an interaction of factors involving communication, the child, the family and the school. The implications of this complex journey and exclusion from school were described by parents to have wide implications on the child and families emotionally and practically in their day to day lives.



## References

- ACHILLES, M., MCLAUGHLIN, M. & CRONINGER, R. 2007. Sociocultural Correlates of Disciplinary Exclusion Among Students With Emotional, Behavioral, and Learning Disabilities in the SEELS National Dataset *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 15, 33-45.
- ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS AND LECTURERS. 2015. *Schoolchildren's mental health at serious risk* [Online]. London. Available: <https://www.atl.org.uk> [Accessed 19.03.2015 2015].
- BLATCHFORD, P., BASSETT, P., BROWN, P., MARTIN, C., RUSSELL, A. & WEBSTER, R. 2009. Deployment and impact of support staff project. Institute of Education, University of London.
- BOWMAN-PERROTT, L., BENZ, M. R., HSU, H. Y., KWOK, O. M., EISTERHOLD, L. A. & ZHANG, D. 2011. Patterns and Predictors of Disciplinary Exclusion Over Time: An Analysis of the SEELS National Data Set. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 21, 83-96.
- BRAUN, C. & CLARKE, V. 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.
- BRONFENBRENNER, U. 1994. *Ecological models of human development*, London, Elsevier Sciences.
- BROWN, T. M. 2007. Lost and Turned Out: Academic, Social, and Emotional Experiences of Students Excluded From School. *Urban Education*, 42, 432-455.
- CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER 2012. 'They never give up on you': Office of the Children's Commissioner School Exclusions Inquiry. London.
- CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER 2013. 'Always someone else's problem': Office of the Children's Commissioner School Exclusions Inquiry. London.
- COLLISHAW, S., GOODMAN, R., FORD, T., RABE-HESKETH, S. & PICKLES, A. 2009. How far are associations between child, family and community factors and child psychopathology informant-specific and informant-general? *J Child Psychol Psychiatry*, 50, 571-80.
- DANIELS, H., COLE, T., SELLMAN, E., SUTTON, J., VISSER, J. & BEDWARD, J. 2003. Study of Young People Permanently Excluded from School. DfES Publication.
- DCSF 2008. The impact of Parental Involvement on Children's Education. Nottingham: DCSF Publications.
- DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT 2007. The English Indices of Deprivation. A summary.
- DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH 2015. Future in mind, Promoting, protecting and improving our children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. London: NHS England.
- DESFORGES, C. & ABOUCHAR, A. 2003. The impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievement and adjustment: A literature review. Nottingham: Department for Education and Skills,.
- DFE 2012. Exclusion from maintained schools, Academies and pupil referral units in England. London.
- DFE 2014a. Mental health and behaviour in Schools: Departmental advice for school staff. London.
- DFE 2014b. School exclusion trial evaluation. London: The Institute of Education, University of London (IoE) & the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER),.
- DFE 2015. Permanent and fixed period exclusions from schools and exclusion appeals in England, 2013/14. London.
- DFE & DOH 2014. Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years. London.
- GORDON, A. 2001. School Exclusions in England: Children's voices and adult solutions? *Educational Studies*, 27, 69-85.
- GWERNAN-JONES, R., MOORE, D. A., GARSIDE, R., RICHARDSON, M., THOMPSON-COON, J., ROGERS, M., COOPER, P., STEIN, K. & FORD, T. 2015. ADHD, parent perspectives and parent-teacher relationships: grounds for conflict. *British Journal of Special Education*.

- HAYDEN, C. 2003. Responding to exclusion from school in England. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 41, 626-639.
- HAYDEN, C. & DUNNE, S. 2001. *Outside looking in: children's and families experiences of exclusion from school*, The Children's Society.
- KOKKINOS, C. M. 2007. Job stressors, personality and burnout in primary school teachers. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 77, 229-243.
- LEBEER, J., BIRTA-SZEKELY, N., DEMETER, K., BOHACS, K., CANDEIAS, A. A., SONNESYN, G., PARTANEN, P. & DAWSON, L. 2011. Re-assessing the current assessment practice of children with special education needs in Europe. *School Psychology International*, 33, 69-92.
- LINCOLN, Y. S. 1995. Emerging criteria for quality in qualitative and interpretive research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 1, 275-289.
- MCDONALD, T. & THOMAS, G. 2003. Parents' reflections on their children being excluded. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 8, 108-119.
- MCINTRYE, R. & HENNESSY, E. 2012. 'He's just enthusiastic. Is that such a bad thing?' Experiences of parents of children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 17, 65-82.
- MUNN, P. & LLOYD, G. 2005. Exclusion and excluded pupils. *British Educational Research Journal*, 31, 205-221.
- PARKER, C. & FORD, T. 2013. School exclusion is a mental health issue. *J Child Psychol Psychiatry*, 54, 1366-8.
- PARKER, C., MARLOW, R., KASTNER, M., MAY, F., MITROFAN, O., HENLEY, W. & FORD, T. submitted. The Supporting KIDs, avoiding Problems (SKIP), Relationships between school exclusion, psychopathology, development and attainment, a case control study *Journal of Children's Services*.
- PARKER, C., WHEAR, R., UKOUMUNNE, O. C., BETHEL, A., THOMPSON-COON, J., STEIN, K. & FORD, T. 2014. School exclusion in children with psychiatric disorder or impairing psychopathology: A systematic review. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*.
- PARSONS, C., HAYDEN, C., GODFREY, R., HOWLETT, K. & MARTIN, T. 2001. Outcomes in Secondary Education for Children Excluded from Primary School. In: DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION (ed.).
- PIRRIE, A., MACLEOD, G., CULLEN, M. & MCCLUSKEY, G. 2011. What happens to pupils permanently excluded from special schools and pupil referral units in England? *British Educational Research Journal*, 37, 519-538.
- QSR 2012. *NVivo qualitative data analysis software*, QSR International Pty Ltd.
- SELLSTROM, E. & BREMBERG, S. 2006. Is there a "school effect" on pupil outcomes? A review of multilevel studies. *J Epidemiol Community Health*, 60, 149-55.
- SMITH, A. P. 2009. New Zealand families' experience of having a teenager excluded from school. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 27, 89-100.
- SYLVA, K., MELHUISE, E., SAMMONS, P., SIRAJ-BLATCHFORD, I. & TAGGART, B. 2004. Effective Pre-School Education. Final Report. London: Institute of Education.
- TAGGART, B., SAMMONS, P., SMEES, R., SYLVA, K., MELHUISE, E., SIRAJ-BLATCHFORD, I., ELLIOT, K. & LUNT, I. 2006. Early identification of special educational needs and the definition of 'at risk': The Early Years Transition and Special Educational Needs (EYTSN) Project. *British Journal of Special Education*, 33, 40-45.
- UHER, R. & GOODMAN, R. 2010. The everyday feelings questionnaire: the structure and validation of a measure of general psychological well-being and distress. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 45, 413-423.
- WHEAR, R., MARLOW, R., BODDY, K., UKOUMUNNE, O. C., PARKER, C., FORD, T., THOMPSON-COON, J. & STEIN, K. 2013. Psychiatric disorder or impairing psychology in children who have been excluded from school: A systematic review. *School Psychology International*.