



Department
for Education

Reasonable force, restraint & restrictive practices in alternative provision and special schools

Research report

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Executive summary

Aims and approach

The Department for Education (DfE) is committed to minimising the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and other restrictive practices in all schools in England, including special schools and alternative provision. This work programme will include updating the ‘Use of reasonable force’ guidance¹ (2013) to provide school staff with advice on how to minimise the use of physical restraint and, in instances where it is absolutely necessary and lawful to use reasonable force or restrictive practices, to do so as safely as possible.

The DfE commissioned Revealing Reality to carry out research to understand how special and alternative provision schools in England currently use reasonable force, including physical restraint and other restrictive practices, and to learn what these schools believe works to effectively minimise the need to use such methods.

The research was qualitative, with findings drawn from analysis of interviews with school leaders and staff from a total of 45 special and alternative provision schools, plus additional evidence gathered from site visits to four of these schools. The fieldwork took place from late May to late July 2023.

Key findings

1: Schools’ policies and engagement with guidance

All schools in the research had comprehensive school-wide policies on the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices, often as part of their behaviour policies. These reflected the type of school and the pupils’ needs. Some schools also had personalised behaviour plans for individual pupils which included anything to do with reasonable force, including physical restraint or restrictive practices. In all these policies and plans, physical restraint was only to be used as a last resort.

The terminology schools employed to describe the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices was inconsistent. Some used differing terminology to refer to the same technique and, conversely, different schools used the same term to denote different actions. This could make comparisons difficult.

¹ [DfE guidance on the use of reasonable force, 2013](#)

2: Reflections on the current Department for Education guidance

Most schools in the research were using the DfE's 'Use of reasonable force' guidance to inform their behaviour policies. Many of them were supplementing this with additional specific detail, tailored for use in that school. Several said they liked that the DfE guidance was general enough that it could be tailored in this way and said that if the updated guidance was more specific it would undermine schools' ability to set and enact behaviour policies that best suited pupils at a given school.

Some school leaders and staff had some criticisms of the wording of the current guidance. A small number said they felt some of the situations in which it said schools could use reasonable force were not sufficiently problematic to warrant doing so.

A small number of school leaders and teachers said a requirement for at least some staff in alternative provision and special schools to attend training on the appropriate use of reasonable force should be added to the guidance. Some school leaders felt the guidance should make it mandatory for schools to share details of incidents involving the use of reasonable force with parents/guardians, the local authority, the DfE or Ofsted.

3: Staff training in the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices

All the schools in the research trained at least some of their staff in behaviour management. Training included the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices, but there was greater emphasis on managing behaviour and de-escalating incidents so that reasonable force, including physical restraint or restrictive practices would not be needed.

All but one of the schools used an external training provider. The content and focus of the training often influenced schools' cultures in relation to the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practice and the language they used to describe it, such as "supportive holding" and "positive handling".

Some schools trained all staff who had contact with a child in the school, others trained only those staff who were likely to be called upon if an incident occurred. Several schools said they were struggling to afford to train all their teaching staff.

4: Prevention and de-escalation measures

Efforts to prevent and de-escalate behaviour that could otherwise lead to use of reasonable force, including physical restraint or restrictive practices were referred to by all the schools in the research. Prevention tended to involve attempting to understand the context and history of pupils' behaviour and circumstances that might trigger disruptive behaviour and putting plans in place to minimise these.

De-escalation techniques varied between schools, often according to the child's needs. They included distraction, use of sensory rooms, encouraging pupils to go for a walk or get some fresh air, switching the member of staff working with the child and removing triggers to misbehaviour. However, some schools said they did not believe it benefited their pupils overall to remove all triggers to misbehaviour as it did not help prepare the children for encountering similar triggers in their lives beyond school.

5: The use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices

All the schools reported that they used reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practice only when they felt it was necessary. This was typically when a child was causing or was at risk of causing physical harm to themselves or others and de-escalation techniques had not averted the behaviour. In cases where school staff felt a pupil was in immediate danger of harming themselves or someone else, staff sometimes used physical restraint straight away.

Fully restraining a child for more than a few seconds was rare among schools in the research, and some said they had never had to use the most restrictive holds they had been taught by their training provider.

After an incident involving physical restraint, most schools took steps to try to reduce the likelihood of it being required again with the same pupil by reviewing what had led to the incident and what could be learned or done differently.

6: Recording of incidents of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices

All schools in the research said they recorded what they judged to be use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices. Most had invested in software to record cases and manage follow-up activity, though some were using paper records.

Some schools said they recorded all instances of physical contact, including gently 'guiding' a child by the arm, while others did not view this as use of reasonable force which needed to be recorded. The types of information recorded also varied from school to school. For incidents of physical restraint or more restrictive holds, it typically included details of the physical intervention (who, what, where, when). In some cases the events leading up to the incident and any other preventative measures that had been attempted were also recorded.

Many of the schools in the sample were reviewing the data to identify patterns, understand triggers and inform their behaviour management.

7: Reporting incidents of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices

What, how and to whom incidents of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices reported varied across the schools in the research, as did the terminology used by schools in the recording and reporting of incidents.

Most of the schools said they reported incidents involving physical restraint or restrictive practices to parents/guardians on the same day. Many schools also shared data on these incidents with governors, the trust they belonged to or their local authority. Most said they had to share the data with Ofsted and all said they were happy to do so.

When asked, most agreed that in principle they would be happy to share this data with the DfE. However, they were wary of sharing data without assurances that the context around the data would be understood. Some were concerned that the data could be misrepresented, particularly given differences between school settings, the profile of their pupils and the variation in what, how and in what terminology incidents were recorded.

Implications for furthering the evidence base in this area

- Training providers played a significant role in schools' policy and practice around reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices. Further research which focuses on training providers and the guidance they are providing to schools may be beneficial.
- In an effort to reduce reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices, some schools had removed stimulus which was felt to trigger disruptive behaviours. There was disagreement across the sample about whether this was best practice, with some school leaders concerned this approach did not adequately prepare children for adult life. Further research which explores this approach and its impact may be beneficial.
- Variations in recording practices and the language used to describe reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices may make it difficult to compare schools if they were required to report incidents. If reporting was to be made mandatory for special schools and alternative provision, exploration of the potential difficulties or unintended consequences of this may be required, including the potential for it to affect how incidents were classified and at what thresholds these were reported.

Introduction

Policy context

Since the Department for Education (DfE) last published guidance on the use of reasonable force in schools in 2013², the landscape has shifted significantly. Following a report in June 2021 from the Equality and Human Rights Commission on the use of restraint in schools, the department committed to a programme of work to minimise instances of the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices in all schools in England.

