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UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST of SCOTLAND

UWS

Understanding violent and aggressive behaviour in schools and Early Learning and Childcare settings in Scotland

October 2026

Acknowledgements

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Introduction and research design

This study was commissioned by the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) and conducted by a research team at the University of the West of Scotland (UWS) between November 2025 and September 2026. It draws on the experiences of children and young people aged 3-18 in schools and Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) settings, and the perspectives of the practitioners, allied professionals, and parents and caregivers who support them.

The *Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research* (2023) documented a significant escalation in violence and aggression within 3-18 education settings, prompting the Scottish Government to develop a national action plan for the period 2024-2027 and to publish revised guidance on consequences and risk assessment for violent, aggressive and dangerous behaviour in June 2025.[1] Policy deliberation takes place within a framework that emphasises inclusive, relational and rights-based practice, expressed in *Curriculum for Excellence, Getting It Right for Every Child* (GIRFEC, 2008), and the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024*. From this perspective, challenging behaviour is understood as the communication of distress or unmet need, and children's wellbeing depends on early, consistent intervention and a coherent professional response sustained over time.

Schools and ELC settings are workplaces as well as learning communities. In line with the Health and Safety Executive, the EIS defines violence and aggression as 'any incident in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work', encompassing verbal, written, gestural and physical acts, whether directed at objects, peers or members of staff.[2] The capacity to respond with care and consistency to children in distress and to de-escalate and prevent serious conduct issues depends, in turn, on the conditions in which practitioners work. Research consistently links staff wellbeing to the quality and sustainability of relational practice in schools.[3]

> *'No child or young person, parent or carer, or member of staff should go to school, or their place of work, and be subject to violence or abuse... If we are to create the safe and consistent environments in our schools that will enable everyone to thrive, there needs to be a strengthening of relationships across our whole school community' Scottish Government/COSLA (2024: 2)*

In this study, challenging behaviour, including violence and aggression, is understood as produced by the interaction of layered conditions: child and family circumstances, the immediate setting, the wider social environment, and the policy and system architecture within which schools and ELC settings operate (Figure 1). The contributing factors are multiple and

[1] Scottish Government (2023) Behaviour in Scottish Schools 2023. https://www.gov.scot/publications/behaviour-scottish-schools-research-report-2023/documents/ . Scottish Government/COSLA (2024) Improving Relationships and Behaviour in Schools Join Action Plan 2024-27. https://www.gov.scot/publications/national-action-plan-relationships-behaviour-schools-2024-2027/. Scottish Government (2025) Risk Assessments for Violent, Aggressive and Dangerous Behaviour Guidance for local authorities and educational settings. https://www.gov.scot/publications/risk-assessment-guidance-violent-aggressive-dangerous-behaviour-local-authorities-educational-settings/documents/

[2] EIS (2023) Violence & Aggression Branch Survey Report and Campaigning Recommendations: Full Report. https://www.eis.org.uk/Content/images/Campaigns/QualityEducation/ViolenceAggressionSurveyReport.pdf

[3] Longmuir, F. & McKay, A. (2024) Teachers' workload strain: considering the density as well as the quantity of teachers work. *Curriculum Perspectives* 44, 561–565 https://doi.org/10.1007/s41297-024-00279-2 Scottish Division of Educational Psychology (2025). Supporting Staff Wellbeing – whose responsibility? A think piece by the Scottish Division of Educational Psychology. British Psychological Society. DfE (2020) School and college staff wellbeing: evidence from England, the UK and comparable sectors. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-and-college-staff-wellbeing-report

interact in complex ways. They include socio-economic deprivation, child and adolescent mental health difficulties, adverse childhood experiences, family environment, and exposure to online communities and social media as contexts for abusive and bullying behaviour. Rising identification of neurodivergence, which reflects greater awareness and shifting diagnostic norms, raises fundamental questions about how well settings are equipped to accommodate the full range of cognitive diversity and to move towards neuroinclusive practice. [4] Access to specialist and targeted support, particularly for additional support needs, is variable and under significant strain, leaving practitioners to navigate enduring needs, including communication difficulties, emotional dysregulation, and developmental delay, often without consistent multi-agency support. [5]

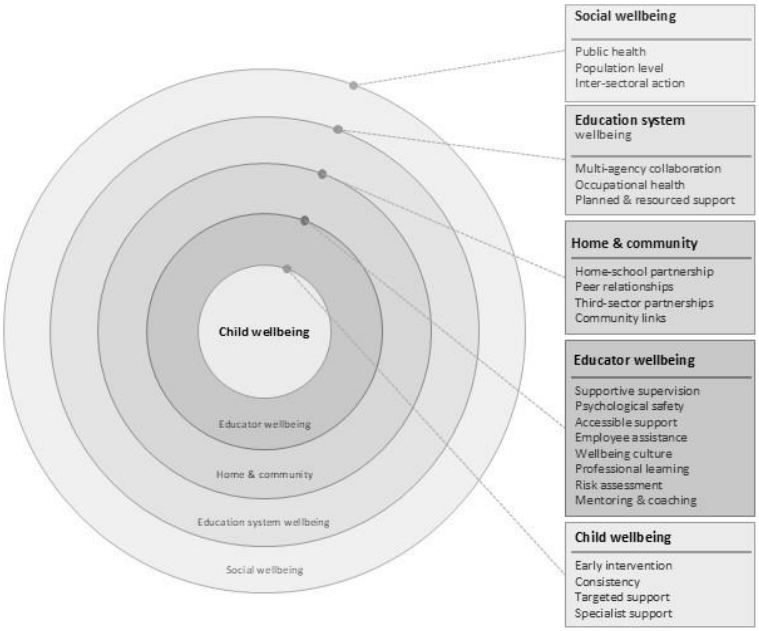


Figure 1. An ecological and relational approach to system health

These conditions carry serious consequences for children and young people and for the adults who work with them. Young people displaying violent or aggressive behaviour are disproportionately at risk of exclusion, including placement in alternative provision, and of reduced educational outcomes. [6] Teachers contending with persistently high levels of dysregulation and purposeful misbehaviour report workload intensification, elevated stress, declining job satisfaction, burnout, and increased intentions to leave the profession. [7] The

[4] Lang, J., Wood, R., Inchley, J., Haughton, D., Turner, F., Gajwani, R., Minnis, H. and Press, M. (2026). More than inclusion: reimagining secondary education through neurodiversity-affirming practice. *London Review of Education*, 24(1), 6. DOI: https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.24.1.06. Rajotte, E., Grandisson, M., Couture, M. M., Desmarais, C., Chrétien-Vincent, M., Godin, J., & Thomas, N. (2025). A Neuroinclusive School Model: Focus on the School, Not on the Child. *Journal of Occupational Therapy, Schools, & Early Intervention*, *18*(2), 281–299. https://doi.org/10.1080/19411243.2024.2341643

[5] McManus, J. (2026) Additional Support for Learning: A Review of System Delivery for Learners. https://www.gov.scot/publications/additional-support-learning-review/ . Audit Scotland (2025) Briefing: Additional Support for Learning. https://audit.scot/uploads/202502/briefing_250227_additional_support_for_learning.pdf Smith, M. N., & Douglas, R. R. (2024). The Role of School-Based Occupational Therapy Practitioners in Providing Tier 1 Services to Enhance Sensory Processing and Self-Regulation Strategies Within the Classroom. *Journal of Occupational Therapy, Schools, & Early Intervention*, *17*(1), 26–36. https://doi.org/10.1080/19411243.2022.2129904. ADES/RCSLT/COSLA/SDAHP (2025) Transforming support for children and young people with communication needs in Scotland: A partnership approach. https://www.rcslt.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Transforming-support-for-CYP-in-Scotland-Report-August-2025.pdf

[6] Taylor, A., & McCluskey, G. (2024). 'Alternative' education provision: a mapping and critique. *Oxford Review of Education*, *50*(6), 798–816. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2024.2373067

[7] Hulme, M., Beauchamp, G., Wood, J., & Bignell, C. (2024). *Teacher Workload Research Report 2024*. https://www.eis.org.uk/Content/images/Campaigns/QualityEducation/WorkloadResearch.pdf Hulme, M., Wood, J., Bignell,

wellbeing of children and the occupational wellbeing of the education workforce are not separate concerns. They are structurally interconnected, and sustaining both requires a deeper understanding of what drives particularly challenging behaviour, how it is experienced across learning communities, and what conditions enable effective and sustainable responses.

'As practitioner wellbeing declines, this likely impacts on practitioners' ability to develop, model and maintain supportive relationships with children and young people' Scottish Division of Educational Psychology (2025:1)

Research Questions

The research was guided by the following questions:

RQ1. What are the lived experiences of education staff in managing violence and aggression, and what support mechanisms are most effective in protecting staff wellbeing and safety?

RQ2. How do children and young people experience and perceive violence and aggression in their educational settings, and what environmental or relational factors contribute to their sense of safety?

RQ3. What are parents' and caregivers' perceptions of, and concerns about, behaviour and safety in educational settings?

RQ4. What approaches, interventions, and practices do multi-stakeholder groups identify as most promising for preventing and responding to violence and aggression in educational settings?

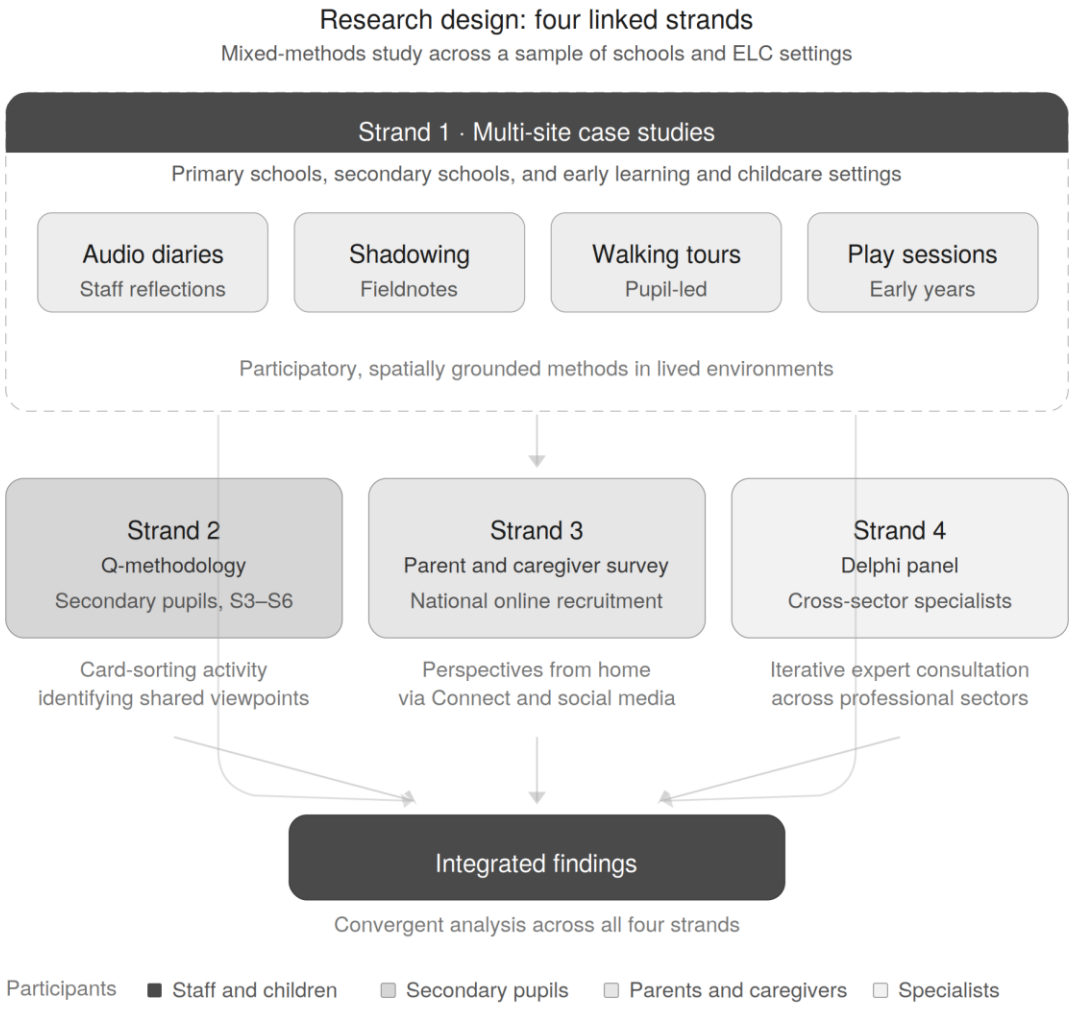
Research design

Understanding the causes of violent and aggressive behaviour in educational settings is a complex challenge that no single method or source of evidence can fully capture. This study therefore adopted a mixed-methods design, combining multiple approaches to data collection and analysis so that findings draw on different kinds of evidence – from the education workforce, from expert professional judgement, and from the voices of children and young people themselves, and their parents and caregivers. The findings are strengthened by the points of convergence across those different sources.

The research was structured around four linked strands (Figure 2). The first comprised **multi-site case studies** spanning primary schools, secondary schools, and Early Learning and Childcare. Sites were selected purposively to reflect setting type, size, geographic spread – including urban and rural communities – and variation in socio-economic context (see Technical Annex A for sample composition). Importantly, no school or setting was selected because it had identified difficulties with behaviour; selection was based on diversity of context.

C., & Beauchamp, G. (2025). Pressure management: factors influencing the turnover intentions of school middle leaders in Scotland. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*. https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432251357691. Hulme, M., Beauchamp, G., Wood, J., & Bignell, C. (2025). Workload intensification and wellbeing among primary school teachers in Scotland. *Education 3-13*, Article 2448509. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2024.2448509

Figure 2: Overview of the research design



Within each case study site, several complementary methods were used. Staff members kept short **audio diaries** over the course of their working week, using a secure mobile app, reflecting on their day-to-day experiences of managing behaviour. A researcher spent one day **shadowing** a teacher, pastoral/ guidance staff member or ELC practitioners, recording observations in fieldnotes. Pupils guided researchers on **walking interviews** – tours of their own school environment in which they identified spaces that felt safe or less safe and explained why. In ELC settings, researchers observed **play sessions** co-designed with practitioners to be developmentally appropriate. These methods were chosen because they are participatory and grounded in the lived environment, capturing the relational and spatial dimensions of behaviour that formal interviews and surveys often miss.

The second strand was a **Q-methodology** card-sorting activity with secondary pupils in years S3 to S6 (ages 14-17). Q-methodology is an established technique for identifying shared patterns in how people think about a topic. Participants sorted a set of statements about behaviour, safety, and school life into a structured grid ranging from strongest agreement to strongest disagreement. Statistical analysis of these sorting patterns reveals distinct viewpoints without requiring participants to articulate them through open-ended discussion, making it well suited to school age research participants.

The third strand was a **parent and caregiver online survey**, distributed through Connect (the Scottish Parent Teacher Council), a national charity whose members include Parent Councils and parent groups across Scotland. This strand was designed to capture perspectives from home rather than school and was not linked to any individual case study setting.

The fourth strand was a **modified Delphi** study: a structured way of drawing on expert judgement through online questionnaire rounds. In the first round, panellists were asked open-ended questions about what they saw as the most important contributors to challenging behaviour - in the child's own life and family, the wider policy and community context, and in schools and ELC settings themselves - and what, in their experience, works to prevent and respond to it. A second round returned the resulting statements to the panel, asking panellists to rate how important they judged each one to be and to identify their top priorities for change.

Together, these strands were designed to generate breadth and depth simultaneously. The case studies provide detailed, contextualised insight into how behaviour is experienced by the people most directly affected, while the parent and caregiver survey and expert panel extend the reach of the study to perspectives beyond individual settings.

A note on terminology: Throughout this report, particularly challenging behaviour includes aggression and refers to behaviour that causes, or risks causing, harm to the child themselves, to peers, or to staff, and which requires adult intervention. This includes verbal, physical, and cyber-aggression directed towards education staff, and peer aggression among children and young people.

Scope of the evidence

This study draws on evidence gathered between March and September 2026 (Table 1). The evidence base generated within that window is substantial, but it is also specific. The account offered here is grounded in how behaviour was understood, experienced and responded to at a particular moment, by particular groups, in particular places.