The DfE has committed to updating the guidance on the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices in schools, with the intention to provide school staff with advice on how to minimise its use and, in instances where it is absolutely necessary and lawful to use reasonable force or restrictive practices, to do so as safely as possible.

The department has identified a lack of robust evidence about current practice, including when and how incidents of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices are recorded and reported, or on the types of interventions that can minimise their use.

Research aims and objectives

To help close this evidence gap, the DfE commissioned Revealing Reality to carry out qualitative research to understand how special schools and alternative provision schools in England currently use reasonable force, including physical restraint and other restrictive practices and to learn what these schools believe works to effectively minimise the need for using such methods.

The research objectives were:

- To understand the circumstances in which schools use reasonable force, including physical restraint and other restrictive practices;
- To understand how schools ensure that when reasonable force, physical restraint and other restrictive practices are used, they are used appropriately, safely and proportionately;
- To understand what interventions are most useful in reducing the need to use reasonable force, physical restraint or other restrictive practices;

² [DfE guidance on the use of reasonable force, 2013](#)

- To understand the recording and reporting of incidents of the use of reasonable force, physical restraint and other restrictive practices.

This research is part of a wider work programme to understand how reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices are used, and findings will help inform the revision of guidance for schools.

Methodology

This was qualitative research, with findings drawn from analysis of interviews with school leaders and staff from a total of 45 special and alternative provision schools, plus additional evidence gathered from site visits to four of these schools. The fieldwork took place from late May to late July 2023.

Hour-long interviews were conducted over video with a range of staff members from the schools in the sample, including headteachers, training and safeguarding leads, teachers, and teaching assistants.

These interviews included discussion of the circumstances in which the schools used reasonable force, including physical restraint and other restrictive practices; how they ensured it was used appropriately, safely and proportionately; what interventions were most useful in reducing the need to use reasonable force, including physical restraint or other restrictive practices; how and when incidents involving reasonable force, including physical restraint and other restrictive practices were recorded and reported; and the respondents' reflections on the current DfE guidance.

In addition, researchers conducted site visits to three special schools and one alternative provision school. Site visits included a tour of the school and its facilities, 'intercept' (impromptu, on-site) interviews with staff present, and observation of the environment, teachers and pupils (for example, observation of lessons and breaktime). These site visits have been written up as case studies and can be found in the annex in this report.

Recruitment and sampling

To recruit participants for the project, Revealing Reality referred to GIAS³ (the register of educational establishments in England and Wales) to recruit a sample that included a variety of alternative provision and special schools of differing size, cohort, and location within England.

³ [Get Information about Schools \(GIAS\)](#)

Some of the schools that took part had previously expressed an interest in participating in the project during the DfE's 2023 call for evidence on the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint, and restrictive practices in schools.

The sample included:

- 30 special schools and 15 alternative provision schools;
- schools from every English region;
- a range of types of school, for example, pupil referral units, free schools, independent schools;
- primary, secondary and all-through schools;
- schools catering for children aged 2 to 19;
- schools with Ofsted ratings ranging from inadequate to outstanding;
- schools ranging in size from under 50 to over 300 pupils;
- schools catering for children with differing needs, including children on the autistic spectrum, those with physical, hearing, and visual impairments, children with moderate to severe learning difficulties and children with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs.

Analysis

Revealing Reality analysed the evidence from the interviews and site visits as a team and in collaboration with the DfE, drawing out the key themes that emerged across the interviews in relation to the research objectives.

The main types of analysis used for this project included:

- Grid analysis
- Thematic analysis

This involved researchers using transcripts and written fieldnotes to fill out a grid, inputting the relevant data against key themes and elements of the research in order to compare the data across the sample.

Methodological considerations

There are some limitations of the study which should be considered alongside the findings in this report:

- The recruitment and fieldwork took place between 29 May and 28 July 2023. During this period, many schools reported being particularly busy in the lead-up to

and during the summer break, which limited some schools' availability to take part in the research.

- The research team attempted to recruit an even split of alternative provision and special schools, however alternative provision settings proved more difficult to recruit.
- Although a range of schools were contacted to take part in the research, participation was voluntary, so the sample was self-selecting.
- The data only represents the views and practices of those who agreed to take part in the research. Schools who did not take part may have different approaches towards reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices.

1: Schools' policies and engagement with guidance

Key findings

All schools in the research had comprehensive school-wide policies on the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices, often as part of their behaviour policies. These reflected the type of school and the pupils' needs.

Some schools also had personalised behaviour plans for individual pupils, some of which had a detailed and personalised plan for the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices.

In all these policies and plans, physical restraint was unambiguously only to be used as a last resort.

Schools' use of terminology to describe the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices was inconsistent. Some used differing terminology to refer to the same technique and, conversely, different schools used the same term to denote different actions. This could make comparisons difficult.

Some schools had deliberately chosen to use terms such as "supportive holding" rather than "restraint" because they felt these more accurately described the actions staff were taking.

In a minority of schools, however, use of the word "restraint" was encouraged so that staff understood its severity and the fact they may need to justify its use.

The schools in the research were asked to provide an overview of their policies on the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices, the decision-making that informed their content, and any changes that had been made over time.

Schools' policies on the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices

Schools' policies often focused on pre-emptive and proactive de-escalation measures, which were to be used before resorting to any form of reasonable force, including physical restraint or other restrictive practices.

"The proviso is that the very last resort is to physically intervene with children." – *Headteacher, special school, Southeast*

In policies the use of any sort of physical intervention was usually limited to situations in which the pupil or those around them would be at risk of harm through their behaviour.

Several schools were also using personalised behaviour plans and risk assessments for individual pupils. These set out for staff agreed actions to take to reduce or address disruptive or dangerous behaviour and in turn minimise the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices. Guidance on the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices was usually included within these plans or risk assessments and tailored to the needs of the child.

Most schools said that having the option to restrain a pupil was important to protect their safety and the safety of others. One school expressed concern about the possibility of schools operating with a no-touch policy, as they were concerned they wouldn't be able to fully carry out their duty of care.

"I really struggle with the fact that people are allowed to have policies where you are not allowed to intervene in any way." – *Teacher, special school, Southeast England*

Use of the Department for Education guidance

Most schools that took part in the research were using the Department for Education's 'Use of Reasonable Force' guidance (2013)⁴ to inform their policies.

The guidance was usually used as a starting point, with many schools including additional detail in their own policies that are tailored to the school and the profile of its pupils. This often included further guidance and school-specific measures to reduce the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices.

The schools in the sample saw the DfE guidance as broad and high level, and most of the schools liked this. Many of the schools said it was important to be able to tailor the DfE guidance to suit the needs and circumstances of their pupils.

"It [the school's policy on the use of reasonable force] is obviously lifted from the DfE guidance, like all our policies are, but then it's personalised to this organisation... so a lot of this is SEMH [social, emotional and mental health] provision." – *Headteacher, alternative provision, Southeast England*

⁴ [DfE guidance on the use of reasonable force, 2013](#)

Other factors informing schools' policies

Almost all the schools in the research were using a training provider to train their staff on the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices, as well as wider behavioural management techniques. Approaches varied across this training provision, but there was a notable focus on de-escalation across the board. The content and focus of this training, including its emphasis on de-escalation, often played a significant role in informing the content of the schools' policies.

"All of our policies refer back to our [name of provider] training, so it would always be clear within the policies that we use de-escalation before anything else." – *Headteacher, alternative provision, Northeast England*

The size of the school, in particular the ratio of staff to children, as well as the needs of its pupils, also impacted the content of the policy documents and use of additional behavioural plans.

In both the special schools and the alternative provision in the sample, the smaller, more specialised schools that had a high staff-to-child ratio tended to be better able to develop and maintain bespoke, detailed behaviour plans for every child.

"Every child has a pupil profile, which I appreciate is absolutely not possible in other schools because you have 1,200 pupils" – *Headteacher, alternative provision, Southeast England*

Additionally, schools with higher needs pupils tended to have more tailored plans for each child.

"We have an individual care plan for every child, so we know which holds would trigger them... because some of our ASD [autism spectrum disorder] children enjoy the feeling of being held, but some of our SEMH children would find only some [forms of] holding acceptable." – *Headteacher, special school, Southeast England*

Language used in schools' policies

Most of the schools had thought about the terminology they used in their policies on reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices or when speaking about the topic. While there was some consistency in the way this topic was framed and spoken about, particularly when schools had adopted the terminology and emphasis used by the same training provider, there were also contrasts between the schools.

Most schools deliberately used language that centred around words like “support” and “care” when it came to enforcing behavioural policies. For example, physical holds, rather than being described or labelled as “restraint” or “restrictive” were often called “supportive holding”, or similar terms.

"I think the wording should be changed to be “supportive”. Would you rather I told you I restrained your child today, or that I supported your child today?" – *Headteacher, special school, Southeast England*

Many schools considered language an important tool to frame their behavioural policies in a more positive, less punitive light. Several schools said words like “restraint” and “force” were often associated with law enforcement and could have an inflammatory effect on pupils and their parents/guardians. For these schools, getting the language “right” helped both to minimise parental concerns and in some cases provide them with a more accurate description of a particular incident involving their child.

“When you tell a parent, ‘Your child has been restrained,’ they think you’ve held them face down on the floor like the police might do.” – *Deputy head, special school, Southeast England*

However, this attitude towards the language surrounding physical restraint was not replicated across the board. A small number of schools in the sample either accepted the use of the word “restraint”, or actively encouraged it. For example, the head of safeguarding at one special school said it was crucial to use that kind of language to ensure the staff in the setting understood the severity of the actions they were taking when using reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices.

"I think it's really important that staff know the severity of using physical restraint...they might one day end up in court having to justify themselves." – *Head of safeguarding, special school, Northeast England*

2: Reflections on the current Department for Education guidance

Key findings

Most schools in the research were using the DfE's 'Use of reasonable force' guidance to inform their behaviour policies. Many of them were supplementing this with additional detail, tailored for use in that school.

Several said they liked that the DfE guidance was general enough that it could be tailored in this way and said that if the updated guidance was more specific it would undermine schools' ability to set and enact behaviour policies that best suited pupils at a given school.

Some school leaders and staff had some criticisms of the wording of the current guidance. A small number said they felt some of the situations in which it said schools could use reasonable force were not sufficiently problematic to warrant doing so.

A small number of school leaders and teachers said a requirement for at least some staff in alternative provision and special schools to attend training on the appropriate use of reasonable force should be added to the guidance.

Some school leaders felt the guidance should make it mandatory for schools to share details of incidents involving the use of reasonable force with parents, the local authority, the DfE or Ofsted.

There was some concern that future guidance might suggest schools should not use reasonable force, including physical restraint or restrictive practices at all, which one school said would likely have negative impacts for pupils.

Concerns about wording

During the interviews school leaders and staff were asked to reflect on the existing guidance available from DfE. Despite most schools appreciating its broad nature, there were some concerns about the wording in the guidance around the situations in which reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices would be acceptable.

A few school leaders reflected that the scenarios of using reasonable force to "remove disruptive children from the classroom where they have refused to follow an instruction to

do so” and to “prevent a pupil behaving in a way that disrupts a school event or a school trip” would not usually be seen as acceptable grounds for physical intervention within their schools, and were perhaps too broad.

One special school head teacher said pupils with severe learning difficulties were often disruptive and struggled to follow instructions, and he was concerned that the guidance could be used to justify frequent and unnecessary force.

One head of a trust felt the guidance regarding school events and trips sounded as though the focus was on protecting the reputation of the school rather than being in the best interests of the child, and should not usually be grounds for the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint or restrictive practices.

Another school had concerns that all the scenarios within the DfE guidance could be used to justify reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices in a wide number of unnecessary circumstances.

“If you look at the guidance from the DfE, you know, damage to property, you can put your hands on the child. In fact, pretty much you could justify any hold of a child through their very loose definitions of what the threshold is” – *Designated safeguarding lead, special school, Southeast England*

The schools that raised concerns about these scenarios suggested the guidance should make it clearer that de-escalation measures would always be the first port of call in these situations.

Concerns about omissions in the guidance and policy

A small number of the school leaders and teachers interviewed expressed concern that training around the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practice was not mandatory for schools. Currently the DfE guidance states: “Schools need to take their own decisions about staff training.”⁵

These school leaders and teachers suggested it be made compulsory for at least some staff in all alternative provision and special schools to attend training programmes that provide guidance around the appropriate use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices as well as de-escalation tactics.

“At the moment, training is not compulsory in schools. I think we've reached the time in schools where some kind of training should be

⁵ [DfE guidance on the use of reasonable force, 2013.](#)

given... That's important." – *Designated safeguarding lead, special school, East Midlands*

Some also felt it should be mandatory for schools to share details of incidents more widely, for example with parents/guardians, the local council, or with wider bodies such as DfE or Ofsted.

"I would challenge the existing [guidance]... because it says that it is up to schools to decide whether it is appropriate to report the use of force to parents...I think that when a physical intervention is used, parents should be informed." – *Headteacher, special school, Southeast England*

Reflections on potential changes to the DfE guidance

Most school leaders and teachers agreed that the DfE guidance had to be deliberately broad to accommodate a wide range of settings, pupil needs and situations in which reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices might have to be used.