The case study settings, while deliberately diverse, were selected through purposive rather than random sampling, and schools/ELCs that agreed to participate may differ in important ways from those that did not. The findings are therefore best understood as offering rich, contextualised understanding rather than statistical representativeness. The practitioner audio diaries provide contextualised accounts from within single settings and no claim is made to sectoral prevalence. Similarly, pupil walking interviews offer illustrative experiential accounts but cannot be generalised. Q-methodology reveals distinct, internally coherent viewpoints held by young people in the senior phase; it does not measure how widely each viewpoint is held across the wider pupil population. The parent and caregiver survey reached a constituency of parents sufficiently engaged with their children's education to respond to a national network's invitation. The Delphi panel captures structured expert judgement across four specialist fields and surfaces areas of agreement among professionals who work closely with these issues, rather than the full distribution of opinion within any one field.

The study was also conducted at a moment of active change in Scottish policy and practice on behaviour and wellbeing, and some of the contextual factors identified by participants are themselves in motion. Where findings converge across methods, settings and participant groups, they are reported with corresponding confidence.

Table 1. Research design at a glance

	Research question	Data sources	Evidence gathered
	**RQ1 Staff experience** *Lived experiences of education staff in managing challenging behaviour, and the support mechanisms that protect staff wellbeing and safety.*	— Practitioner audio diaries — Staff shadowing and observation	— Case study settings: 7 inc. ELC 3, Prim 1 Sec 3 *(West Central, Eastern, Southern Scotland).* — Case study audio diary participants: 11 — Case study Shadowing days: 7 — Supplementary primary sample: primary teacher diaries: 6[8]
	**RQ2 Children and young people** *How children and young people experience and perceive challenging behaviour in their educational settings, and the environmental and relational factors that shape their sense of safety.*	— Walking interviews (primary) — Walking interviews (secondary) — Q-methodology card sort (S3–S6) — Observed play sessions (ELC)	— Primary walking interviews: 6 pupils — Secondary walking interviews: 22 pupils — Q-sort participants: 32 (3 schools) — ELC play sessions observed: 3 x 2
	**RQ3 Parents and caregivers** *What are parents' and caregivers' perceptions of, and concerns about, behaviour and safety in educational settings*?	— Online parent and caregiver survey — Distributed via Connect and parent social media groups	— Completed responses: 152 across 23 local authorities — Children represented (aged 3-18): 267, including ELC 35, Primary 138, Secondary 93
	**RQ4 Promising approaches** *The approaches, interventions and practices that multi-stakeholder groups identify as most promising for preventing and responding to challenging behaviour in educational settings.*	— Two-round modified e-Delphi study — Four professional panels: therapeutic and developmental support; child welfare and safeguarding; senior educational leadership; academic and research expertise	— Round 1 panellists: 24 — Round 2 panellists: 21 — Statements taken forward to R2: 26

[8] Note: Six additional audio diaries were collected to strengthen representation of the primary sector following the withdrawal of two primary case study schools. These participants were recruited independently of the case study settings and did not take part in shadowing.

Structure of the Report

The report is structured in 7 sections. Section 1 presents the findings from the audio diaries completed by school and ELC staff within case study sites, together with six supplementary diaries from primary teachers recruited to strengthen representation of the primary sector. Section 2 presents the findings from the walking interviews with secondary and primary pupils. Section 3 details key messages from observation of focused play sessions undertaken in the participating Early Learning and Childcare settings. Section 4 reports the Q-methodology study and findings, followed by the parent and caregiver survey in Section 5 and the modified e-Delphi study in Section 6. Section 7 presents conclusions and implications. The Technical Annex provides information on sample characteristics, recruitment, and the statistical analysis underpinning the Q-methodology and modified e-Delphi.

Practitioner perspectives: staff diaries

Key insights

- **Transitions, unstructured time and changes in the adults present recurred as triggers across settings.** Primary diarists also identified crowding and shared open-plan space as pressures.
- **A small number of children and young people generated a disproportionate share of recorded incidents**, with the same individuals reappearing across entries in every sector.
- **In the primary diaries, the most serious incidents involved physical aggression by children in P1 and P2, directed at adults as well as at other children.** Three accounts record injuries to staff that required medical attention, and support staff were described as carrying a large share of the physical risk.
- **Practitioners in all sectors drew on skilled preventive, individualised and relational approaches.** These depended on adult time and staffing continuity that the settings could not consistently sustain.
- **The support reported as making a difference was largely immediate and team-based**, namely a prompt management response when help was called, a trusted colleague working alongside, protected time and a plan agreed with the family. Systemic supports were less dependable, including follow-up after injury, current training in physical intervention, specialist placements and sufficient adults in class.
- **The emotional demands on practitioners were considerable and variably supported.** Accounts ranged from equanimity to guilt toward the rest of the class, sustained vigilance, fear of injury and fear of the professional consequences of intervening.

This section presents findings from a thematic analysis of audio diaries completed by 17 practitioners - 4 in Early Learning and Childcare (ELC), 9 in primary and 4 in secondary - across 11 settings spanning the 3-18 age range covered by the study. The diaries were collected through two routes. Eleven diarists were recruited within the case study settings.[9] A further six primary diarists were recruited after the main fieldwork to strengthen the primary evidence base.[10]

The sample is small, purposive and information rich. It supports description of what a group of experienced practitioners noticed, prioritised and articulated about their working week, but does not support cross-sector comparison or generalisation to sectoral practice. The diary entries themselves differ in form and focus, ranging from retrospective catalogues of discrete incidents to close-grained narratives tracking a single child through the day, alongside accounts that combine attention to individual children with broader reflections on staffing and team practice. These differences shape what each diary can reveal, and the analysis therefore treats the diaries as distinct lenses on practitioner experience rather than as directly comparable accounts.[11]

The section is organised around the two parts of RQ1 (p.5). The first reports staff experiences of managing challenging behaviour. The second reports the support mechanisms that diarists

[9] One of the case study primary settings is the primary phase of an all-through school whose secondary phase hosted a full case study. The primary phase did not participate in the wider case study activities but contributed to the audio diary strand.

[10] The six additional primary teachers self-referred in response to a flyer circulated by the EIS to primary members in six local associations in August 2026. Registrations were screened against eligibility criteria (a publicly funded primary school with a roll of 150 or more and recorded additional support need at or above the national primary median). All eligible registrants who completed the recording week are included. Diaries were completed using the same protocol as case study participants. Self-referral may mean that the additional primary diarists include staff with particularly serious recent experiences to report, and their accounts of severity should be read with this in mind.

[11] Diary prompts explicitly invited practitioners to record effective strategies alongside challenging incidents. The balance of content across individual diaries therefore reflects each practitioner's selection within that invitation, and should not be read as an indication that (for example) secondary settings are more incident-focused or ELC settings more preventive than the diaries alone can establish.

described as protecting, or failing to protect, their wellbeing and safety. Findings are presented as insights offered by the participating diarists, to be read alongside the other data strands and the wider evidence base.

Staff experiences of managing challenging behaviour

Behaviour recorded

Early Learning and Childcare

In the ELC settings, the behaviours recorded include throwing objects (plates, forks, water, cushions), biting, hair-pulling, hitting, verbal refusal and kicking. These are often directed toward other children or objects rather than adults. Practitioners are resigned to commonplace incidents of aggression. After an incident in which a practitioner moved aside in time to avoid an attempted bite to the arm, she reflected:

> *"It happens quite a lot and it can be very sore, it can leave scars. Luckily this time I wasn't hurt, neither was anybody else... so it could have been worse."*

The ELC diarists framed these behaviours within a developmental and communicative register, interpreting them as expressions of distress rather than intentional aggression. A child's verbal outbursts ("I don't like you. I hate you") are understood as "absolutely not insults...it's just big emotions and communication." Impulsive physical behaviours are linked to speech and language difficulties, with practitioners reasoning that "even if the child was to say something, they probably feel quite misunderstood a lot of the time."

The behaviours documented by diarists in the participating ELCs are temporally and spatially bounded rather than pervasive. They concentrate at threshold moments (entering the building, moving from corridor to playroom, transitioning to lunch) and typically subside once the transition is achieved. One practitioner described a child who "really struggles with coming into the ELC" and recorded days where the child remained in the corridor from 8:20 until 10:30 or even 11:30, sometimes never reaching the playroom before lunch. Yet once settled, the same child was "much happier for the rest of the day...able to explore and play." In this setting, beyond transition, the most challenging moments tended to be brief, context-specific episodes of distress within an otherwise regulated day.

Primary

The case study primary diaries capture distinct behavioural profiles. At one school, a learning assistant's diary documents daily incidents during playground supervision, including punching, pushing, stone-throwing, and verbal threats between pupils. One entry describes an escalation from pencil-jabbing to a pupil bringing a butter knife from home with expressed intent to harm a classmate. The fact that a week of multiple daily incidents was experienced as "quiet" signals how normalised routine aggression had become for this practitioner:

> *"I'd like to preface the following reports by stating that the week that I undertook the audio recording was an unusually quiet week for violence in the primary school."*

The entries from a pupil support practitioner working with a single child offer a different lens. The child is described as "dysregulated" rather than aggressive, struggling to manage sensory input, transitions and the demands of the school day. Challenging behaviour manifests as distraction, fidgeting, task avoidance and difficulty settling after transitions, not as directed interpersonal violence.

The behaviours recorded in the additional primary diaries were predominantly physical and frequently directed at adults. Diarists recorded hitting, kicking, punching, nipping, biting, hair-pulling, head-butting, spitting, and the throwing of objects and furniture. In one school, a P1

teacher sustained a head injury requiring hospital treatment while trying to protect other children. In a second, a diarist recorded injuries to a member of support staff and to a teacher that required hospital attention. In a third, a member of support staff sustained a fracture when a child threw a chair. The diarist in the second school did not regard these events as exceptional, closing her account of the week: "This has been a fairly typical week and I have probably forgotten some events."

Additional primary diarists also recorded verbal aggression, including swearing, threats to hurt other children, racially targeted abuse directed at a teacher and at support staff, racist language in the playground, and sexualised language heard by support staff and during school transport. Property-directed behaviour included overturned tables and chairs, damage to staff office equipment that was thrown, and furniture lifted in an open plan teaching area.

Across both strands, most primary diarists interpreted these behaviours through a developmental and regulatory lens, describing children as 'dysregulated' or 'overwhelmed', or as unable to cope with busy spaces.

> *"It just seems like whenever it's a busy space and there's a lot of people around, they just can't cope and are lashing out and hurting people."*

Diarists' explanations of behaviour were not confined to identified conditions. One additional primary diarist linked some of a child's behaviour to "the frustration associated with finding learning difficult" and observed that the child had "the ability to behave for certain adults when they choose to."

Secondary

Among the diaries collected, the secondary entries document the widest range of incidents. One teacher recorded seven distinct incidents in a single recording, spanning physical aggression, verbal abuse, weaponisation of classroom objects, vandalism, false accusations against staff, and truancy. Physical aggression was the most frequently recorded category, including punching, pushing, kicking, hitting with objects, and deliberate head banging against a radiator during a fight. Property-directed aggression included vandalism of school property and the throwing of classroom furniture. Verbal aggression included sustained swearing at staff, name-calling and threats. One diarist described a class in which a majority of male pupils appeared to have agreed together to engage in sustained low-level provocation directed at her personally:

> *"Today I had a class in which a lot of the boys display misogynistic behaviours. They agreed together to try and 'rage bait' me. This includes carrying out low level behaviours repeatedly to try and gain a reaction. Although this is not violence, it feels like bullying and is on a large-scale as it is almost every male member of the class. I have addressed the issue of bullying with the class to be told that they often made their teacher in primary school cry."*

Weaponisation of everyday objects emerged as a recurring and cross-setting concern. In a separate incident from the primary school case noted above, a pupil picked up a butter knife during a home economics class and used it to threaten a peer. In the same setting, chairs were reportedly thrown across a teaching area on a separate occasion. Teachers also recorded the risk of false allegations. After a teacher attempted to de-escalate a confrontation, the pupil phoned their parent and falsely claimed the teacher had "him up against the wall by his collar." The diarist, who corroborated the teacher's account from multiple sources, assessed the risk as placing staff in a "very dangerous position." If such risks deter school staff from intervening in volatile situations, other pupils are left at greater risk.

Contexts and triggers

Transitions and environmental conditions were the most frequently mentioned context for incidents across both strands. In the ELC diaries, as noted above, transitions are the primary trigger for challenging behaviour, concentrated at arrival, corridor crossings, and mealtimes. ELC practitioners also identified a distinctive cyclical pattern in which behavioural progress through the week is followed by regression after weekends. Monday is consistently the hardest day, with transitions taking longest. As one practitioner reflected:

> *"By Thursday and Friday you finally feel like you're making headway and those strategies and the repetition, the predictability is really doing something and then suddenly the weekend comes and you're back to square one again."*

This cyclical regression raises questions about continuity of support strategies across home-setting boundaries. ELC practitioners frame the pattern in terms of disrupted routine and predictability rather than attributing it to parental behaviour, but the finding has implications for how settings and families might work together to sustain progress.

In the primary diaries, conditions preceding the school day shape children's regulation throughout it. A case study pupil support practitioner notes how late buses disrupted arrival at school, causing a child to miss settling-in routines. Once in class, the child found the school's large task board overwhelming, whole-school gatherings were a known pressure point, and large group activities were tolerable only when content was of high personal interest. The playground and unstructured times were the primary sites of interpersonal aggression. The additional primary diaries confirm this pattern. Playtimes, PE, lunch times and the end of the school day were recurrent flashpoints. A P2 teacher noted that incidents were "happening a lot in the afternoons" and described a child who had settled well becoming dysregulated in the few minutes it took to dismiss the class. A teacher whose department rotated between classrooms through the day identified the volume of transitions as a source of pressure.

Two further features are more prominent in the additional primary diaries. The first is physical proximity and crowding. One teacher described a child who could manage in their own space within the classroom but became aggressive whenever sat among other children. In another school, two classes shared a single open plan space, which a diarist described as producing sensory overload for a child in her class. Staff had been told there was no alternative space on requesting separate spaces to manage conduct. A third teacher concluded that her P1 children were "overwhelmed by classrooms and all the resources they have available to them" and, with management agreement, replaced free-flow play with a structured rotation of short tasks.

The second is the absence or change of familiar adults. In one diary, escalations followed a class teacher leaving the room for planned non-contact time or for a meeting, occurred while support staff were at lunch, and followed a mix-up that left two P2 classes without additional adults for an afternoon. The same teacher attributed one child's difficulties at the start of P2 to the loss of the consistent one-to-one adult she had had in P1, which left the class teacher as "the most consistent adult" across a changing support staff timetable.

In the secondary diaries, transitions between classes, unstructured breaks and specific locations (the canteen, corridors, stairwells, toilets) featured as incident hotspots. One senior teacher noted that the rest of their recording week had been "very, very quiet", suggesting that incidents clustered within particular days and that temporal and contextual factors shape when they occur.

Practitioner strategies

The diaries describe a range of approaches to managing behaviour, reflecting the different demands and contexts of the participating settings.

Early Learning and Childcare

The ELC diarists describe a repertoire of approaches around three recurring principles. First, *predictability and consistency* emerge as foundational. "Being calm, consistent and predictable is what is best." Specific preparations include placing resources linked to a child's interests before arrival, ensuring consistency of adult-child pairings, and maintaining consistent routines. Second, *controlled choice* features prominently, with children offered binary options (inside or outside, this playroom or that one) and visual supports such as "Now and Next" boards. Third, *sensory and interest-based engagement* functions as a bridge from distress to regulation. One practitioner described bringing a child's favourite toy to the car at drop-off, wearing a t-shirt branded with the toy, and creating a carefully orchestrated multi-sensory environment tailored to one child's specific interests.

A further ELC account illustrates these strategies in practice. When a child climbed onto a kitchen counter, the practitioner used the sign-along stop gesture, pointed to a "stop" Boardmaker symbol fixed to the cooker, and repeated a child-specific phrase the team had introduced to mark unsafe behaviour. When the child became frustrated and attempted to bite, the practitioner offered a named transitional object, a "chew buddy" the child was already familiar with, and moved them to the setting's water tree, an area used for sensory regulation. Several familiar elements (visual support, shared language, named regulation objects, sensory area) are used in a single sequence around one moment of risk.

ELC practitioners also use physical space as a deliberate regulatory intervention. When a child became restless and refused both the main playroom and the outdoor area, a practitioner suggested moving to a smaller, former sensory room. As a result, "The child relaxed and began to explore different resources. The tone of the wee one's voice even changed." These accounts suggest that the physical environment of the ELC setting operates as an active ingredient in behaviour support, not merely a backdrop. Adult-led structured play also features as a deliberate regulatory tool. One practitioner described introducing the game "traffic lights" to children whose outdoor play was tending toward rougher games and toy fighting:

> *"It gave them directions to follow and direct their energies into rather than being left to their own devices. We find they don't necessarily know how to play a lot of the time outside."*

Primary

The case study pupil support practitioner provides a detailed inventory of regulation strategies developed through close knowledge of an individual child. Time structuring used the classroom clock to break the day into short, visible intervals. When the child happened to wear an analogue watch, the practitioner recognised an opportunity:

> *"We decided to challenge her today to use that as her own timer rather than looking at the class clock, which she seemed very positive about…She managed to complete three tasks and two brain breaks in an hour and a half this morning and she really relished the reward of that."*

The practitioner built regular 'brain breaks' into the child's daily structure, alongside fidget tools and ear defenders, guiding appropriate choices through negotiation rather than confiscation. The diary entries demonstrate strong relational knowledge of the child, including that Monday mornings are harder, that tasks need to be explained individually, that praise is a key motivator, and that time to share weekend stories prevents attention-seeking behaviour later. The child was "carefully surrounded by children who will be encouraging towards her", a deliberate seating arrangement embedding regulation within the classroom community.

The additional primary diaries record a similarly substantial repertoire, closely tailored to particular children. This included a structured workstation and choosing board using a TEACCH approach, visual supports, a calm corner and fidget resources, an activity box designed with the children to allow time to regulate between transitions, praise, stars and group points in response to low-level disruption, and a class scavenger hunt devised so that a child on a reduced timetable would not be the only one leaving the room at home time. The most detailed account of de-escalation comes from a teacher who stood between a distressed child and the room to which other children had been moved for safety.

> *"I stood at the door to the area where all the other children were to prevent this learner from going in, as she was still making threats that she was going to continue to hurt the other children, and I was offering her some options that she and I could go and do together. And while I was giving these options, I was being kicked in the leg and hit in the stomach"*

The teacher continued to offer familiar activities until the child took her hand, then used a game in a quiet space to reflect gently on what had happened, using "wondering statements rather than direct questions". The child was then able to name the trigger. This account illustrates both the relational skill involved and the physical cost to the teacher of sustaining it.

Where individualised strategies were insufficient, additional primary diarists described protective and organisational responses. These included evacuating classes, moving children out through alternative doors so that a distressed child would not see them leave, physically removing a child, part-time or reduced timetables, time in a nurture base and temporary exclusion. Diarists generally presented these as necessary for the safety of others rather than as solutions, and several noted their limits. One teacher recorded that a nurture placement had reduced harm in class, but that the child had begun hitting in the nurture room, and questioned the sustainability of the preparation required to support them during their time in class.

> *"I'm not sure how long this will be sustainable because it takes a lot of time to organise these things for when they are in class in that short period."*

Secondary

Across the secondary diaries, responses followed a broadly consistent pattern of attempted de-escalation, followed by physical extraction or separation where necessary, followed by parent or caregiver contact and, in serious cases, formal recording and meetings. The diaries document persistent relational engagement under duress. A teacher continued building rapport with a pupil who was repeatedly swearing at him, and another teacher calmly walked a distressed pupil back from a stairwell after a violent outburst. The same pupils appear across multiple diary entries, suggesting cycles of incident, response, and return.

Support mechanisms and staff wellbeing and safety

Diarists in both strands described the conditions that made their work safer and more sustainable, and the points at which those conditions were absent. Staffing emerges across the diary entries as an amplifier of behavioural difficulty, though it manifests differently in each participating setting.

Support that helped

The additional primary diarists described four forms of support as making a difference. The first is a prompt management response. Where management attended quickly when radioed, diarists described incidents being de-escalated and colleagues relieved. The second is a trusted colleague working alongside. A teacher in an open plan setting described close and often wordless coordination with her partner teacher, including "a hand-gestured signed decision" about which of them would take both classes to PE while the other managed an escalation,

followed by an end-of-day debrief. The third is protected time. Management in one school had allocated teachers protected 'headspace' time each week, in recognition of the demands of the first weeks of term. The fourth is a plan agreed with the family. Following an injury, one teacher recorded a positive return day with a reduced timetable, a risk assessment and additional adults in place, concluding that "having the class teacher, management team and family on board is crucial". Another teacher described a planning meeting with a parent as "a relief to feel like we had the school and home on the same page". Conversely, a cancelled meeting with a different family had left staff unable to agree a new playtime plan.

The case study diaries point to similar team-level supports. The ELC diarists described a distinctive tag-team model of shared responsibility. Staff rotate to support a child in the corridor ("different faces, very much repetition") and management step in when frontline staff are overwhelmed. In one setting, the management team maintained informal mutual support, going for coffee together after work to "just be friends instead of colleagues." This distributed responsibility functions as a practical strategy, though it is vulnerable to staffing pressures and has limits. One ELC diarist described a day in which her keyworker child remained heightened from arrival, and offers of help from other staff escalated rather than supported the child:

> *"Inviting other staff in to try and intervene instead of myself has caused their behaviour to escalate and become more unsafe... So they have to almost take a step back and watch me potentially being injured or hurt by that child because intervening can cause it to escalate even more."*

Where a child has formed an attachment to a specific safe person, distributed support can become concentrated on a single practitioner. In the case study primary accounts, similarly, the effective strategies documented worked because they were built on deep relational understanding. This relational foundation may also be a source of fragility, as success depends on staffing continuity that cannot be guaranteed.

Where support fell short

The diaries also record points at which support did not hold. The first concerns the response to calls for help. The case study learning assistant recorded supervising the playground alone and receiving no response when she called for support.

> *"I am the only Learning Assistant in the playground so I radioed the school office to put a call out. I heard nothing from Primary SL."*

The secondary diaries document a related pressure. Individual senior staff repeatedly manage volatile situations alone, with backup requiring radio calls or physical searches for colleagues. One diarist described pursuing a pupil in distress who had run from class while simultaneously managing competing demands on their attention. The cumulative picture is one of near-constant reactivity, with successive incidents handled by the same individuals and little to no recovery time between them.

The second concerns follow-up after injury. After one incident, an additional primary diarist reported that she had to prompt the risk assessment and injury reporting herself, and met resistance when formally recording her injury.

> *"I don't feel this has been taken seriously by my management team. I am the one prompting risk assessment and [health and safety incident] forms... The protocol did not work. I want to know what we do when this happens"*

In one setting, a senior leader acknowledged uncertainty about what more could be done, suggesting that the difficulty lay less in the willingness of leaders than in the limits of the support available to them.

The third concerns physical intervention. A lower primary teacher described lifting a child away when they went to harm other children without current training in physical intervention.

> *"...every time I'm put in that position, it's horrible because I know that if it backfires, then I could lose my career because the council would not back us."*

The fourth concerns specialist provision. Additional primary diarists described children whose needs were judged to require specialist provision remaining in mainstream classes, in one case because no local place was available and in another because the family had declined a place.

Concentrated need and adult capacity

Across the diary entries, practitioners' accounts repeatedly returned to the same children and young people, whose needs appeared complex. Four of the additional primary diaries centre on between one and four children, most in P1 and P2, several of whom were on part-time or reduced timetables or awaiting specialist provision. The others, written from a whole-school perspective, record incidents across P1, P2, P4 and P6 and in the playground, suggesting the pattern was more widely distributed in those schools. This recurrence raises questions, to be examined against the other strands and the wider evidence base, about the adequacy of current support, and about the institutional pressure that concentrated need can create when staffing, expertise and continuity are stretched.

One of the ELC diaries names the resource mechanism directly. Describing a child who would benefit from individual support but did not have allocated Pupil Support Assistant hours, the practitioner reflected:

> *"Really the support that would help in situations like that is for this child to be given some PSA funded hours, which is not a possibility with the funding we have been given this year."*

The same practitioner, writing about a different child, set out the consequence for the rest of the group:

> *"They need complete one-to-one, which takes one of our three team members away from all the other children that are actually included in our ratio, and it means we're not reaching the other children's full potential either."*

Within the participating ELCs, concentrated need was not described as exceptional or short-lived but as a routine feature of the working week, met from within existing ratios. When one-to-one support is provided to a child at transition points, all other staff must manage the remaining children. On one occasion, when a staff member deviated from the established two-sitting lunch routine because of reduced numbers, "the result was a chaotic mealtime with water and soup thrown". Staffing shortages disrupt the routines on which emotionally dysregulated children depend, and for those who are least tolerant of unpredictability, such disruptions can precipitate further dysregulation.

The additional primary diarists described the same pattern of adults stretched across competing needs, with support staff absorbed by one-to-one work and little capacity left for the rest of the class. A P1 teacher with numerous children requiring individual support and one support worker concluded that "we could really do with more than two adults in some classrooms to ensure safety, wellbeing and success for all". Opportunities to debrief were limited. A P2 teacher recounted moving directly from a difficult dismissal into a staff development meeting and regretted that they "didn't have the opportunity to check in with the support staff fully". In another school, a diarist recorded staff giving up lunchtime and breaks to look after dysregulated pupils in a week that also included extended days of after-school commitments.

Emotional demands on staff

The diaries reveal different affective registers. The ELC diarists in this sample described equanimity and purpose on routine days, and helplessness and self-doubt on days of sustained dysregulation without one-to-one support. One practitioner stated: "I wouldn't say I ever feel stressed about it. It's just about realising it's not really about me, it's about the child." Another drew on both the ethical dimensions of work in education and her empathy for the children: "I like to feel I'm making a difference in people's lives through my job ... Poor wee souls. How can they go through every day feeling so disjointed?" Equanimity was not uniform across the sample. A fourth ELC diarist contributed a working week that ranged from "a good day, I feel good overall" on quieter days to a heavier register on days when a child's level of need exceeded the support the setting was resourced to provide:

> *"You almost go home feeling as though you've not done your job properly because you haven't been able to support that child fully... It leaves you feeling quite helpless."*

The case study pupil support diary conveys a similar, if quieter, emotional texture. The practitioner's investment is visible in her tracking of incremental progress, such as the child completing tasks with gentle reminders, participating in singing rehearsal at the front rather than retreating to the back with ear defenders, and showing pride in her maths work. These are the kinds of gains that are invisible in incident data but, in this account, constitute the core emotional reward of primary support work.

In the additional primary diaries, fear of injury is present, but guilt, vigilance and concern for others are more prominent. Guilt toward the rest of the class was the most persistent thread. A teacher of an early primary class repeatedly described choosing between the immediate needs of one child and the learning of all the others. She also described relief when a child was absent, and her discomfort at that relief.

> *"It feels really terrible to say, but I had a real sense of relief because I knew that meant I would be able to get through a lot more learning with the rest of the class."*

A P1 teacher reflected that the other children "are not getting the same amount of time with adults and all of their efforts are not always recognised". Sustained vigilance was described as exhausting even on calmer days, with one teacher explaining that she and her partner teacher "feel like we're on high alert" because of the children in their shared space. Teachers' accounts placed support staff at the centre of the physical risk. Pupil support assistants and learning assistants were punched, kicked, nipped, hit or spat on in four diaries, and one diarist attributed more frequent support staff absence to the challenging working environment.[12]

> *"Support staff were off, which is happening more and more as they are being hit and spat on regularly."*

Other entries convey a wider sense of strain. One diarist described feeling "frantic and unsafe at times" and staff morale regarding behaviour as "very low currently". The fear of professional consequences after an untrained physical intervention, noted above, adds a further dimension in which the risk to the teacher is not only physical. Alongside this, diarists recorded moments of progress and pride, such as a "brilliant morning" on a reduced timetable and calm reflection after a crisis. One teacher spoke of the need to "hold on to the little glimmers of moments when things go well".

Secondary staff convey a different emotional landscape. One teacher described feeling physically threatened by a pupil wrapping a lanyard around his clenched fist while shouting

[12]In the additional primary diaries these are teachers' accounts of support staff experience rather than support staff speaking for themselves.

aggressively. While managing immediate safety risks, the same diarist expressed anxiety about the longer-term trajectories of the young people involved:

> *"The long-term aspect is, or my long-term worry is, is that he's happy to pick up a butter knife and threaten someone with it at this stage in his life. And later on when he's older, I don't want him to be lashing out in anger and doing something like that as well."*

The secondary accounts also extend the taxonomy of staff-directed challenging behaviour beyond overt aggression to include deliberate, organised relational harassment. The account of 'rage baiting' is distinctive in its collective, coordinated character and gendered targeting. Behaviour of this kind is less likely to be captured by incident-recording systems because it falls below the threshold of reportable violence, yet places sustained emotional demands on teachers.

Summary

What the diaries make visible, across these 17 accounts, is that staff at every point on the 3-18 continuum are engaged in demanding, skilled, emotionally absorbing work. In the participating ELCs, a successful day is one in which a child moves from the corridor to the playroom, settles, and participates. In the primary diaries, success is a child completing tasks, and going home regulated, or a calm reflection after a crisis. In the secondary diaries, a successful outcome is one in which a pupil in crisis is safely managed, a weapon is confiscated, or a young person in distress is located and settled. In each case, the skill and effort involved are largely invisible to those outside the setting. The additional primary diaries add a sharper account of physical risk in the early primary stages, including injuries to teachers and support staff.

On this evidence, the support that diarists valued operated in the moment and at the level of the team, namely a prompt response when help was called, a trusted colleague or PSA, protected time and an agreed plan with the family. Diarists were less able to rely on systemic supports such as specialist placements, current training in physical intervention, sufficient adults in class and timely follow-up and support after injury. Three observations converge across both strands: the significance of transitions, concentrated need among a small number of children, and staffing as an amplifier of difficulty.

Walking interviews with pupils

Key insights

- **Pupils experience safety and behaviour as inseparable from relationships**: a space is safe or unsafe depending on who is in it and whether a trusted adult is present, not because of its physical characteristics alone.
- **Unsupervised and transitional spaces - toilets, changing rooms, stairwells, corridor blind spots and congested canteens - were identified consistently by secondary pupils as sites of misconduct**. Consistent adult visibility at these locations was recognised by pupils themselves as the most frequently named deterrent.
- **Strong teacher-pupil relationships function as a form of relational accountability**: where pupils knew and respected a teacher, they described feeling reluctant to let them down. In the primary site, an analogous dynamic was expressed as accountability to the community rather than to an individual.
- **Curricular choice and self-directed learning were associated with better behaviour**. Pupil agency in learning - through subject choice in the senior phase and flexible, self-directed approaches in primary - was associated with greater engagement and reduced misconduct.
- **Social media and group-chat conflict were described by some secondary pupils as a persistent background source of anxiety and disruption**, generating tension that entered the school day regardless of what happened within school boundaries.
- **The primary setting offered a distinctive account in which the physical environment, pedagogical approach and pastoral infrastructure were experienced as actively supporting good behaviour** rather than containing or responding to it

This section reports findings from walking interviews conducted in March 2026 with 22 pupils across four case study schools: 16 secondary pupils (S3–S6; 8 male, 8 female) across three secondary sites, and 6 upper-primary pupils (P6–P7) in one primary site. Each tour lasted approximately one hour. Headteachers identified participants with guidance from the research team. The aim was a small and diverse group of pupils comfortable with the walking-talking method. Headteachers were asked not to limit selection to the most articulate or highest-attaining pupils. The findings are presented as an account of what these 22 young people chose to show and discuss, not as typical of Scottish schools.

Walking interviews are an established qualitative method in which participants lead a researcher on a tour of a setting, identifying and talking about spaces that are significant to them. The approach is well-suited to research with young people because the physical environment prompts discussion and tends to generate more situated accounts than a conventional seated interview. Pupils were positioned as 'expert guides' to their own school, choosing which spaces to show the researcher and what to discuss at each. Tours were audio-recorded and, in two secondary settings, supplemented by instant photographs annotated by the pupils. In the primary, the tour commenced with a pupil-led presentation on school values, pupil voice and the relationships policy, before moving into more spontaneous exchanges as pupils walked through the school.