"I think it's as bland as it needs to be, because it's policy, and it's never going to touch everything that needs to be touched." – *Head of safeguarding, special school, Southeast England*

Particularly because of the differences between types of settings and the needs of pupils, it was felt that overly specific guidance may inhibit the decisions staff were able to make around the best course of action for their pupils.

School leaders and teachers interviewed all felt that they and/or other members of their team had significant expertise in keeping their pupils safe and addressing their needs. A few were concerned that policy-makers may have a less detailed understanding of what was required in a special needs or alternative provision school and might therefore develop guidance which was difficult to adhere to or apply.

One school was concerned that future guidance might suggest schools should not use reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices at all. They felt this could lead to either dangerous situations for pupils, or schools having to exclude children who exhibit more aggressive or disruptive behaviours.

"We're very aware that there's political pressure around virtually outlawing holds in schools. To be clear, that would just lead to loads more exclusions because there are just youngsters you could not have in a school situation, in any collective community education if

you were not able to hold them.” – *Teacher and de-escalation/physical intervention trainer, special school, Southeast England*

3: Staff training in the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices

Key findings

All the schools in the research trained at least some of their staff in behaviour management. Training included the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices, but there was greater emphasis on managing behaviour and de-escalating incidents so restraint would not be needed.

All but one of the schools used an external training provider. Around half of them used the same one.

Most of the schools were positive about the focus of the training, although a minority felt it did not always reflect real-life situations.

The content and focus of the training often influenced a school's culture in relation to the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practice and the terminology they used to describe it, such as "supportive holding" and "positive handling".

Some schools trained all teaching staff who had contact with a child in the school, others trained only those teaching staff who were likely to be called upon if an incident occurred. Schools with a lot of temporary or agency staff had less control over what training they had received.

Several schools said they were struggling to afford to train all their staff. Some had paid for one or more members of their own staff to train to become accredited trainers with their chosen provider because they considered it more cost effective for them to train other teachers in the school.

Use of external training providers

Most schools that took part in the research used an external training provider to train their staff in the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices.

"I refuse to use internal training because there's that level of protection I have if we use an external company." – *Head of sixth form and behaviour lead, Alternative Provision, Southeast England*

Team Teach was by far the most commonly used external provider, with approximately half of the schools in the sample using it, and several more schools having used it in the past. Other providers and training models used included LeAFE, Norfolk Steps, RAID, CALM, PROACT-SCIPr, Dynamis, PRICE and CPI. One school had set up its own training programme which it was offering to other schools.

According to the schools' descriptions, the training models and providers had a number of similarities. The training usually comprised of an initial intensive course lasting a day or two, with shorter refresher sessions taking place annually.

“Each member of staff will be trained yearly, and they have yearly refreshers.” – *Teacher, special school, Southwest England*

“Our [name of provider] training happens annually... and any new staff will get the two-day course.” – *Deputy head, AP, Southwest England*

Training covered both de-escalation and specific physical restraint techniques, with most courses spending significantly more time on de-escalation than physical restraint.

The techniques taught varied from guiding the child using a light touch (for example, the ‘caring C’ where a cupped hand is used to hold the child, minimal pressure is applied and staff predominantly use their body to move with the child), to two teachers physically restraining a child (e.g. an under-arm hold, where staff lock their arm under the shoulder, hold onto the child and restrain them).

Several schools had invested in their own members of staff to complete a course to enable them to become a trainer with their chosen provider. These staff members could then train teachers within their own setting, and sometimes go to other settings to deliver training, too. This was often cited as a way to make the training cheaper in the long term, although the initial cost of the course to become a trainer was said to be high.

An emphasis on prevention and de-escalation

Much of the training in prevention focused on managing behaviour and de-escalating incidents before they get to the point where physical restraint is needed.

For example, almost all the schools in the sample that were using one particular training provider repeated that the provider focused 95 per cent of the training on de-escalation techniques and 5 per cent on physical holds.

Many of the schools were positive about this approach, although some were concerned that the training did not prepare staff for real-life situations, for example, when a pupil might overpower a teacher.

The wider influence of training providers

Training providers were influential, not only in communicating a practical understanding of safe and effective techniques for the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices, but also in shaping a school's behaviour management culture and expectations of when reasonable force should be used.

While all training providers emphasised de-escalation as the primary approach to behaviour management, the schools reported that they differed on other methods of behaviour management, including perceptions of what physical restraint was for and how to describe it.

Some training providers put a strong emphasis on using positive language, such as “supportive holding” or “positive handling”, rather than “physical restraint”.

Variations in the number and type of staff trained

All of the schools were training at least some of their staff in the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint or restrictive practices. Some of them provided training for all members of staff who had any contact with a child, while others only put forward members of staff for training if they were likely to be called upon if an incident occurred which could require reasonable force, including physical restraint or a restrictive practice.

“Not all our staff are trained because there are low numbers of physical interventions... but our staff are excellent at asking for help. If someone was in a situation where they really felt that a physical intervention was absolutely necessary and they weren't a person who was trained, [they would] very quickly and efficiently seek to pull support from staff who have training... They know within their departments who they can seek support from in that crisis situation.”
– *Designated safeguarding deputy, special school, Northeast England*

One school trained the majority of its staff in de-escalation techniques and “lower-level holds” with only a few staff members being trained in the more restrictive physical restraint practices. The head teacher said the school was committed to promoting the reduction of physical restraint and did not feel it was necessary for all its staff to be trained to physically restrain children.

A small number of the schools said that even though the majority of their staff were trained, some members of staff lacked confidence in using reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices. Because the need for it was so low, some staff had never seen or experienced it being used in practice.

A few of the schools said not all their staff were trained due to reasons beyond their control. For example, high staff turnover meant staff had joined who had to wait for training to be arranged. Others used a lot of temporary or agency staff and had less influence over what training they had received.

Barriers to accessing external training provision

Several schools in the sample cited expense as a barrier to training their staff. Many highlighted the expense of using an external training provider, and some schools were struggling to afford to train all their teaching staff. The cost of some training courses, or refresher training, led schools to switch to different training providers or deliver more training internally.

One school had invested in training from their chosen provider for two of their teaching staff to become accredited trainers within their school but were shocked by the requirement for and cost of refresher training for them to be able to continue doing this.

“Schools are on quite tight budgets. It was not affordable for us to go and retrain. And we were both a little bit shocked that we would need to retrain so soon after actually passing. We felt like our knowledge was quite embedded [...] I think they wanted something just over £1,000 each to do that [a two-day refresher course], and it was expensive.” – *Pastoral team member, special school, Southeast England*

A small number of the schools felt the training given by certain external providers was not always of a high enough standard or did not agree with the methods taught.