Findings from thematic analysis of the transcripts are presented in three sections: the spaces pupils identified as significant, the social and relational factors that shaped their experience, and the changes pupils themselves proposed.

Space and environment

Across the three secondary schools, pupils identified a consistent set of spaces as shaping their daily experience of safety and behaviour. Pupils rarely described any location in purely

physical terms. The significance of a space was almost always bound up with relationships - whether an adult was present, who else was in the room, and how those people were likely to behave.

Unsupervised and transitional spaces

Toilets and changing rooms were identified across all three secondary schools in the sample as the most problematic category of space. Pupils described them as unsupervised areas where vandalism, vaping, intimidation and low-level aggression were most often reported. Pupils consistently linked this to the absence of adult presence.

> *"There's no surveillance … Teachers aren't supervising the toilets." (School A)*

> *"The toilets, because they're unsupervised … there's always teachers outside the toilets but not inside." (School B)*

> *"It's almost impossible to find a toilet … there's just groups of people, and they're in there for ages. You just can't get in." (School C)*

In School A, pupils described vandalism including sinks ripped from walls, flush handles pulled out, and toilet paper used to block urinals. In School C, the bathrooms were described as "not an inviting place at all" because groups occupied them for vaping , sometimes physically blocking other pupils from entering. One pupil said they would rather avoid the toilet during the school day than navigate these spaces. Changing rooms were identified as similarly problematic. School A's pupils noted deodorant spray being deliberately set on fire in enclosed spaces. Pupils' post-sort comments in the Q-methodology strand echoed the concern about vaping.

Corridors, stairwells and transition times were also identified as sites of concern. Each secondary site had spaces where pupils reported transition-time congestion: narrow corridors, bottleneck stairwells and one-way systems. Pupils linked these to low-level physical contact (bumping, shoving, jostling) and to what they called "blind spots" where sightlines were poor.

> *"Anywhere where you're not in view is where the most stuff happens." (School A)*

> *"The corridors get really, really crammed during passing … people jump their friends around and stuff, so you get bumped into." (School B)*

> *"It can get extremely crowded. School tries to implement a one-way system … but there's people that don't adhere to it." (School C)*

Pupils in School A described the area under the stairs as a hidden zone where pupils went to avoid detection. Pupils in School C described a stairwell frequented by younger years that was strewn with food debris. On one occasion, baby oil had been deliberately spread on the floor. A corridor connecting two buildings was described as a "choke point" at changeover. One pupil recounted an incident in which a pupil was pushed into a teacher by the crush in a narrow corridor and was disciplined "unfairly" for the collision.

The dining hall and lunch queue generated frustration in each secondary setting. In School A, the queue could cause friction that "spilled over" into other spaces. In School B, there was "a lot of pushing" to reach popular food before it ran out. In School C, the canteen was described as "extremely, extremely crowded." Where large numbers of pupils were compressed into a small space with limited adult supervision, the potential for conflict increased.

Outdoor and peripheral spaces featured in all three secondary tours. Pupils in School A described an area used for lunchtime football that had no teacher supervision and reported that competitive sport could trigger conflict. Pupils in School C identified limited outdoor seating or social space for senior pupils. In one school, S3 pupils extended the discussion beyond the

school gates to describe feeling unsafe in the local community, particularly at night. One female pupil described not wanting to walk to the local supermarket after dark. Others described hearing screaming outside their homes, witnessing confrontations, and being aware of antisocial behaviour in their neighbourhood. These accounts suggest that the boundary between school safety and community safety may be porous, and that anxieties and conflicts originating outside school hours can travel through the school gates.

Spaces of safety and refuge

Alongside accounts of problematic spaces, pupils in each secondary school identified places where they felt calm, supported and secure. These spaces shared three features: a trusted adult was present, the space had a clear purpose, and pupils within it had generally chosen to be there.

Libraries and support-for-learning bases were valued as quiet refuges. In School B, the library "is always quiet and nice". In School C, the support-for-learning base was singled out as "one of the most favourable places in the school" - calm, quiet and clean. The loss of School C's functioning library was described as "a really big shame" by a pupil who had used it in earlier years and saw it being repurposed into a classroom as a backward step for the school.

Specific teachers' classrooms were noted as significant. Pupils led researchers to individual classrooms and explained why these spaces felt different. In School A, one teacher's classroom was described as a place where pupils felt comfortable studying voluntarily until six o'clock in the evening. Another teacher's room attracted pupils who might otherwise be disruptive, but who behaved because of mutual respect. These were not designated pastoral spaces, but classrooms made safe by the quality of the relationship within them.

> *"She really cares about us being the best we can, and it does rub off." (School A)*

> *"I've never heard of anything bad happening [in his room], and I feel like that's because of the relationship with those boys." (School A)*

The environment as pastoral resource: the primary case

The primary tour presented a contrasting account of the physical environment and is reported here as a distinctive single-site case rather than as a typical picture of primary provision. In this school, the physical environment was described by pupils as deliberately designed to communicate values, belonging and care. Caring quotations appeared on doors, mirrors, windows and stairwells, and a relationships and behaviour policy co-created with children was visible at multiple points around the school. The uniform was described not as a rule but as a "team strip" connecting pupils to a longstanding community.

Wellbeing areas were built into communal corridors as small, themed spaces. One had a forest theme, with grass, a campfire and cushion seating. Others contained stress toys, colouring materials and a "worry monster" into which pupils could post written concerns. Pupils can ask to visit a wellbeing area "if you're feeling a bit overwhelmed." Pupils reported that these spaces "tend to be empty, because generally we do all right," and staff confirmed this. Pupils also noted that when someone did use one, "you'll go in, like, three or five minutes later, and it'll be much better." These spaces functioned in pupils' accounts as both an everyday recovery resource and a signal of institutional care. As one pupil put it:

> *"It would be quite terrible to be upset and overwhelmed and just having to sit there and pretend like nothing's wrong."* (Primary site)

In the secondary accounts, the built environment was largely experienced as a constraint to be navigated - narrow corridors, blind spots, congested canteens - with positive spaces (libraries, individual classrooms) sometimes described as precarious, liable to withdrawal through misuse or resource decisions. In the primary site, the built environment was described by pupils as an active expression of institutional values. Care is needed in interpreting this contrast: it is based on one primary case and three secondary cases, and the difference may reflect phase, school size, staff stability, building type, local context, or the particular ethos of this school rather than any general primary–secondary pattern. What the comparison does show is that a school environment can be configured deliberately as a positive pastoral resource, not only as a risk landscape to be managed.

Relationships, supervision and accountability

Pupils' accounts consistently identified the presence and conduct of other people - adults and peers - as the decisive influence on whether a space felt safe. Several interrelated dimensions of this social environment were evident across the tours:

Adult visibility as a deterrent

In School A, one teacher's habit of standing at the junction of two corridors at every break and lunchtime was described by pupils as having changed the character of the adjacent area:

> *"I've seen people turn to go in [the toilets] and then see her and just keep walking." (School A)*

Pupils did not experience this as oppressive surveillance. They valued it and described liking the teacher more as they progressed through the school.

Teacher–pupil relationships and relational accountability

Where pupils had chosen their subjects, knew their teachers over time and felt respected, they described behaviour as markedly better. Older pupils described a reciprocal dynamic in which good relationships generated relational accountability.

> *"Once you've a proper relationship with someone, it's almost like … I almost feel awkward. If there's a teacher that I've grown close to … you're letting them down. You actually know them." (School A)*

> *"The better you behave, the teacher will enjoy spending time with you more, and then you'll enjoy spending time with them more." (School A)*

> *"I've never had a teacher that I haven't had a good experience with. I think the teachers do 100% make the school … not in a physical sense of safety, but you're safe in the knowledge that they're there for you." (School C)*

This account describes a virtuous circle in which strong relationships are described as motivating good behaviour, and good behaviour in turn deepening the relationship. Pupils also recognised the reverse: where relationships were weaker, behaviour deteriorated.

Peer influence and identity-based harassment

Peer influence was identified as a significant driver of behaviour, though its character varied with age and context. School A's senior pupils observed that a small number of disruptive individuals could have a disproportionate effect in small classes. Pupils in School B (S3) described social hierarchies in more immediate, personal terms. They identified dominant individuals amplified by followers, and noted the importance of group membership for personal safety.

> *"People who think it's funny to make people feel bad about themselves." (School B)*

"Always stick with people that you know won't turn on you." (School B)

Some pupils reported identity-based issues, describing homophobic, transphobic, racist and ableist language as widespread and persistent enough to make reporting feel overwhelming. The school was credited with acting when incidents were reported, but the sheer frequency of such language discouraged individual reports.

"There's a lot of people who use ableist slurs and homophobic slurs ... The school doesn't tolerate it. If you say something, it will get dealt with. But it's so common and regular, sometimes it's a bit daunting to tell someone." (School B)

One pupil described invasive questioning from peers about her heritage and food. Another observed that younger peers appeared to be becoming more prejudiced under the influence of social media content creators. These themes were less prominent in Schools A and C; this does not mean that identity-based harassment was absent in those settings. The difference may reflect the age of participants (S5–S6 pupils may experience or notice different dynamics from S3 pupils), school culture, or which topics happened to arise on a given tour.

Peer conflict amplified online

The observation that social media content creators were shaping peer attitudes connects to a broader theme raised in the secondary tours: digital technology was described as both a source and an amplifier of conflict, though in different ways across the three schools. In School A, senior pupils described how phones enabled in-class disruption: friends calling each other from the toilets to make phones ring in lessons, pupils being unable to focus because of constant notifications, and confiscation policies that had limited lasting effect because phones were always returned. In School B, pupils emphasised cyberbullying and group chats that generated threats and "drama" spilling over into the school day that was difficult to escape. Pupils described the constant churn of group-chat conflict as creating a background level of anxiety and distraction that ran through their school day, rather than as frequently producing physical violence. Post-sort comments in the Q-methodology strand echoed this, with one pupil noting that "different incidents that I have been involved in, lead immediately back to social media."

Pupil voice as institutional accountability: the primary case

In the primary site, pupils described a Pupil Parliament that operated as more than a consultation mechanism. It had a visible board tracking projects through stages - started, in progress, completed - with a transparent "what we can't do, and why" section. Pupils described concrete outcomes: toilet refurbishment, new sports equipment funded by a donation, and a quotation added to a stairwell at a pupil's suggestion. Every class fed into the system via electronic class-council meetings, and House Captains analysed the collated data. Pupils described the Parliament as a mechanism that created ownership and mutual accountability:

"When you feel that your voice really matters and you can help make positive changes, you want to look after the community you're part of, not do anything that would spoil it." (Primary site)

This articulation resembles the relational accountability identified in the secondary tours - not wanting to "let down" a respected teacher - but operates at an institutional rather than an interpersonal level. Care for the community, rather than loyalty to an individual, is the motivating force. These accounts, across different phases and with different participants, converge on a common observation: where pupils described feeling known and consequential, they articulated reasons to act well that did not derive from external rules alone.

Institutional care and emotional support: the primary case

A second institutional-level expression of this relational infrastructure, described in the primary site, was the integration of emotional support into the everyday running of the school rather than its reservation for escalation. Several primary pupils described structured support following significant change or loss as a valued resource. One pupil described receiving valuable support after a bereavement. Another said:

> *"It's helped with my emotional problems … at first, I didn't want to do it, but see when I joined, it was the best experience of my life. After that, my work also improved a lot." (Primary site)*

Taken together, the subsections above describe a layered relational ecology: adult visibility at points of risk, strong individual teacher–pupil relationships, an awareness of peer dynamics and their online amplification, and - where it is available - an institutional architecture of voice and care that embeds relational accountability into the everyday fabric of the school. The four case studies did not display all of these in equal measure, but pupils consistently identified them as the features that mattered.

Curriculum, choice and behaviour

Senior pupils in School A offered the most developed secondary account of how curriculum, class size and behaviour interact. They drew a distinction between subjects they had chosen and those they were required to take. In their accounts of compulsory classes, pupils were less invested and the motivation to behave was weaker. In chosen subjects, classes were smaller, relationships with teachers were stronger, and engagement was higher.

> *"People are like, oh, I have to take it. I didn't want to … it makes people want to be there less and then act out against the teachers." (School A)*

A parallel theme emerged in the primary site. Pupils described a learning approach in which they select the order in which they complete tasks, can work indoors or outdoors, with partners or alone, and move between areas with permission. Deadlines and accountability are built in, but the framing is one of trust and self-management rather than external control. Pupils linked this directly to behaviour:

> *"When we're all motivated and enjoying what we're doing, no one has time to get bored or misbehave." (Primary site)*

A transfer pupil drew a direct contrast with a previous school:

> *"Fun learning equals good behaviour … In other schools, it's the opposite. Boring learning equals being bored and having the urge to lash out and misbehave." (Primary site)*

Pupil suggestions for change

Pupils in the secondary schools were articulate about the problems they experienced and thoughtful about what might help. Their suggestions fell into five categories.

- *Better sightlines and fewer blind spots*. School A's pupils recommended that architects consider visibility when designing or refurbishing schools. "Less blind spots … you can see more things at once." (School A)
- *Consistent staff presence at known trouble spots*. Across all three secondary schools, the positioning of a trusted adult at a congestion or blind-spot location was the most frequently named intervention.
- *Preserving and restoring calm social spaces*. School C pupils advocated for the restoration of safe areas for study and decompression. School A participants raised a

related concern: a support space used by pupils with additional needs was sometimes closed because of misuse by others. “That’s a resource for people who need space gone, which is just not fair for a lot of people.” (School A)

- *Fairer application of rules*. School B pupils questioned the fairness of systems that penalised pupils for being late to registration when the lateness was caused by building layout, and called for greater consistency in how teachers distinguished between bullying and ‘banter’.
- *Better infrastructure and maintenance*. School C pupils called for more refuse bins, working soap dispensers in toilets, better use of existing display screens, and outdoor seating. Pupils described the physical environment as communicating institutional care. Where facilities were poorly maintained, they read this as a signal that the space, and the people in it, was not valued.

Summary

The walking interviews contribute a spatially grounded, pupil-led perspective to the wider study. Within the limits of a purposive sample of 22 young people in four schools, three observations can be drawn with reasonable warrant.

First, pupils in this sample conceived of safety as a relational rather than a primarily physical condition. They were articulate about the micro-geographies of their schools - blind spots, congestion points, unsupervised zones and safe havens – but the significance they attached to any space depended on who was present within it and how those people were likely to behave. Second, pupils’ accounts shared a common observation across sites and age groups. Where young people described feeling known, respected and consequential, they articulated reasons to act well. This appeared as interpersonal accountability to a respected teacher in the secondary tours, and as collective accountability to a community in the primary site.

Third, the comparison between the secondary and primary accounts was one of orientation. The secondary tours largely described schools *responding* to behavioural difficulties that had already emerged, with valued spaces sometimes experienced as precarious. The primary tour described a school in which physical space, pedagogical approach and pastoral infrastructure were configured to *reduce* the conditions under which such difficulties may arise.

Early Learning and Childcare settings: play observation sessions

Key insights

- **Transitions are the primary trigger for dysregulated behaviour** within the ELC. Where transitions were bridged by predictable group activities or supported by practitioners, behaviour was notably calmer.
- **Practitioners use the physical environment as an active behaviour management tool.** Staff use spatial choices as deliberate preventive and containment strategies, alongside play-based pedagogy.
- **Co-regulatory, relational approaches are consistently effective at de-escalation**. Practitioners deployed physical comfort, calm verbal repetition, distraction, and indirect guidance rather than directive or punitive responses.
- **Violent language in play was linked to personal experiences and media exposure beyond children's age range**. Children as young as three and four reproduced violent verbal content from age-inappropriate media during imaginative play.

This analysis draws on fieldnotes collected during full-day visits to three early learning and childcare (ELC) settings. At the time of observation, one setting was operating a reduced service due to staffing shortages. The Head of Centre (HoC) reported being unable to recruit from the supply list and expressed concern that the previous year's experience of a reduced service for six months might be repeated. Across the participating settings, up to 40% of children were reported as having additional support needs, with language and communication difficulties widely observed and a substantial number of children requiring help with personal care, including nappy changes. Despite these pressures, the strategies observed were largely effective, and no incident escalated to sustained emotional distress, aggression or violence during the observed sessions.

Transitions: routines and physical space

The physical layout of the settings shaped how transitions were experienced and managed. ELCs typically offer a range of dedicated spaces, including separate areas for dining, quiet or nurture support, active indoor play, and outdoor provision. This configuration reflects the breadth of developmental and pastoral functions settings are expected to fulfil. Staff make deliberate use of this varied geography, directing movement through particular routes, using specific rooms at specific times, and matching spaces to children's emotional states. The physical estate is incorporated into the behaviour management strategy.

Transitions were the moments when dysregulated behaviour was most likely to surface, and their management was a recurring focus of observation throughout the day. Arrival at the setting and the approach of home time were particularly difficult for some children and parents. On arrival, families were greeted warmly, establishing a settled tone from the outset. Practitioners often checked with parents whether they would like support or prefer to deal with the situation on their own. Where space allowed for children to be welcomed in a different room than the playroom, the transition felt noticeably easier for children. In a small number of instances, parents' approaches to drop-off seemed not to align with practitioners. Here, parents looked for an opportunity to share their upset about children's behaviour, which led to a difficult arrival of the individual child in the setting. Practitioners managed these situations well, provided brief assurance to parents and allowed the child to enter the session without carrying difficult emotions into the playroom. Where transitions were actively managed, behaviour was notably calmer.

In one setting, tidy-up music signalled the shift to whole-group time; children responded readily, and no squabbles were observed. A whiteboard activity and singing before lunch captured attention and provided structure ahead of lining up. In the afternoon, a yoga session supported the transition to afternoon tea, settling the group and enabling smooth movement through handwashing to the quiet room. In each case, a predictable group activity bridged the transition, reducing the scope for dysregulation.

Spatial choices also shaped behaviour during transitions. In one setting, children were encouraged to play outdoors while awaiting collection. Collection was managed via the rear door rather than through the playroom, a deliberate strategy to avoid triggering dysregulated behaviour in children who were not being collected at midday. For afternoon tea, a smaller quiet room was used rather than the main dining room; the more intimate space appeared to contribute to a settled atmosphere, with turn-taking unprompted. A child with acute needs was settled in the nurture room before joining the group, rather than being exposed to the busy playroom on arrival.

The outdoors was of major importance in every setting visited. Although the indoor space varied greatly in size and opportunities for children to spread out across different locations (for example nurture spaces, shared hallways with additional play opportunities, use of the attached school facilities), all settings relied on the access to outdoor play to support behaviour regulation. Practitioners highlighted this repeatedly, outlining how important the act of opening the door to the garden felt to them, allowing children to run and be loud, and also feel the connection to nature. Opportunities to play in the mud, ride bikes, climb and balance were consistently taken up by large numbers of children, regardless of the weather.

The outdoor provision seemed essential to support positive behaviour. In some instances, where children struggled with their emotions indoors, their behaviour changed after a short time of outdoor play. In one observation, a young non-verbal child found it hard to settle upon arrival and required one-to-one support to deal with frustration. The child hit the practitioner when they addressed other children and could not settle with any activity offered. The practitioner took the child outdoors as soon as staffing numbers allowed and the child settled quickly, showing a clear change in behaviour and emotions. The child was smiling, exploring the environment and no further physical outbursts were observed for the remainder of the session.

Space was also used to contain flare ups. For example, when children became severely dysregulated, a practitioner described allowing them space to 'trash the room' until they calmed, evacuating other children from the area rather than attempting to remove or physically restrain the dysregulated child. This approach prioritises the emotional safety of the dysregulated child alongside the physical safety of others. Throughout the day, children and resources moved fluidly between indoors and outdoors in support of playful learning, and this freedom of movement appeared to reduce pressure within any single environment.

Managing behaviour in play-based settings

Early years practitioners deployed a wide repertoire of relational strategies, characterised by consistency, warmth, and calm co-regulatory approaches. Staff were gentle, softly spoken, and physically present. Physical contact was offered readily and without hesitation: during arrival distress, at transitions, and when children were upset. Sitting beside a child or positioning themselves at eye level, practitioners used physical proximity to convey emotional security.

Verbal strategies were equally deliberate. Consistent, calm repetition was regarded as central to providing security, conveying predictability through familiar language and tone. During episodes of dysregulation, practitioners used short, clear phrases - 'No hitting', 'Kind hands', 'No throwing',

'Gentle' - delivered consistently and without raised voices. Some of the children would repeat these phrases in critical situations, reminding each other of turn-taking and sharing.

Where direct intervention risked escalation, practitioners shifted to distraction and redirection. A practitioner bounced a ball to divert a child from a dispute; another offered a swap to resolve a tussle over an object. Indirect guidance was also evident: when a child ran indoors, a practitioner asked a quiet question and then stepped back, observing from a distance rather than pursuing the matter. The child slowed within minutes. This appeared to be a deliberate tactic: not escalating the situation, creating space for the words to settle. Similarly, at the water table, a practitioner narrated a child's effort ('working hard') without directly rebuking a second child, who then withdrew independently.

A small number of physical aggressions were observed. When these were between children and adults were aware, rules were reinforced and upset children comforted. Children would not regularly bring these instances to adult's attention and, more often, just move on with their play and look for other play partners. Physical aggression towards adults happened very rarely and predominantly came from non-verbal children in situations of distress. These instances were tolerated by adults, rather than specifically addressed when it was clear that the child may not be able to control their own behaviour sufficiently. Practitioners would move themselves into a safer position and redirect the child's attention.

A strong impression from observing the adults during their work was how present all practitioners were in the moment. Although the approaches to supporting children were slightly different in each setting, practitioners took great care to understand the children in their care and support their development. Children were encouraged to manage their emotions and conflicts independently, with adults stepping in only when needed. Many children seemed to tolerate small verbal and physical outbursts of others, ignored these and kept playing or moved to a different location, avoiding seemingly unnecessary confrontation.

Routines seemed to be of high importance for children's positive behaviour and effective emotional support. These included, for example, steps to get ready for the outdoors. One setting outlined the routines of changing into outdoor suits and wellies on a pictorial chart and children were eager to show how well they managed by themselves. In a situation where one adult might have struggled to get eight children ready, children were supporting each other, demonstrating to others how to arrange the suit on the floor to get all limbs in with very few seeking adult help. In another setting, children could decide themselves whether to get changed for the outdoors or not. Again, children were highly familiar with the routine, picked jackets (or not) and helped others who did not manage zips or boots. Both routines seemed appropriate for the specific groups of children and the practice in the setting. Routines were also present during many activities throughout the day, such as arrival at the setting and mealtimes ('signing in' by adding one's picture to a chart), engaging with particular equipment (getting helmets to ride bikes) and setting up art or games. In general, many children highlighted consistently how well they knew their setting and what processes to follow as part of their daily routine. This seemed to fill them with pride and support their autonomy.

A few instances of different reactions to boys' and girls' behaviour were observed. These predominantly happened in situations where an escalation seemed imminent, and a boy was trying to enforce his will against a girl's goals. For example, a boy taking a paint pot from a girl and the girl being reassured by a practitioner that the boy would only want it briefly and sharing was important. In another situation a boy and a girl engaged in a verbal exchange, initially giggling and telling each other "No" until the boy found this upsetting and threw himself on the floor. A practitioner stepped in and told the girl that she knew better than to annoy the boy and was expected to understand what would upset him. In both situations, the girl was held to

higher standards than the boy and were asked to accept boys' actions and adapt their own behaviour accordingly, so boys' negative emotions could be avoided. There were only a few instances like this, but the different expectations felt significant, especially as there were no follow up conversations with the boys to address their behaviour.

Self-selection and choice

The settings operated a child-led model offering children opportunities to self-select activities, with practitioners available to support and extend learning without directing it. Observed provision included children gravitating freely towards areas of interest: the block area, play dough table, writing table, book corner, role-play area, mud kitchens, sandy area, water table, home corner and many more. All settings offered some degree of flexibility around meal- and snack-time and offered opportunities for children to prepare their own food. Children chose if and when to have a snack, whether to accept help in the toilet, and when to engage with a story-reading activity. Resources travelled between indoors and outdoors, available for responsive use throughout the day.

This approach extended to respecting children's refusals. When a child declined a snack, the practitioner moved on without pressing. When a child said 'no' to help in the toilet, the decision was respected. One practitioner explained this as rooted in respect for children's rights, noting that she had on occasion been unable to change a child's nappy because the child refused, and had communicated this to the parent at collection.

Exploring feelings

The settings dedicated structured time to exploring feelings, using picture books and mindfulness activities as shared starting points. In one setting, children had been reading *The Colour Monster* (Anna Llenas) in the days preceding the visit. Earlier in the day, *I Am Angry* (Michael Rosen) had been read one-to-one with a child with additional needs, who identified that the cat character was 'mixed up' and volunteered: 'He's feeling mixed up and I'm feeling mixed up; sometimes I get too excited.' Another child said she felt 'a bit sad and angry' after the story.

During a group story activity, a practitioner read *I Am Angry* alongside *Colour Monster* props, displaying figures linked to different feelings and inviting children to discuss anger, happiness, and calming strategies. Mindfulness strategies were displayed on the wall, with yoga and mindfulness referenced as established calming practices. Children offered varied and candid responses to what makes them angry: 'Slapping! You need to be calm!'; 'Someone laughing at me'; 'If someone hurts me!' During a separate responsive reading, one child said she gets sad 'when someone knocks down her tower.'

The exchanges also illustrated practitioners' skill in redirecting without shame or sanction. When a child responded to a question about anger by saying 'My mum would punch him', the practitioner replied: 'I think he'd be sad if you hit him? How could you make him feel better?' This brief exchange exemplifies the relational approach evident across the settings, acknowledging children's perspectives while gently modelling alternative responses.

The other settings both shared the book *Grumpy Monkey* by Suzanne Lang on the day of the visit. Children demonstrated a good understanding of emotions displayed and were able to relate this to their own feelings 'Sometimes I feel grumpy', 'you can see it on their face', ' you can feel it here' (points to stomach). Conflicts at home were cited as the main source of their own anger: 'I'm grumpy when dad tricks us'; 'When mum makes me go fast'; 'When my sister bites me'. In addition, restricted access to electronic devices was repeatedly mentioned as being annoying by children, such as no more time on the tablet or gaming console. 'When mummy and daddy don't let me play my racing game. I might say a bad word', 'When my brother doesn't

let me play the Xbox, I stamp my foot.' Practitioners supported children thinking through these situations and identifying solutions and support. Here, children consistently pointed towards physical activities such as playing outside, going on swings or riding bikes as solutions to manage their own behaviour. Supportive adults were sometimes mentioned in relation to receiving physical comfort, especially when being hurt. A small number of children mentioned toys, such as worry bears/dolls or specific computer games designed to calm them down.

Re-enacting experiences through play

In some instances, play situations seemed to show children re-enacting familiar conflict situations (like interrupting adults working or family mealtimes). Here, children often presented themselves as very strict adults, reinforcing rules. In response to a younger child teasing him, a boy states: "No thank you. Let us do our work. If you don't let us, I'm going to call the police on you." Two other children in the home corner took turns shouting 'no' at each other and giggled until one tried to silence the other by putting their hand in front of the other's face and shushing. The other child was annoyed: "You're not the mum. You can't say no. I'm the mum." These instances usually resolved without adult intervention and children moved on to play something else.

Two distinct examples of media influence were observed. Children expressed interest in Bluey, an Australian animated children's television programme, during early-morning conversation. This was noted without concern.

More significantly, a group of five to six children were observed during outdoor afternoon play engaged in chase-based imaginative play accompanied by violent verbal content: 'I'm going to kill you!' and 'Stab, stab, stab!' A practitioner explained that the children liked to play 'Five Nights at Freddy's', described as 'a YouTube thing.' Five Nights at Freddy's is classified as a violent video game, and a film adaptation received a 15 certificate due to depictions of stabbings, slashings with blades, and decapitation. While the children's physical play was not violent - they were not hurting each other or engaging in rough and tumble - the verbal content they were reproducing was violent and aggressive. A practitioner had asked the children to think about playing something else, suggesting awareness of concern. Practitioners in this situation had limited knowledge of the source material, suggesting a gap between children's media consumption at home and practitioners' capacity to understand or respond fully to its influence in ELCs.

Summary

Across observations in these ELC settings, the physical environment, predictable routines and relational practice were central to supporting children's behaviour and emotional regulation. Transitions were the moments of greatest vulnerability, and where these were actively managed - through structured group activities, spatial choices and warm adult presence - dysregulation was reduced. Practitioners worked with skill and consistency, drawing on co-regulatory, child-led approaches and a strong ethic of respect for children's autonomy.

Q-methodology: secondary students' perspectives on behaviour

Key insights

- **Pupils' experiences of behaviour and safety in school cluster around two distinct viewpoints**, identified through the card sort and present across all three participating schools.
- **Viewpoint 1 pupils - *Safe, Supported, and Able to Learn* - describe school as a place where they feel safe, trust adults to help, and can concentrate on their learning.** Aggression, where it occurs, does not reach them personally and is seen as managed.
- **Viewpoint 2 pupils - *Witnessing Injustice* - describe a school in which the central problem is not aggression itself but the perceived unfairness of the response to it.** They describe differential treatment, victims overlooked, and a sustained impact on their wellbeing, friendships and capacity to learn.
- **Both viewpoints were present within each participating school, sometimes within the same year group**, with one S3 cohort split almost evenly between them.
- **Perceived fairness, trust in adults, and the visibility of consequences distinguish the two viewpoints more sharply than the presence or absence of aggression itself.** Several Viewpoint 2 pupils independently raised the perception that academically successful pupils receive more lenient treatment.
- **Social media is a significant factor for Viewpoint 2 pupils but not for Viewpoint 1 pupils**, extending the reach of aggression beyond the school day.

Q-methodology: rationale

This strand of the research asked how secondary pupils themselves experience behaviour in their schools, and how they understand the school's response to it. Q methodology was chosen because it combines the rigour of a structured research activity with the depth of individual expression. It is especially well suited to topics where people may hold strong feelings but find them difficult to articulate openly.

Q-methodology is an established research method, used widely in education, health and policy research, that identifies shared viewpoints within a group of participants. Unlike a survey, which counts how many people agree or disagree with individual statements, Q-methodology examines how participants prioritise a whole set of statements relative to one another. The result is not a set of percentages but a map of distinct perspectives.

Participants sort a fixed set of statements into a forced-distribution grid (see Technical Annex B, Figure B2), placing those they most agree with at one end and those they most disagree with at the other. The data are then analysed using a form of factor analysis that groups together pupils who sorted the statements in similar patterns. Each group, or 'factor', represents a shared viewpoint - a coherent way of seeing behaviour in school - and the analysis produces a composite picture of each viewpoint, showing which statements define it most strongly.

Importantly, Q-methodology does not tell us how many pupils in the population hold a particular viewpoint. It tells us what distinct viewpoints exist and what they look like in detail. It is a method for discovering the range and structure of perspectives on a topic, not for measuring their prevalence.

Study design

Thirty-two pupils across three secondary schools completed the card sort activity during March 2026. The schools were selected to provide contrasting settings, including variation in size, urban/rural location and levels of deprivation. Participants spanned year groups S3 to S6. Thirty-

one of the 32 pupils also completed a short post-sort survey. Among these 31 respondents, the gender balance was even (15 female, 15 male, 1 'prefer not to say').

Pupils sorted 48 statements covering six aspects of school life: experiencing school safety; observing patterns and dynamics of aggression; impact on learning and wellbeing; experiencing how the school responds to incidents; experiencing support; and experiencing the school environment. The statements were written in everyday, first-person language (for example, “I feel safe in most parts of my school”) and were balanced between positive and negative framings (23 positive, 25 negative), so that pupils with very different school experiences could find statements that resonated with their reality. Statements were developed through a review of existing research, consultation with pastoral teachers, revision and piloting with secondary-age pupils. Details of the development process and the full list of 48 statements are provided in Technical Annex B.