“There are lots of people who offer supportive holding around the UK, and there are some big players, but they’re franchises, so the training is not the same in each person’s experience, and there isn’t a time limit [in terms of when it gets refreshed].” – *Headteacher, special school, Southeast England*

This particular special school went on to develop its own training programme and now offers it to other schools.

4: Prevention and de-escalation measures

Key findings

Efforts to prevent and de-escalate behaviour that could otherwise lead to use of reasonable force, including physical restraint or restrictive practices were referred to by all the schools in the research.

Prevention tended to involve attempting to understand the context and history of pupils' behaviour and circumstances that might trigger disruptive behaviour and put plans in place to minimise these.

Many of the schools used individual behaviour or risk assessment plans for children who had been repeatedly disruptive or whose behaviour had prompted physical intervention in the past. Some schools had a behaviour plan for all pupils. Some behaviour plans included the most relevant or safest form of reasonable force, including physical restraint or restrictive practices.

De-escalation techniques varied according to the child's needs and the type of school. They included distraction, use of sensory rooms, encouraging pupils to go for a walk or get some fresh air, switching the member of staff working with the child and removing triggers to misbehaviour.

However, some schools said they did not believe it benefited their pupils overall to remove all triggers to misbehaviour as it did not help prepare the children for encountering similar triggers in their lives beyond school.

Preventative measures to manage the behaviour of pupils

All the schools in the research were trying to support pupils in various ways to prevent or avert behaviours that might lead to a need for reasonable force, including physical restraint or restrictive practices.

In addition to training in prevention and de-escalation techniques, all the schools were working to understand the children's needs, backgrounds and behavioural triggers, and put plans in place to avoid behaviour escalating.

Many of the schools were using behaviour support or risk assessment plans for children as a preventative measure. These were most commonly put in place for children with repeated negative or disruptive patterns of behaviour, or following an incident of physical

restraint. Some of the schools, typically those with high-needs pupils, created such plans for all children.

The plans usually included contextual and historical information about the child, for example their home-life and history, triggers for misbehaviour, behaviour which might indicate distress or dysregulation, and strategies to de-escalate a potentially problematic situation. In some cases, the plans included the safest form of reasonable force, including physical restraint or restrictive practice for that child, often agreed with a parent, carer or social worker.

“We’ve just had our staff training this week and it was all about getting to know your class... You read the EHCPs (education, health and care plans), you sit down with previous teachers and you learn about what their triggers are, the behaviour plans, individual risk assessments... There’s weeks and weeks of work that goes in before each September... Removing as much risk and lowering the percentage of someone going into crisis at that early stage.” –
Assistant head & pastoral behaviour lead, special school, Northwest England

Some of the schools were attempting to avoid using any form of reasonable force, including physical restraint or restrictive practices by removing identified triggers for disruptive or unsafe behaviour.

While not all the schools were actively removing potential triggers to disruptive behaviour, one school was going further – deliberately but gradually exposing its pupils to potentially triggering situations or stimuli so that they could become accustomed to them. Even if this meant occasionally needing to use reasonable force, including physical restraint or restrictive practices, the school felt it was important to help the children develop this experience so they could regulate their behaviour in less controlled environments (outside school).

“When we think they’re ready, we introduce stimulus to [their space] in the classroom so they start to get more used to it [...] Out there [in the world], they’re not going to be able to completely avoid it.” –
Headteacher, special school, Southeast England

De-escalation before physical intervention

As well as prevention, de-escalation formed a large part of the schools’ approaches. The schools employed a wide range of techniques, which varied depending on the type of school and the pupils’ needs. Techniques included: distraction (using physical distraction

tools as well as verbal), sensory rooms, encouraging the pupils to go for a walk or get fresh air, removing triggers, moving out of the classroom, and “changing face” so a different member of staff was working with the child.

For example, one special school had a longer-term goal to support the children to recognise and manage their own emotions, and this was at the centre of its behaviour policy. They use coloured “zones of regulation” to help children recognise how they were feeling and apply their own strategies when they felt themselves becoming dysregulated. These included using a fidget spinner, going for a walk, and leaving the classroom.

“We use zones of regulation – getting the child to recognise their own emotions... They choose their own strategies and what that looks like with support from us... We might have to start by prompting them, to say, ‘You look like you’re in the yellow zone, what’s your selected strategy there?’ And they will get a ‘strategy’ – that could be a fidget toy or ear defenders so they can continue to access the classroom, it might be to go for a walk. That’s all built into their every day and it’s about them taking ownership of that.” – *Assistant headteacher, special school, Southeast England*

One pupil referral unit (PRU) focused on relationship-building with children as a preventative and de-escalation strategy. Staff would speak to pupils first to try to calm them, but the school also had regulation rooms and other tools to help calm them if their behaviour continued to escalate.

“We talk to our children, and try to rationalise, relate and work through the situations... Really it’s about relationships and knowing your children... We’ve got regulation rooms now in each of our centres so we can set children away from a situation and put them into a small, quiet area with different types of lighting, fish, all kinds of stuff that just helps regulation a bit better.” – *Headteacher, alternative provision school, Northeast England*

While all the schools actively focused on de-escalation, most still envisaged having to use reasonable force, including physical restraint or restrictive practices in some scenarios and were prepared to do so. For example, one school had pupils with severe mental health needs, and reported needing to use physical restraint when a child was self-harming and de-escalation was not effective.

5: The use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices

Key findings

All the schools reported that they used reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices only when they felt it was necessary. This was typically when a child was causing or was at risk of causing physical harm to themselves or others and de-escalation techniques had not averted the behaviour. Staff said this kind of behaviour was often highest when the children were new to the school or starting a new academic year.

In cases where school staff felt a pupil was in immediate danger of harming themselves or someone else, staff sometimes intervened physically straightaway, including sometimes using physical restraint.

Fully restraining a child for more than a few seconds was rare among schools in the research, and some said they had never had to use the most restrictive holds they had been taught by their training provider.

After an incident involving the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices, most schools took steps to try to reduce the likelihood of it being required again with the same pupil by reviewing what had led to the incident and what could be learned or done differently.

Typical scenarios in which reasonable force, including physical restraint or restrictive practices was used

All the schools reported that they only used physical restraint when they felt it was absolutely necessary, typically when a child was causing, or at risk of causing, physical harm to themselves or others. Usually de-escalation techniques were tried first, with physical restraint being a last resort.