Pupils were invited to participate by school staff and gave their own informed consent on the day, in addition to parental consent. The card sort was completed online using QMethod Software, a specialist platform for Q-methodology research. In each school, a member of the research team introduced the activity, emphasised that participation was voluntary and that there were no right or wrong answers. Pupils first read all 48 statements and sorted them into three broad piles - agree, neutral and disagree - before placing them onto the grid, working from the extremes inward. After completing the card sort, pupils answered two open-ended questions: one asking what made their extreme placements stand out, and another inviting any additional comments about behaviour that they felt the statements did not cover.

Findings: two viewpoints

The analysis identified two distinct viewpoints that capture how the 32 pupils experience behaviour in their schools. These were determined through factor analysis using centroid extraction and varimax rotation - standard techniques in Q-methodology (the technical details are set out in the Technical Annex). The research team tested solutions with two, three and five factors and retained the two-factor model because it was the only solution in which every extracted factor met all the established statistical criteria for robustness. It also accounted for the largest proportion of participants: 30 of 32 pupils (93%) were associated with one of the two viewpoints. The two viewpoints are summarised below, drawing on the statistical analysis and on pupils’ own words from the post-sort survey.

Viewpoint 1: safe, supported, and able to learn

Twenty pupils shared this viewpoint (19 positive, 1 negative exemplar). It was the most widely held perspective and explains more of the common patterning in pupils' sorts than any other viewpoint (accounting for 28% of the variance in the data, which is typical for a dominant factor in Q studies). Pupils holding this viewpoint described schools where they feel **safe, well supported by adults, and able to concentrate on their learning**. Violence and aggression are not major features of their daily experience.

The statements these pupils placed most strongly in the ‘agree’ columns were:

Table 2. *Viewpoint 1 - Highest-ranked statements (most agree)*

+6	I generally enjoy coming to school.
+5	I feel safe in most parts of my school.
+5	I feel confident that adults in my school would help me if I was being hurt.
+4	I feel I can concentrate and do my best work at school.
+4	Students are encouraged to report violent and aggressive behaviour and know how to.

+4	I feel safe in places like the dining hall, social areas, changing rooms and toilets in my school.

At the other end of the grid, these pupils strongly rejected statements about fear, avoidance and the impact of aggression on their daily lives:

Table 3. *Viewpoint 1 - Lowest-ranked statements (most disagree)*

−6	Aggressive behaviour in school has made me want to stay at home.
−5	Worrying about aggressive behaviour affects how I feel before I even get to school.
−5	I have changed how I get around school to avoid certain people or places.
−4	I feel afraid of some students in my school.
−4	I feel more at risk because of who I am.

The overall picture is one of personal security and institutional trust. These pupils feel safe in school, enjoy attending, and believe that adults would help them if needed. They see positive relationships and peer solidarity, and they are able to concentrate on their learning. This does not mean they are unaware of aggression - several noted in their written comments that aggressive behaviour exists - but it does not dominate their school experience.

Viewpoint 2: witnessing injustice

Ten pupils shared this viewpoint (9 positive, 1 negative exemplar). It was the second clearly distinguishable perspective and captures a further share of the patterning in pupils' sorts (accounting for 13% of the variance in the data). This is the minority viewpoint statistically, but it is robust and richly elaborated in pupils' written comments. These pupils described an experience dominated by **pervasive exposure to aggression, a deep sense that the school's response is inadequate and unfair, and a resulting inability to relax, concentrate, or feel supported**.

Table 4. *Viewpoint 2 - Highest-ranked statements (most agree)*

+6	I see some students getting away with more than others.
+5	The same students tend to be involved in aggressive incidents again and again.
+5	Students who behave aggressively seem to get more attention than those they hurt or target.
+4	Social media drama often spills over into school the next day.
+4	I have seen pupils being aggressive towards teachers or other staff.
+4	I see students who have been aggressive back in class very quickly after an incident.

The statements these pupils rejected most strongly were:

Table 5. *Viewpoint 2 - Lowest-ranked statements (most disagree)*

−6	I can relax and be myself at school.
−5	My school feels overcrowded.
−5	Teachers have time to support students who have been hurt by aggressive behaviour.
−4	I see young people stepping in to calm situations down before they escalate.
−4	I don't think much about violence or aggression during my school day.

Central to this viewpoint is a perception of systemic unfairness. The highest-ranked statement - "I see some students getting away with more than others" - was placed at the top of the grid (+6), far above where Viewpoint 1 pupils placed the same statement (+1). Viewpoint 2 pupils see a two-tier system in which those who behave aggressively receive more attention and more chances than those they hurt, in which victims are sometimes blamed, and in which aggressors are returned to class quickly while victims are left unsupported.

These pupils cannot relax at school. They think about aggression during their day. Social media amplifies and extends aggression beyond the school gates. They have seen other students become withdrawn and unhappy. They do not believe that teachers have time to support those who have been hurt, and they do not see incidents dealt with quickly or fairly.

In pupils' own words:

> *"I have been bullied for about 7 years... for my weight... and I know others who have been bullied for a very long time too." (Pupil S3, Female)*
>
> *"Personally I dislike school as it causes a lot of stress and pressure. It is also difficult as I struggle a lot with mental health and past trauma and the school don't seem to care as if I need support they send me back to class." (Pupil S3, Female)*
>
> *"I feel that some people are more favoured than others due to how they are doing in school such as if they are doing well they are more likely to be believed than others." (Pupil S3, Female)*

A striking theme that emerged across Viewpoint 2 pupils' written comments - raised independently by several of them - was the perception that teachers exercise differential treatment depending on how well a student is doing academically, creating an uneven system of accountability. This theme was not captured by a single statement in the card sort but suffuses the viewpoint, connecting directly to the dominant concern with unfairness.

Different experiences within the same school

Perhaps the most important finding from the Q-methodology strand is that both viewpoints were present within each participating school. This is not a story of some schools being safe and others being unsafe. It is a story of pupils within the same school building, sometimes within the same year group, experiencing their school in fundamentally different ways.

At School B, for example, the sample was split almost evenly between the two viewpoints among an entirely S3 cohort. One S3 pupil placed "I generally enjoy coming to school" at +6 and reported that his extreme placements reflected things he was "most sure about." Another S3 pupil at the same school, completing the same activity on the same day, placed that statement at −6 and wrote about stress, mental health struggles and feeling unsupported. At School A, ten pupils held Viewpoint 1 while two held Viewpoint 2 and a third expressed the mirror image of Viewpoint 2. At School C, both viewpoints were again present.

Table 6. *Summary comparison of the two viewpoints*

Dimension	**Viewpoint 1:** *Safe, Supported, Able to Learn*	**Viewpoint 2:** *Witnessing Injustice*
Personal safety	Feel safe throughout the school; aggression does not reach them personally	Cannot relax; think about aggression daily; friendships and wellbeing affected
Trust in adults	Confident adults would help; see adults as respectful and available	Feel unsupported; school sends them back to class when they need help
Fairness of the system	Acknowledge some students get away with more (mild agreement)	Perceive a deeply unfair two-tier system where aggressors are rewarded and victims overlooked
Response to incidents	See consequences, restorative conversations and quick responses	See aggressors returned to class quickly, victims blamed, consequences unclear
Social media	Not a prominent concern	Social media drama spills into school; aggression is amplified and extended
Peer relationships	See students looking out for each other; friendships unaffected	See students withdrawn and unhappy; peer solidarity absent
Learning	Can concentrate; enjoy coming to school	Cannot concentrate; school is a source of stress

These two viewpoints are not simply 'positive' and 'negative.' They are structured, internally coherent perspectives organised around different concerns: personal security and institutional trust for Viewpoint 1; systemic fairness and the adequacy of support for Viewpoint 2.

Summary

The Q-methodology findings point to several considerations for policy and practice:

- *Within-school variation matters*. School-level data on behaviour - incident counts, exclusion rates, inspection reports - risk masking the very different experiences of pupils within the *same* building. These findings show that safety and support for some pupils can coexist with profound feelings of injustice and distress for others, even within the same year group. Approaches to behaviour need to attend to this variation.
- *Perceived fairness is central*. For Viewpoint 2 pupils, the core concern is not the existence of aggression per se but the unfairness of the school's response to it. They see differential treatment, they see aggressors receiving attention while victims are overlooked, and they see inconsistency in consequences. This points to the importance of transparent, consistent and visible systems of accountability.
- *The impact extends beyond the incident*. Viewpoint 2 pupils described effects on their mental health, attendance, concentration, friendships and sense of belonging. Some described physical symptoms. The impact of aggressive behaviour is not confined to the moment of an incident; it permeates these pupils' wider school experience.
- *Social media amplifies aggression*. For Viewpoint 2 pupils, but not Viewpoint 1 pupils, social media is a significant factor. Drama that begins online spills into school the next day, extending the reach of aggression beyond the school gates and the school day.

Parent and Caregiver Survey

Key insights

- **Most children are happy at their educational setting.** Approximately three-quarters of children were described as very or fairly happy (76%).
- **Children who had told a parent or caregiver about feeling unsafe at their setting were concentrated in primary settings (39% of children)** more than secondary (27%) or ELC (16%).
- **Parents and caregivers report that disruption to learning and play is a daily reality for many children**. 58% of children were reported to experience peer-behaviour disruption at least weekly, including 31% daily. The pattern is similar in primary (62% at least weekly) and secondary (61%); ELC has the lowest rate (40%).
- **Parents and caregivers report that witnessing aggression is more common than direct personal experience, but neither is rare.** Two-thirds of children (67%) had told a parent or caregiver they had witnessed peer-to-peer aggression and four in ten (42%) had witnessed aggression toward staff in the last twelve months. Just under half (47%) were reported to have personally experienced verbal or physical aggression. Physical aggression peaks in primary settings and is also high in ELC.
- **Parents and caregivers reported bullying for around three in ten children across the sample, with a sectoral pattern.** 29% of children had experienced at least one form of bullying. Group, online and prejudice-based bullying are concentrated in secondary settings; bullying by an individual is reported at similar rates in primary and secondary (28% in each).
- **Non-reporting of incidents under-records levels of aggression and bullying.** Where a child had told their parent or caregiver about aggression, 16% of those incidents had not been passed on to the setting. For bullying, the figure was 42%.
- **Parent–staff trust declines through stages.** On every communication and trust item, ELC parents are the most positive and secondary parents the least. Confidence that the setting will work collaboratively to resolve issues was recorded by 57% of secondary respondents.
- **Parents do not consistently see education staff as well-supported.** Across the sample, more parents agreed than disagreed that staff appear well-supported in managing challenging behaviour (39% versus 33%), but in primary settings - where parents most frequently report disruption and physical aggression - more parents disagreed than agreed.
- **Restorative, relational and individualised approaches are recognised and rated as effective; punitive approaches are not.** Where parents had a basis to judge, peer mediation, nurture groups and personalised or modified curriculum had effectiveness ratings outweighing ineffectiveness ratings by more than three to one.

Sample

The parent and caregiver survey was distributed online via Connect (Scottish Parent Teacher Council), Facebook parent groups and UWS networks. It closed on 30 April 2026 with **152 completed responses** covering **267 children** aged 3-18 in education settings in 23 local authorities in Scotland. Where parents had more than one child in education, they were asked to respond for each child separately. Closed-question results are reported at child level (n = 267) and open-text results at respondent level (n = 152).

It should be noted that the achieved sample is self-selected through parent networks. Respondents who hold strong views - positive or negative - are likely to be over-represented relative to a general parent population. Findings are therefore reported as the experiences and concerns of an engaged parent constituency rather than as population estimates. Of the 267 children represented, 138 (52%) were in primary, 93 (35%) in secondary, 35 (13%) in early learning and childcare (ELC) and one in a special school. Of the 143 respondents who provided a valid postcode, the largest group lived in West Central Scotland (n=70), followed by Eastern Scotland (n=29), Southern Scotland (n=24), the Highlands and Islands (n=16) and North Eastern Scotland (n=3). Postcodes were classified using the Office for National Statistics ITL2 regional geography. Setting locations were predominantly suburban (44%) and urban (33%), with rural settings (22%) and one remote/island setting also represented. Full details of the sample profile are reported in Technical Annex C.

Parents' overall assessment of behaviour and safety

Across all settings, three-quarters of children were reported by their parent or caregiver as happy and settled at their educational setting (76%), with one in seven (14%) described as fairly or very unhappy. The pattern varied by sector. ELC parents were the most positive (83% very or fairly happy; no child described as very unhappy). Primary parents were similarly positive overall (79%), but with a discernible minority of unhappy children (14% fairly or very unhappy). Secondary children were the least likely to be described as very happy (23% compared with 46% in ELC) and most likely to be described as very unhappy (9%, compared with 1% in primary and none in ELC).

Table 7. Q5 - Overall, how happy and settled does each child seem at their educational setting? (child-level).

Happy and settled	All (n=264)	ELC (n=35)	Primary (n=138)	Secondary (n=90)
Very happy	87 (33.0%)	16 (45.7%)	49 (35.5%)	21 (23.3%)
Fairly happy	113 (42.8%)	13 (37.1%)	60 (43.5%)	40 (44.4%)
Neither happy nor unhappy	27 (10.2%)	4 (11.4%)	10 (7.2%)	13 (14.4%)
Fairly unhappy	28 (10.6%)	2 (5.7%)	18 (13.0%)	8 (8.9%)
Very unhappy	9 (3.4%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.7%)	8 (8.9%)

Of the 267 children represented, 264 child-level responses were returned: ELC 35/35, primary 138/138, secondary 90/93 (3 missing) and the one child in a special school, who was reported as very happy. The single special-school case is included in the All column but not shown separately in Tables. Percentages are calculated within each setting on valid responses.

Asked about **overall behaviour at their child's setting** (Q7), parents and caregivers gave a more measured account than the happy-and-settled item suggests. Half rated overall behaviour as good or very good (50%), but the modal response was **"mixed"** (39%). Mixed accounts were most common in secondary settings, where 49% of children were described in those terms and only 13% as having very good overall behaviour. ELC parents gave the highest "very good" rating (37%); primary parents fell between the two.

A minority of parents and caregivers reported that their child had **expressed a worry or concern about feeling unsafe** at their setting in the last twelve months (Q17): 32% Yes, 64%

No, 4% Unsure. Primary parents were the most likely to report a child raising a safety concern (39% Yes), followed by secondary (27%) and ELC (16%).

Table 8. Child-level summary by setting type. Cells show n / valid n in setting (percentage).

Safety and behaviour items	All	ELC	Primary	Secondary
Child happy or fairly happy at setting	200/264 (76%)	29/35 (83%)	109/138 (79%)	61/90 (68%)
Overall behaviour rated good or very good	132/264 (50%)	19/35 (54%)	75/138 (54%)	38/90 (42%)
Overall behaviour described as "mixed"	104/264 (39%)	12/35 (34%)	47/138 (34%)	44/90 (49%)
Child expressed concern about feeling unsafe (Yes)	83/258 (32%)	5/32 (16%)	54/137 (39%)	24/88 (27%)

Single-response items (Q5, Q7, Q17) use valid responders as denominators (3 to 9 cases missing across these items).

Almost three in ten parents and caregivers (29%) reported that there are areas in or around their child's setting they would prefer their child to avoid (Q32). The figure was very similar across sectors: 29% in ELC, 28% in primary and 30% in secondary. Of the 48 respondents who answered Yes for any child, the areas identified were: areas immediately outside the school or ELC gates (60% of those answering), specific routes to and from school (46%) and areas within the school or ELC grounds (38%).

In open-text responses describing the nature of their child's safety concerns (Q33; 58 responses), **physical violence by peers** was the dominant theme. Specific accounts described class evacuations, repeated physical assault by particular children, and incidents that staff had been unable to prevent. Secondary accounts more often described knife-carrying, intimidation in specific spaces (including the school bus), substance misuse and bullying responses parents regarded as inadequate. Knives were mentioned by four respondents (five mentions across Q33 and Q44), three of them parents of secondary children; one further respondent described a knife brought into a primary setting. Inadequate school response was identified in around one in six Q33 responses, describing schools that act only when parents press the issue and that fail to follow through after a disclosure has been made.

> *"My child has expressed feeling unsafe in the classroom due to a child who has explosive outbursts during lessons. This often spills out into play time. My son has been attacked multiple times... He has expressed a fear that this will happen again, it happens most days." (Primary, urban)*

> *"Regular incidents of whole evacuation of classes due to children posing harm or threats to others. Staff restraining pupils. Violence from pupils to staff or other pupils, parents not being told." (Primary, urban)*

Disruption to learning

Parents and caregivers were asked how often their child reported that **learning time or play is interrupted** by other children's behaviour. Across the whole sample, 31% of children reportedly experienced disruption **daily**, 27% weekly, 7% monthly, 21% rarely and 14% never. Combined, **58% of children and young people experience disruption to learning or play at least weekly**, according to their parent or caregiver.

This pattern was strongest in primary and secondary settings. In primary, 33% of children reportedly experienced disruption daily and 29% weekly (62% at least weekly). In secondary, the figures were 32% daily and 29% weekly (61% at least weekly). ELC reported the lowest rates: 26% daily, 14% weekly, with 37% of ELC children according to their parents never reporting experiencing disruption from peer behaviour. The contrast between ELC and the school-age sectors is one of the clearest gradients in the survey.

Table 9. Q10 — Frequency of learning or play interruption (child-level).

Frequency of disruption	All (n=263)	ELC (n=35)	Primary (n=138)	Secondary (n=89)
Daily	82 (31.2%)	9 (25.7%)	45 (32.6%)	28 (31.5%)
Weekly	71 (27.0%)	5 (14.3%)	40 (29.0%)	26 (29.2%)
Monthly	18 (6.8%)	0 (0%)	10 (7.2%)	8 (9.0%)
Rarely	54 (20.5%)	8 (22.9%)	29 (21.0%)	17 (19.1%)
Never	38 (14.4%)	13 (37.1%)	14 (10.1%)	10 (11.2%)
At least weekly (combined)	**153 (58.2%)**	**14 (40.0%)**	**85 (61.6%)**	**54 (60.7%)**

Of the 267 children represented, 263 child-level responses were returned: ELC 35/35, primary 138/138, secondary 89/93 (4 missing) and the one child in a special school, whose disruption was reported as never. Percentages are calculated within each setting on valid responses.

Prevalence and nature of challenging behaviour

Parents and caregivers were asked separately about behaviours their child had **witnessed** and told them about in the last twelve months and about behaviours their child had **personally experienced**. Two-thirds of children (67%) had reported witnessing some form of aggression by peers towards other children. Physical behaviours (hitting, kicking, pushing, spitting, biting) were the most frequently reported (60%), followed by verbal aggression face-to-face (48%) and verbal aggression online (18%). The pattern by setting is consistent with the case study and Q-methodology evidence: physical aggression peaks in primary (65%); verbal aggression online peaks in secondary (34%); ELC sits below both for verbal items but reports physical behaviours at a rate (57%) close to the primary figure.

Challenging behaviour by children towards staff was less frequently witnessed but still reported in over four in ten child reports to a parent/caregiver (42%). The most common form witnessed was verbal aggression face-to-face (35%), with physical behaviours toward staff witnessed in 23% of child-reports overall. Witnessed aggression toward staff was more common in primary (46%) and secondary (41%) than in ELC (23%). The gap between child-to-child witnessing (67%) and child-to-staff witnessing (42%) is consistent with the practitioner audio diaries, in which staff describe themselves as the secondary recipients of aggression that is most often directed peer-to-peer.

Table 10. Q11–Q15 - Witnessed and personal experience of challenging behaviour and bullying (child-level n and percentage by setting).

Witnessed and personal experience	All (n=267)	ELC (n=35)	Primary (n=138)	Secondary (n=93)
Witnessed verbal aggression (face-to-face) - peers	129 (48%)	6 (17%)	75 (54%)	48 (52%)
Witnessed verbal aggression (online) - peers	49 (18%)	1 (3%)	16 (12%)	32 (34%)
Witnessed physical behaviours - peers	160 (60%)	20 (57%)	89 (64%)	51 (55%)
Witnessed verbal aggression (face-to-face) - towards staff	92 (34%)	3 (9%)	50 (36%)	38 (41%)
Witnessed physical behaviours - towards staff	60 (22%)	8 (23%)	38 (28%)	13 (14%)
Personally experienced verbal aggression or threats	91 (34%)	5 (14%)	53 (38%)	33 (35%)
Personally experienced physical aggression	89 (33%)	17 (49%)	52 (38%)	20 (22%)
Experienced bullying by an individual	68 (25%)	3 (9%)	39 (28%)	26 (28%)
Experienced bullying by a group	31 (12%)	1 (3%)	11 (8%)	19 (20%)
Experienced prejudice-based bullying	20 (7%)	0 (0%)	9 (7%)	11 (12%)
Experienced online bullying	20 (7%)	1 (3%)	4 (3%)	15 (16%)

Multi-select items: column percentages do not sum to 100. Denominator is all children in the setting; non-selection is treated as no behaviour reported.

In the last twelve months, nearly half of all children (47%) had told a parent/caregiver that they had personally experienced some form of verbal or physical aggression. Verbal threats and physical aggression were reported at almost identical rates overall (34% and 33% respectively). According to setting profile, physical aggression was most often reported in ELC and primary settings (49% of ELC children and 38% of primary children), while secondary children were more likely to encounter verbal aggression than physical (35% verbal versus 22% physical). Personal experience of any aggression peaked in primary (52%), with ELC and secondary close behind (49% and 39% respectively).

> *"High levels of aggressive outbursts from a classmate who is likely undiagnosed. Mainstream setting is not working for this child and others are being hurt as a result. The child is also now being ostracised by others in class who are scared of him." (Primary, rural and remote)*

Parents and caregivers were asked whether their child had experienced **specific forms of bullying** in the last twelve months. Across all settings, 29% of children had experienced at least one form of bullying. The most frequently reported was bullying by an individual (25%), followed by bullying by a group (12%), online bullying (7%) and prejudice-based bullying (7%).
The sectoral pattern places secondary settings at the centre of group, online and prejudice-based bullying. Group bullying was reported for 20% of secondary children, compared with 8% in primary and 3% in ELC. Online bullying was reported for 16% of secondary children.

Prejudice-based bullying was reported in 12% of secondary cases and 7% of primary cases, with no ELC reports. Bullying by an individual was reported at very similar rates in primary and secondary (28% in each). For ELC, only three of 35 children had any bullying reported.
Twenty children across the sample (7%) were reported as having experienced bullying that their parents identified as **prejudice-based**. The open-text responses describe homophobic verbal aggression, gender-targeted intimidation, and disruption and bullying linked to peers with unmet additional support needs. Homophobic incidents were described mainly in secondary and rural settings: "Kids being paid by other kids to come up and make homophobic slurs". Neurodivergence-related accounts were most often reported in primary settings, including in rural locations where specialist provision is described as scarce.

Reporting and setting response

Where children had experienced **aggression**, parents and caregivers were asked how satisfied they were with how the setting responded (Q14). Of the 138 child-level responses that gave an applicable rating, 38% were dissatisfied with the setting's response, 25% satisfied, 20% neither, and 16% had not reported the incident to the setting.

Among the 167 child-level responses where **bullying** was answered, the most common outcome was non-reporting. Two in five parents and caregivers (42%) had not reported the bullying to the setting. A further 20% were dissatisfied with the response received, 23% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, and 14% were satisfied.

Reasons for non-reporting offered in open-text responses include prior experience of bullying being ignored or dismissed. One parent wrote, "Bullying has been ignored. Rather than dealing with the issue [my] child has simply been told to ignore and stay away". A second pattern is the belief that complaints to the school do not result in action, as one respondent put it, "We had approached the school about this and saw no real action taken".

Table 11. Q14 and Q16 — Parent satisfaction with setting response.

Satisfaction with setting response	Aggression (Q14, applicable n=138)	Bullying (Q16, n=167)
Satisfied	35 (25%)	24 (14%)
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	28 (20%)	39 (23%)
Dissatisfied	53 (38%)	34 (20%)
Did not report incident to setting	22 (16%)	70 (42%)

Q14 excludes "Not applicable" (126 child-records) and 3 missing. Q16 has no "Not applicable" option; the 100 child-records not answering Q16 are those for whom no bullying had been recorded at Q15.

Approaches to positive behaviour: awareness and perceived effectiveness

Parents and caregivers were asked whether their child had been involved in ten named approaches over the last twelve months and, where so, how effective they judged each to be. The findings show a wide range of awareness and a clear set of approaches that parents recognise as effective.

The most familiar approaches were **peer mediation or buddy systems** (32% of respondents reported their child was involved), **restorative conversations or circles** (22%), **nurture groups** (20%) and **circle time** (16%). Detention or supervised reflection was reported in 6% of cases, and exclusion in just 1%.

Two further findings are notable. First, between 18% and 24% of respondents were "unsure" whether their child had been involved in restorative conversations, mentoring time or circle time, and a further 19% were unfamiliar with the term "restorative conversation or circle". The vocabulary that schools and ELC settings use to describe their approaches is not always reaching parents, even where the underlying practice is established. Second, where parents had a basis to judge, **restorative, relational and individualised approaches were rated effective more often than punitive ones**. Where rated effective or ineffective (excluding "Not applicable" and "Too early to say"), peer mediation, nurture groups and personalised or modified curriculum each had effectiveness ratings outweighing ineffectiveness ratings by more than three to one. Detention and exclusion were either rated ineffective or fell below the threshold for substantive rating.

What settings do well

The most frequently coded theme in Q9 (good practice) was **praise, rewards and recognition systems** (28% of respondents), encompassing certificates, merit systems and peer-nominated recognition. **Individualised support and planning**, **communication with parents**, and **school values and inclusive ethos** each appeared in around 16% of responses. Parents described settings where staff actively communicate positive observations to parents, where rewards are part of a wider relational approach rather than a stand-alone strategy, and where value frameworks are visible in classroom practice rather than as decorative signage. A small but distinct group described approaches that go beyond standard accommodation to recognise diverse needs, including flexi-schooling and treating Team Around the Child meetings as collaborative spaces.

> *"They are very nurturing and notice, comment and reward good behaviour. They will also comment on good behaviour to parents, including phoning or emailing to express how proud they are of the child." (Primary, urban)*

> *"Our school are very child led and neuroaffirming as standard in classrooms and in practice. Each teacher has their own methods, but the ethos is the same. Good teachers have been able to understand all behaviour is communication, and get to the root of the trigger rather than simply punishing." (Primary, suburban)*

Parent-staff communication and trust

Four items examined the relational dimension of parent–setting interaction. Most parents and caregivers reported feeling **treated with respect** by staff (80% agree or strongly agree) and **comfortable approaching the setting with concerns** (78% agree). **Confidence that the setting would work with them to resolve issues** was lower (64% agree, 21% disagree), and just under half (46%) reported having sometimes found **communication frustrating or difficult**.

ELC parents were the most positive on every measure: 97% felt treated with respect, 86% comfortable approaching staff, and 77% confident the setting would work with them. Secondary parents were the least positive: 66% felt treated with respect (with 20% disagreeing), 73% comfortable approaching, and 57% confident in collaborative resolution.

Table 12. Q22–Q28 — Parent–staff communication, trust and policy awareness.

Communication and trust - % agree or strongly agree	All	ELC	Primary	Secondary
I feel treated with respect by staff	212/264 (80%)	34/35 (97%)	118/138 (86%)	59/90 (66%)
I feel comfortable approaching with concerns	204/263 (78%)	30/35 (86%)	108/138 (78%)	65/89 (73%)
I feel confident the setting will work with me	168/263 (64%)	27/35 (77%)	89/138 (64%)	51/89 (57%)
I have found communication frustrating	121/264 (46%)	11/35 (31%)	65/138 (47%)	45/90 (50%)
Aware of behaviour policy (fully or in detail)	131/264 (50%)	12/35 (34%)	71/138 (51%)	47/90 (52%)
Aware of mobile phone policy (fully or in detail)	163/257 (63%)	3/30 (10%)	83/137 (61%)	77/89 (87%)

Each cell shows the number of children whose parent agreed (or strongly agreed), out of the number who answered the question, with the percentage in brackets.

On policy awareness, half of parents (50%) reported being fully aware or aware in detail of the positive behaviour and relationships policy at their child's setting (Q26), with the remainder either not aware (33%) or unsure whether one existed (17%). Awareness of the mobile phone policy (Q28) was higher overall (63% aware), driven by very high awareness in secondary (87%) and substantial awareness in primary (61%). Among the 148 respondents who answered Q29, half (49%) supported or strongly supported their school's mobile phone policy and 6% opposed it; 38% either did not know enough about it or were not aware of any policy. Parents of secondary children were both the most aware of and the most likely to support a clear policy in this area.

On involvement (Q30), among the 131 child-records where the question applied, 72% of parents and caregivers reported feeling involved in discussions about support strategies when behaviour concerns arise; 28% did not. Where parents disagreed (n=37 child-records), the case is concentrated in secondary (20% of secondary records gave No, compared with 12% of primary).

Perceptions of staff support

A single item asked whether **staff at the child's setting appear well-supported in managing challenging behaviour** (Q31). Across all settings, **39% of parents and caregivers agreed that staff appear well-supported, while 33% disagreed** and 27% were neither in agreement nor disagreement. ELC parents were the most likely to agree (47%) and the least likely to disagree (21%); primary parents were the most divided (36% agree, 41% disagree); secondary parents agreed more often than they disagreed (41% versus 28%). The primary figure is the most distinctive: of the 138 primary child-records, more parents disagreed than agreed that staff appear well-supported.

> *"Teachers are spread far too thinly. Many are trying to manage classes with mixed and competing needs. This means the quieter children who are struggling can be overlooked and lost in the noise. I find some teachers are resorting to authoritative / fear-based compliance methods despite evidence these do not promote good outcomes for children but they feel they don't have other options." (Primary, suburban)*

How settings could better support children's wellbeing

Q37 attracted the most extended commentary, with 84 responses (61% of the sample). The dominant theme was the call for **more staff and improved ratios** (42% of Q37 respondents), often paired with concerns about the impact of mainstreaming pupils with significant additional support needs without commensurate resourcing. The next-ranked themes were **specialist additional support needs (ASN) provision** (calls for specialist placements where mainstream is not meeting need), **consequences and accountability** (clearer systems for responding to harmful behaviour), and the **impact on the well-behaved majority**. Calls for trauma-informed and neurodiversity training, and for stronger relational and nurture approaches, were also frequently coded.

> *"Smaller class sizes. More support staff. Decent training (and pay) for support staff. Trauma-informed practice in every school. Specialist provision for children whose needs are not being met in mainstream." (Primary, urban)*

> *"There is not enough staff and support for learning in schools to meet pupil needs. Class sizes are too big to cope with the level of need which is now much greater than it ever has been. As a result, we are not getting it right for every child. … there are multiple staff off long term sick due to challenging behaviour in classes." (ELC, primary and secondary, suburban)*

Summary

Most respondents to the survey describe settings where children are happy and parents and caregivers are treated with respect, but a substantial proportion report frequent disruption to learning (58% at least weekly), children who have witnessed and personally experienced aggression, and bullying responses they regard as less than optimal. The pattern of concern is most pronounced in primary settings: primary parents and caregivers report the highest rates of weekly disruption, witnessed peer and staff aggression, personally experienced aggression, and children voicing safety worries at home. Secondary settings are rated lowest for overall behaviour and show the highest prevalence of bullying. Sixteen per cent of applicable aggression cases and 42% of bullying incidents reported by children to parents had not been reported to the setting. Where parents had a basis to judge, restorative, relational and individualised approaches were rated effective more often than punitive ones

Multi-professional perspectives: expert panel

Key insights

- **The panel converges on a developmental and relational framing of behaviour.** Behaviour described as 'challenging' or 'aggressive' is more accurately understood as the communication of distress or unmet need. Every panellist endorsed this framing.
- **Three system-level conditions stand out as upstream priorities for change.** The presumption of mainstreaming without commensurate resourcing, the reactive orientation of the system, and long CAMHS and specialist-service waits were identified as the conditions most in need of change.
- **Co-located, wraparound multi-agency working organised around schools is the clearest single priority for action.** Sixty-four per cent of panellists placed it as the inter-professional change most in need of action and ninety-six per cent placed it in their top three.
- **Online and digital culture and staff burnout are identified as the most pressing contemporary pressures.** These share top position and were not separated in priority. The panel sees an upstream pressure on children and a downstream pressure on the workforce.
- **Relational, trauma-informed, nurture and restorative approaches are endorsed as the most effective long-term response.** Endorsement is tempered by the qualification that these approaches require clear limits, whole-school adoption, sustained resource and skilled leadership to work.