"It is always our starting point that we would never put our hands on a child unless they were going to be of harm to themselves or to somebody else. So, we just don't really do it, which some people find quite surprising within the setting that we are in." – *Headteacher, alternative provision school, Northeast England*

Staff noticed the number of incidents tended to peak at times of transition, for example at the start of the academic year or when pupils were new to the school.

"It would be if a child was putting themselves or somebody else at risk. For instance, if they hit themselves or bang their heads, attempt to abscond, or attack an adult... We tend to go through spells, like when children first arrive, and then it tends to die down quickly." –
Headteacher, alternative provision school, Northwest England

Many of the schools said there were rare occasions in which de-escalation strategies could not be tried first, particularly if the child was at immediate risk of harm. Examples given were if a child is about to run into traffic or is about to seriously injure themselves or another child. In one school, the most common situation in which physical restraint was used was when a child was self-harming. If their physical safety was felt to be at immediate risk, sometimes staff took the decision to intervene physically straight away.

Holds which fully restrained the child for more than a few seconds were reportedly rarely used by the schools in the sample, and some schools said they had never had to use them.

Steps taken after use of reasonable force, including physical restraint or restrictive practices

After an incident involving the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint or another restrictive practice, most of the schools reported speaking to the pupils and staff involved with the aim of learning lessons from the incident and reducing the likelihood of it happening again. Considerations for the schools after an incident included:

- Assessing if the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint or restrictive practices was the correct course of action;
- Reviewing what steps were taken by staff prior to the incident, and thinking about different or pre-emptive interventions that could have de-escalated the situation;
- Making a note of the triggers that led to that behaviour and sharing understanding of ways to avoid the situation in the future;
- Thinking about the “unmet need” of the child in that moment and what they were trying to communicate with their actions.

Talks with the pupil who had been restrained were sometimes referred to as 'restorative justice'⁶ by the schools spoken to. This was described as a process where staff would talk through with the child what they had done that meant they needed to be restrained, the impact their behaviour had on themselves and others, and discuss what had triggered their behaviour and think together about steps to avoid it happening again.

"Restorative justice is a really powerful tool we use... it is a way of getting pupils to understand why they did something and then how that had an impact on someone else. They think about what need they were trying to fulfil when they [were violent]" – *Head of sixth form and behaviour lead, alternative provision school, Southeast England*

⁶ Restorative justice in education focuses on repairing relationships and supporting the child to recognise the impact of their behaviour, often as an alternative to punishment. It is a practice which stems from the criminal justice system and is not a universally adopted approach in schools.

6: Recording of incidents of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices

Key findings

All schools in the research said they recorded what they judged to be use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practice. Most had invested in software to record cases and manage follow-up activity, though some were using paper records.

Some schools said they recorded all instances of physical contact, including gently 'guiding' a child by the arm, while others did not view this as use of reasonable force which needed to be recorded.

The information recorded varied from school to school. For incidents of restraint or more restrictive holds, it typically included details of the physical intervention (who, what, where, when). In some cases the events leading up to the incident and any other preventative measures that had been attempted were also recorded.

Many of the schools in the sample were reviewing their data to identify patterns, understand triggers and inform their behaviour management.

Methods of recording

All schools in the research said they recorded incidents of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices. It was common practice among the schools to record more data than was suggested in the DfE guidance, "Use of reasonable force".

Some had invested in software to record incidents and manage follow-up activity. CPOMS was one of the most widely used platforms to record incidents. Other platforms used by schools in the sample included Behaviour Watch, Arbor, EdWare and Sleuth.

Other schools were using their own reporting systems, some online but others on paper in "bound books".

"We created a bespoke incident management system. It can tell me almost anything I want to know... Each report goes through checks by many people, so by the end, it's a true reflection of the incident." –
Key stage head, special school, Northwest England

The information recorded varied between the schools but typically included what had happened in the lead-up to the incident, de-escalation measures attempted, the behaviour of the child, the hold used, who had done the holding, how long it lasted, who was present, and what action was taken afterwards. Often witness statements were taken from other members of staff and sometimes other pupils.

The types of incidents recorded

While all the schools were recording instances of physical restraint, they had different thresholds for what was recorded. Some schools recorded only incidents in which the most serious restrictive holds were used, but did not record instances of 'guiding' (where a child is gently guided by the arm to move in a different direction). Others said they recorded all instances of physical touching.

"We record everything here, you know, we record any 'hands on', which is fine. But if you're in a setting where maybe PI [physical intervention] is used more often, and that might be in a very legitimate way, you might be working in a setting where people have really significant severe mental health difficulties, you might need to use it a lot more. And you can't then record every time you put hands on, for example, because you'd spend just as much time writing things down as doing the practice you need to do." – *Deputy headteacher, special school, Southwest England*

In at least one of the schools there appeared to be some confusion or disparity over what was recorded. The headteacher of a special school said all instances of physical touch were recorded, but another member of staff said they were not recording occasions when pupils had been physically guided.

Schools also differed in the amount and nature of contextual data recorded about an incident. Some recorded information as detailed as the temperature at the time of the incident to enable this to be factored into plans to prevent or mitigate future incidents.

How recorded data was used

Many schools reviewed the data they recorded to identify patterns in the use of physical restraint, for example, the behaviours leading up to an incident, the time of day, or who was involved. Schools used this to understand more about triggers, which informed their de-escalation and behaviour management techniques.

One special school said the recording software it used allowed incidents to be tagged easily, which made it easy to review and identify patterns. For example, staff were able to

collate information about a pupil who was exhibiting behaviours they suspected might be signs of ADHD (Attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder) and engage the parents/guardians and school nurses to support a diagnosis and put support plans in place.

“You can tag different types of behaviour incident...It's really clear to break down what has happened, the number of instances, and the type of intervention. It gives us a really clear picture of what's happening, and we can notice patterns of when a behaviour is happening.” – *Headteacher, primary special school, Southwest England*

7: Reporting incidents of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices

Key findings

What, how and to whom incidents of reasonable force were reported varied across the schools in the research, as did the language used by schools to describe what had happened.

Most of the schools' leaders said they reported incidents involving restraint or restrictive practices to parents/guardians on the same day.

Many schools shared data on incidents of reasonable force, restraint and restrictive practice with governors, the trust they belonged to or their local authority. Most of them said they had to share the data with Ofsted and all of them said they were happy to do so.

When asked, most agreed that in principle they would be happy to share this data with the DfE. However, they were wary of sharing data without assurances that the context around the data would be understood. Some were concerned that the data could be misrepresented, particularly given differences between school settings, the profile of their pupils and the variation in what, how and with what terminology incidents were recorded.

External reporting of data

Across the sample, the schools were reporting the data they had recorded in different ways and to different audiences.

Once recorded, most of the schools shared incident reports with parents/guardians or guardians on the same day. Many said this was part of an effort to promote transparency around the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices, as well as providing parents/guardians with important information about the child's behaviour and emotions that day, which could help with behaviour management at home.

“We would expect that after every physical intervention that there was a conversation had with parents about it, at least informing them, but also having that conversation about what had happened in that incident because they're our partners in this and we'd usually want

some sort of response and conversation about it.” – *Deputy head, alternative provision, Southwest England*

Some schools also shared data they had collected with their governing boards or trusts.

“We report to governors the number of physical interventions that have been used. Over the course of this year, there were 168, of which 95 per cent were escorts⁷ - so more proactive.” – *Headteacher, special school, Southeast England*

A small number of the schools shared their data with local authorities. Most schools also said they had to share this data with Ofsted during inspections and were happy to do so.

Reflections on reporting standardised data

Asked how they would feel if they were required to report data on the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices to the DfE, most of the school leaders agreed that, in principle, they would be happy to do so. A few felt it should already be mandatory for schools to record and report data externally.

However, some of the schools were wary of sharing data with the DfE without assurances that the context surrounding incidents could be supplied and taken into account. These schools were concerned that without context, the data could be misunderstood or misrepresented and inaccurate conclusions or comparisons may be drawn. They cited two primary reasons for these concerns:

- The variation in approaches to recording data – some schools were recording all incidents of physical touch, while others were only recording more serious incidents.
- The differences in the need for use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices across schools – there were schools within the sample that catered for pupils with severe learning difficulties and significant SEMH needs. Some staff at these schools felt physical intervention may be required more often than in other schools.

“I would be sceptical about that [reporting data to the DfE]. If I just sent a document that says 115 children have been handled, and you look at the other special school down the road who have only handled six children, suddenly my school looks really bad. When, in

⁷ The word ‘escorts’ here refers to guiding the pupil, for example into or out of a room, rather than physically restraining them. A guide can take the form of the staff member placing a hand on the pupil’s arm.

reality, it's about why have you been handled and what is being done to prevent it." – *Head of safeguarding, special school, Northwest England*

Annex 1: Case studies

CASE STUDY 1 – Special school, Southeast England

- Primary special school.
- Fewer than 50 pupils.
- Caters for children with a range of conditions and needs, including autism, ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), and PDA (pathological demand avoidance). Several of the pupils are looked after children.
- Children with the most complex needs are taught separately from other pupils. Many of the pupils have had adverse childhood experiences.

The school's headteacher put considerable emphasis on equipping the pupils for their life beyond school. This was a fundamental aspect of the school culture, informing its ethos, policies and priorities.

The headteacher said that as well as “providing the right level of support, the right level of medical intervention, the right level of pastoral care,” he also prioritised “what’s going to happen to you when you leave”, including a focus on academic results. When he joined the school several years ago, he had reintroduced the expectation that the pupils would sit “SATs” (key stage 2 national curriculum tests), despite not being legally required to do so.

This ethos was also reflected in the school's behaviour policy and its approach to staffing.

“We do not work under the principle that by putting a body in we will fix the problem. It's about the relationships.”

It was also embedded in its policies and practice on the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices, as well as the way staff approached prevention of misbehaviour and de-escalation.

For example, the headteacher described how many of the pupils can find too much classroom stimulus – pictures on the walls, bright colours, etc – overwhelming, making it more likely they will “act up” and require behavioural management and de-escalation. Rather than removing all stimulus from their environment to reduce the likelihood of needing to use de-escalation techniques, they introduce stimulus gradually, managing it so that children become more accustomed to exposure to stimulus over time.

“We introduce stimulus to [their space] in the classroom so they start to get more used to it...Out there [in the world], they’re not going to be able to completely avoid it.”

When intervention is needed, whether de-escalation or reasonable force, the school applies its behavioural policy which includes an approach to reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices that the school leadership developed themselves, licensed under a CPD (Continuing Professional Development) accreditation service.

The headteacher said the school avoids the language of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices.

“The words are really quite inflammatory. Anything with the words ‘restraint’ or ‘restrictive’ are a real trigger for parents... They’re police-based, criminal words. Instead, the school’s policy uses the language of ‘support’. Physical holds are referred to as ‘supportive holding’ “.

Key elements of the school’s policy on holding include:

- Never work against the body, always work with the body (i.e. they always move body parts in the direction they would naturally move rather than bending limbs or fingers away from the joint).
- Never put arms across the child’s chest area.
- Never physically restrain a child by putting arms around them – e.g. restricting all their arm movement.
- No touching of knees or ankles.

Any instance of supportive holding used on children has to be recorded in a bound book (handwritten). All instances are also logged electronically. In addition, each pupil is categorised 1 – 4 on a behavioural spectrum after each lesson. A 1 denotes behaviour that was good and exceeded expectations; a 4 denotes they had to be ‘held’. At the end of each day, the staff have a debrief and discuss the children’s behavioural scores. This is an opportunity to discuss what could be done differently, and if there were any ways to avoid a physical hold happening next time.

The school reports data about all instances of physical holding to its governing body, to an accredited training provider, and to the local authority. However, “the local authority don’t want it, they don’t know what to do with it,” said the headteacher. When reporting, they provide information about:

- How many children have been held.

- For how long.
- What type of hold.
- The rationale for the hold.
- The outcome (i.e. what is done as a result of the hold happening).

CASE STUDY 2 – Special school, Northeast England

- Special school – primary and secondary.
- 100-130 pupils (40-60 in primary).
- Supports children with SEND (special educational needs and disabilities), including severe autism, physical and cognitive disabilities. Many of the children in the school have difficulty communicating and expressing themselves.

The school's approach to behaviour management is underpinned by a culture of de-escalation, in which reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practices are used only in exceptional circumstances. This ethos, according to the headteacher, is diligently practised by all staff.

An established stage-based approach to intervention, beginning with an "anxiety" phase, moving to a "defensive" phase if needed and a "crisis" phase when required, helps staff intervene before a child's behaviour escalates. Staff understand that reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practice should be avoided at all stages unless a child was causing harm to themselves, others, or property.

A significant portion of the pupils – approximately 40 per cent – have personalised behaviour plans. These plans outline specific triggers, early warning signs of crisis, de-escalation strategies and post-crisis resolution strategies for those pupils.

According to staff at the school, there is a lot of verbal communication between staff about small incidents in an effort to spot emerging patterns in individual children's behaviour. The school also maintains a robust system for recording and reporting behavioural incidents. This data serves as the foundation for identifying trends and crafting appropriate interventions.

The two primary tools used are:

- A "tick sheet", used to document non-harmful disruptive behaviours, which offers insights into the frequency and nature of such incidents;
- A digital system which records incidents involving potential harm to self, others, or property. This system captures vital information, including the child involved, the time and location of the incident, and even the temperature at the time, which was noticed to influence some behavioural incidents.

The data stored in the digital system is exported and manually analysed in excel by the head of behaviour to identify what might cause "spikes" in children's behaviour and make plans to deal with it. For example, the headteacher cited a series of behavioural problems during the same lesson. She realised that the children tend to "dysregulate more easily after a transition from transport [e.g. local buses] into lessons." To tackle this, all classes

now do some “sensory circuits” [calming exercises and ‘mindfulness’] in their classrooms before lessons start to get them “ready to learn”.

CASE STUDY 3 – Special school, Southeast England

- Special school, primary and secondary, co-operative academy.
- 100-130 pupils, including 10-20 boarders.
- Supports a diverse range of pupils with conditions such as autism, ADHD (attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder), and PDA (pathological demand avoidance).

Under new senior leadership, with a new provider of training in behaviour management, which includes guidance from a consultant focusing on positive behaviour management, this school had embarked on an initiative centred on creating “enabling environments” throughout the school where pupils feel “safe and ready to learn”. The school’s leadership emphasised the importance of fostering an environment conducive to learning.

The school aimed to remove anything which poses an increased risk of behaviour that could cause harm and might therefore require physical restraint or other restrictive practices, or which had led to an incident in the past.

“It’s about an enabling environment. When I started a year ago, we had two or three calls a week to the dining hall with chairs being thrown. You walk in there and see the chairs are light enough to be picked up... so we spent £20,000 on new chairs and tables which can’t be lifted up. We haven’t had one incident since.”

The school’s leadership was firmly against the use of restrictive physical interventions (RPIs) except in emergency situations. Staff prioritised planned interventions, and said they maintain a low, calm tone of voice to effectively de-escalate situations. This approach aligns with their broader mission of creating “enabling environments”.

However, the school acknowledged that it is not always possible to remove or prevent behaviour that may cause harm. One example was a pupil who had repeatedly picked up stones and thrown them at staff, cars or windows. “I can’t take all the stones out of the environment”, the headteacher said, saying as a result the child is not allowed to go outside without a member of staff. “You could argue that this is ‘restriction’”, and that having a member of staff “attached to a child’s hip is a deprivation of liberty, but we have to do that because the environment doesn’t allow us to let him out on his own.”

The school’s 100+ permanent staff members received training in behaviour management from the school’s previous provider, supplemented by training from the new provider on inset days. The new provider’s approach emphasised understanding that all behaviour is communicating a need and focuses on creating customised strategies for managing

pupils' behaviour. The school noted that senior leadership had received the most extensive training, as they would be the first responders in a planned intervention. The 15 to 20 agency staff that the school had on site at any one time posed a challenge, as they were often coming to the role with little experience or prior training in exercising reasonable force, restraint and restrictive practices. As agency staff turnover was high at the site, the school struggled to ensure all staff had received the positive behaviour management training.

A digital system for recording and reviewing incidents was overseen by the dedicated safeguarding lead, who identified patterns and managed follow-up activity. The school has made a concerted decision to use more specific language to record incidents than it used to. For instance, where previously the record might have been, "Mr X put his hands on Y", now it would include exactly what hold had been used and where on the body the staff member had touched the pupil.

Certain actions that would not previously have been recorded as the use of reasonable force, including physical restraint or restrictive practices, now were being. For example, not allowing a pupil outside on their own was recorded as a potential deprivation of liberty. As a result, the number of recorded incidents had increased in recent months.

CASE STUDY 4 – Pupil Referral Unit

- PRU - Local authority maintained, attached to a child and adolescent mental health services (CAHMS) unit that has 5-15 inpatients and up to 5 patients on a “day bed” with a reduced timetable.
- Pupils aged 13-19 years.
- Up to 5 pupils per class with a high turnover as patients and inpatients in the unit change.
- Pupils have a range of needs, including SEND. All pupils are on education, health and care plans.

The school’s physical infrastructure was limited, comprising a small number of classrooms, a sensory room, kitchen, a small outdoor seating area, and a playroom. According to the SENCO (special educational needs co-ordinator), this limited space necessitated a vigilant approach to pupil supervision. Classroom doors remain open, and pupils are not allowed to be in rooms alone. The teachers appeared to be hyper-aware of pupils’ whereabouts.

There were times when pupils had to be unsupervised, such as when they need the toilet, which presented more of a risk. There was a two-minute rule for pupils using toilets, after which teachers go in (after announcing “I’m going to come in now, are you okay?”). If the pupil doesn’t come out at that point, the teacher goes in but facing away from the toilet. This example is demonstrative of a highly vigilant culture among staff.

There was also a constant attempt to create an ideal “learning atmosphere” for pupils, which includes playing music in the background, which the pupils could help select.

Security in the inpatient unit was high. Doors were closed quickly after passing through and most had key or code locks. There were signs on doors that read, “Check behind you”.

When it came to use of reasonable force, including physical restraint and restrictive practice, prevention was the primary goal, and the use of physical restraint was rare, with only three incidents in the past year and a half. Physical restraint was employed when pupils posed harm to themselves or others, or if they attempted to abscond. One common form of self-harm observed was headbanging against walls, which teachers aimed to prevent through behavioural interventions and a deep understanding of pupil needs. However, in these instances, physical restraint was often the only option to prevent a child causing harm to themselves.

All school staff, except one, had completed training provided by a widely used training provider. The recent expansion of training was necessitated by a situation where only the headteacher was trained, and staff were unable to intervene during an incident. The school aimed to ensure all staff are trained, but cost and staff availability are challenges.

Hospital staff are trained in RAID (Risk, Action, Insight, Debrief), which focuses on pre-empting incidents and de-escalation. The training is extensive and expensive, which makes it less practical for a small school. Each pupil had a personalised risk assessment and de-escalation plan. Sensory rooms and grounding techniques were commonly employed, depending on the individual's needs.

There was constant communication through a WhatsApp group, which helped staff coordinate and ensure pupil safety. According to the SENCO and head of pastoral care, communication within the school was open and collaborative, with regular meetings and a "feel-good Friday" tradition to celebrate pupils' achievements. A SENCO had daily handover meetings with the hospital and attends community meetings.

All incidents were recorded on a software system. Following an incident of physical restraint, a "restorative approach" was employed, involving pupils and staff in post-incident discussions. Parents/guardians were always notified, and the headteacher met with parents/guardians on the day the incident had occurred. CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) workers were also informed to collaborate on de-escalation strategies and support. Once a term, an incident report was shared with the committee of governors.



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