Rationale for the modified e-Delphi

The e-Delphi strand of the study used a modified two-round design with panellists drawn from four professional groups. The multi-professional structure was intended to capture a diversity of opinions and perspectives across fields that work closely with challenging behaviour in education settings. Panellists were selected purposively on the basis of confirmed topic expertise and direct professional experience of working in or with education settings. Three recruitment routes were used. Experts identified through academic and research literature were approached directly. Specialist professional bodies (including the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists Scotland and the Royal College of Occupational Therapists) and third sector organisations (including youth and community work providers) were invited to circulate the call to their networks. A small number of additional panellists were nominated by existing panel members.

Round 1 was an open exploration. Twenty-four panellists completed open questions covering eight domains. These were individual and family circumstances, policy and funding and wider system pressures, the broader social environment, the immediate school and ELC environment, effective prevention and response approaches, barriers to sustaining and scaling, multi-agency working, and professional learning. The Round 1 analysis identified themes recurring across the four professional groups and across domains, and generated twenty-six propositional statements for Round 2.

Round 2 returned the statements to the panel for structured rating and ranking. Twenty-one of the twenty-four Round 1 completers submitted Round 2 responses (87.5 per cent). Panellists rated each statement on a five-point agreement scale from 1 Strongly disagree to 5 Strongly agree. In four of the six areas, panellists also ranked the statements by priority for action, change, or pressing-ness. Pre-specified criteria were applied to identify statements meeting the threshold for strong agreement.

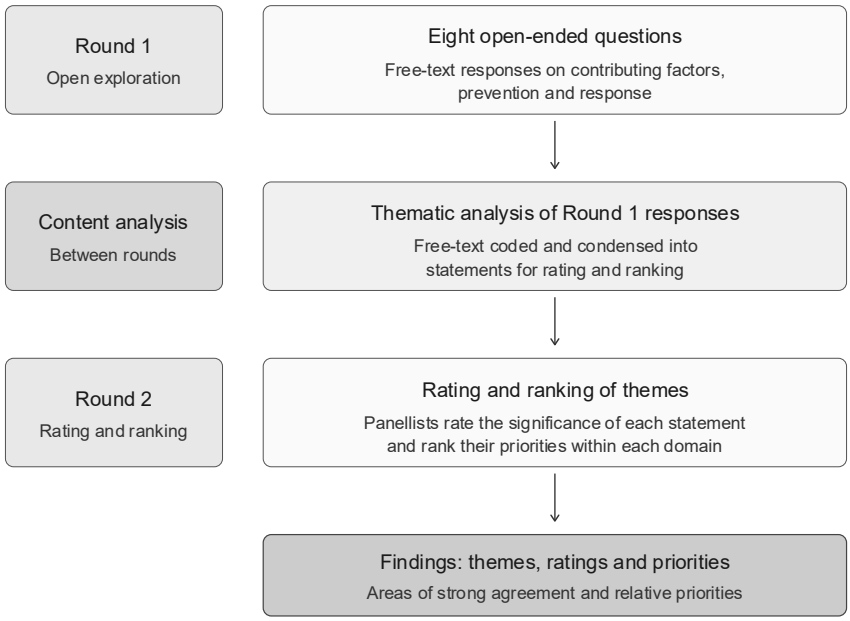
A statement was judged to meet the threshold where at least seventy per cent of panellists rated it in the top two categories (Agree or Strongly agree, hereafter "top-two") and where the interquartile range (IQR) of ratings was one or less. The interquartile range (IQR) is a measure of spread. It captures the middle 50 per cent of responses, from the 25th to the 75th percentile. A wide IQR indicates that panellists' ratings were spread across the scale, reflecting divergent views.

For ranking tasks, a parallel threshold of at least fifty per cent top-three placement was applied. Technical Annex E sets out the calculation methods and the full distribution of responses for each statement.

Table 13. Delphi panel structure and Round 1 completers

Panel	Professional roles represented	Round 1 completers (n)
Therapeutic and Developmental Support	Educational psychologists; speech and language therapists; occupational therapists; play therapists	7
Child Welfare and Safeguarding	Youth workers; family support workers; adolescent welfare practitioners; third-sector practitioners	7
Senior Educational Leadership	Local authority Quality Improvement Managers; headteachers; pastoral leads; ELC managers	3
Academic and Research Expertise	Researchers specialising in inclusive education, child development, trauma-informed practice, educational psychology	6
Multi-category	One panellist identified across Child Welfare and Safeguarding, Senior Educational Leadership, and Academic and Research Expertise	1
Total		**24**

Figure 3. The modified e-Delphi process.



This section reports the panel's findings around six thematic groupings derived from Round 2. These are children's lives and developmental need, system conditions and resourcing, effective practice inside settings, working together and learning together, the contemporary social environment, and distinctive single-source observations. The Round 1 evidence sets the context for each grouping, with selected panellist comments where these add interpretive depth. The Round 2 rating and ranking results follow, and a closing summary brings together the strongest signals across the six areas.

Children's lives and developmental need

In Round 1, panellists were asked to identify the individual child and family circumstances that contribute to challenging behaviour, including aggression. The themes raised by the largest number of panellists, each recurring across at least three of the four professional groups, were family environment and parenting, neurodivergence and additional support needs, poverty and socioeconomic adversity, trauma and adverse childhood experiences, parental mental health and stress, communication and language needs, behaviour as communication of distress or unmet need, domestic abuse and violence, and self-regulation and emotional development.

> *"Children growing up in poverty may experience chronic stress, hunger, or disrupted sleep. These factors can reduce emotional resilience, lower mood, and impair concentration, making it harder to engage positively in classroom routines." (Academic and Research panellist)*

> *"Being tired, hungry and ill-prepared for learning because there are financial strains and where carers are struggling can pass on to children and make learning at school less of a priority. The likelihood of tensions spilling over from frustrations or a sense of lack and injustice is higher." (Child Welfare and Safeguarding panellist)*

> *"Difficulties with emotional regulation are key. Many children experience strong feelings - often anxiety-driven - but lack the skills to manage them, so behaviour escalates into fight, flight or freeze responses." (Child Welfare and Safeguarding panellist)*

Several panellists were explicit that locating the problem in the child or family alone risks deficit framing. Behaviour described as challenging or aggressive is, in their view, more accurately understood as the communication of distress or unmet need.

> *“Often 'poor parenting' is seen as one element of the equation. However, this risks slipping into the unhelpful terrain of victim-blaming and stigmatising parents who are often under significant pressure from a range of sources.” (Child Welfare and Safeguarding panellist)*

Round 2 returned four statements framing this developmental and circumstantial picture. All four met the threshold for strong agreement. In the tables that follow, % top two is the combined percentage of panellists who rated the statement as either Strongly agree (5) or Agree (4) .

Table 14. Children's lives and developmental need ratings (n = 21)

Statement	% top-two	Median	IQR
Behaviour described as 'challenging' or 'aggressive' is, in most cases, more accurately understood as communication of distress or unmet need.	100%	5	0
Poverty and the chronic stress, hunger and disrupted sleep that accompany it materially shape children's capacity to engage in school and contribute to behaviour described as challenging.	100%	5	1

Statement	% top-two	Median	IQR
Children with neurodivergence and additional support needs are at heightened risk of being misread and inadequately supported in mainstream environments designed for neurotypical learners.	90.5%	5	1
Trauma, including ACEs and developmental trauma, plays a substantial role in patterns of behaviour and must be a central frame for response.	90.5%	5	1

The framing statement - Behaviour described as 'challenging' or 'aggressive' is more accurately understood as communication of distress or unmet need - attracted the strongest endorsement on this page. Every panellist rated it in the top two categories and three quarters rated it Strongly agree. Poverty also drew unanimous top-two agreement, consistent with the prominence of poverty as a cross-domain theme in Round 1.

The neurodivergence and trauma statements attracted strong agreement with a small minority signal in each case. One panellist registered Disagree on the neurodivergence framing and one registered Strongly disagree on the trauma framing. Two comments illustrate different sources of qualification. One panellist questioned the framing of neurodivergent young people as a group at heightened risk of being misread. A second comment cautioned that a trauma-informed framing should not displace expectations about conduct.

> *"I feel that neurodivergent young people receive more understanding from teachers when they display challenging and disruptive behaviours. It's those who are not neurodivergent, but display challenging behaviours, who do not receive as much understanding as they should." (Child Welfare and Safeguarding panellist)*

> *"However understanding staff are, and whatever your belief or attitude about this, there is no room for staff at any level, or other pupils to be treated badly, even if the young person in question has had traumatic events and experiences throughout their lives." (Senior Educational Leadership panellist)*

These minority signals do not affect the threshold judgement on either statement. They indicate that even where panel agreement is broad, panellists hold differentiated views about how the framings should be applied in practice.

System conditions and resourcing

In Round 1, panellists identified a wide range of system-level pressures on schools and ELC settings. Funding and resourcing was the most frequently raised theme, encompassing core budgets, dependence on short-term and ring-fenced funds, and the absorption of Pupil Equity Funding into additional support needs provision. Long CAMHS waits and reduced access to neurodevelopmental services, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and social work were cited across all four professional groups.

> *"It is increasingly difficult to access services for children such as CAMHS, neurodevelopmental services, social services, speech and language, occupational therapy, physio etc. as budgetary pressures across the public sector shrink available supports. We see the impact of this acutely in education as it is a universal entitlement, with more children presenting with SEBN as appropriate multi-agency planning is not available." (Therapeutic and Developmental Support panellist)*

> *"Delays in mental health and external services mean schools are often managing high levels of unmet need on their own." (Child Welfare and Safeguarding panellist)*

A consistent argument was that mainstreaming without commensurate resourcing does not constitute inclusion in any meaningful sense. Three further themes recurred. These were

attainment pressures crowding out wellbeing, gaps in training and CPD, and a system oriented towards reaction rather than prevention.

> *"Children with SEBN are the 'A&E' of the education system. They are the children whose needs must be attended to as they are significant, can worsen without intervention, disrupt the learning of others, and can lead to staff burnout and absence. Yet we continue not to resource this need adequately." (Therapeutic and Developmental Support panellist)*

> *"Schools are the one constant service who cannot disengage with young people and families. Other services are stretched beyond their capacities and there is not enough resource to support those who need it at a critical stage, never mind prevention." (Senior Educational Leadership panellist)*

Round 2 returned seven statements describing the structural conditions that shape what schools and ELC settings can do. All seven met the rating threshold for strong agreement. Three also met the ranking threshold for priority for change.

Table 15. System conditions and resourcing ratings (n = 21)

Statement	% top-two	Median	IQR
The presumption of mainstreaming has not been matched by adequate funding, staffing or specialist support, and this gap is a primary driver of behavioural escalation in mainstream settings.	95.2%	5	1
Long CAMHS and specialist-service waits leave schools and ELC settings managing high levels of unmet mental health and developmental need without the support they require.	90.5%	5	1
Short-term, ring-fenced and bid-based funding cycles undermine the consistency, reach and sustainability of effective approaches.	100%	5	1
The system as currently configured is designed to react rather than prevent. Investment in early intervention is repeatedly displaced by crisis demand.	95.2%	5	0
Class sizes of up to 30, combined with the rise in additional support needs, prevent the relationships and individual attention needed to prevent and respond to challenging behaviour.	95.2%	5	1
Pupil Support Assistants are systematically undervalued in pay, voice and access to training despite carrying disproportionate weight in supporting the most vulnerable learners.	90.5%	5	1
A relentless focus on attainment and comparative performance marginalises learners with social, emotional and behavioural needs and crowds out wellbeing-focused practice.	85.7%	4	1

The strength of agreement is striking. All seven statements drew top-two agreement above eighty per cent and six of the seven had a median of Strongly agree. The panel did not split on the existence of any of these system-level problems.

The ranking task discriminates between them. Panellists were asked to identify the three system-level conditions most in need of change. Three statements met the threshold. Full ranking results are reported in Annex E, Table E2.

- **Mainstreaming without resourcing** (78% top-three, 50% first place). This is the strongest single ranking signal anywhere in Round 2. The accompanying comments make clear that

panellists are not arguing against the principle of mainstreaming. They are arguing that the resource gap has produced unsustainable conditions in mainstream classrooms.

- **Reactive rather than preventive system** (64% top-three).
- **Long CAMHS and specialist-service waits** (59% top-three).

The three priorities are linked. Panellists describe a system in which crisis demand displaces investment in prevention, and in which long waits for diagnosis and therapeutic intervention then leave schools and ELC settings managing levels of need they were not configured to absorb.

> *"The presumption of mainstreaming is not the primary driver, but a lack of adequate funding / resource to address all needs." (Therapeutic and Developmental Support panellist)*

> *"Ideally we would be looking to upstream responses and address the root causes of mental and emotional distress rather than simply needing ever greater levels of acute specialist care." (Academic and Research panellist)*

Four statements meet the rating threshold but do not meet the ranking threshold. Short-term and bid-based funding cycles, class sizes, Pupil Support Assistant undervaluation, and the attainment focus are endorsed as real problems. When asked to prioritise, however, the panel converges on the conditions that act as upstream constraints on everything else.

Effective practice inside settings

Round 1 identified relational and proactive practice as the central feature of effective approaches, with consistency across all four professional groups. Panellists described behaviour as less likely to escalate where children feel safe, known and connected to the adults around them. Within this orientation, panellists identified a range of established frameworks. Nurture, restorative practice, trauma-informed practice and neuro-affirming approaches were described as having demonstrated impact. These were described as neither soft touch nor quick fixes, requiring time, fidelity, whole-school adoption, sustained funding and skilled leadership. An important counterpoint, raised by several Therapeutic and Developmental Support panellists, was that relational approaches must not be confused with an absence of limits. Clear boundaries and consistent limit-setting are themselves relational. They communicate safety and predictability.

> *"Limit setting and boundaries can be overlooked. Our most aggressive, dysregulated and distressed children often experience the least limit setting, for fear of escalation. They need multiple learning trials of limits, rules and the word 'no'. There needs to be staffing flexibility to allow staff to see this through safely. This creates safety." (Therapeutic and Developmental Support panellist)*

In Round 1, panellists also described the conditions that make these approaches difficult to sustain and scale. Funding sustainability was the dominant barrier, raised across all four professional groups, alongside staff time and workload, leadership continuity, and the challenge of achieving whole-school adoption rather than pockets of good practice.

> *"A promising approach often loses momentum not because it is ineffective, but because the conditions needed to sustain or scale it are fragile. One of the most significant barriers is the reliance on short-term funding, which creates uncertainty and limits long-term planning. Schools may pilot innovative strategies successfully, but without guaranteed, ongoing financial support, it becomes difficult to embed these approaches into everyday practice." (Child Welfare and Safeguarding panellist)*

A distinct set of barriers, identified primarily by senior leadership and research panellists, concerned mis-implementation. Examples included cherry-picking, knowledge confined to one or two individuals, third-sector partners working at the periphery without meaningful skill

transfer, and false narratives positioning zero-tolerance as a straightforward alternative to relational approaches.

Round 2 returned four statements on effective practice. Three met the rating threshold.

Table 16. Effective practice ratings (n = 21)

Statement	% top-two	Median	IQR
Relational, trauma-informed, nurture and restorative approaches, when consistently implemented across whole settings, are the most effective long-term response to challenging behaviour.	100%	5	1
Felt safety, built through predictability, consistency, structured routines and meaningful autonomy, reduces the likelihood of behavioural escalation.	95.2%	5	1
Whole-school cultures and visible, values-based leadership are necessary conditions for sustaining relational approaches. Isolated 'champion' practitioners alone cannot make it stick.	100%	5	0
Most behavioural incidents occur at transition points, including transitions between activities, between lessons, at unstructured social times, and between sectors.	57.1%	4	1

The first three statements form a coherent picture in which relational, trauma-informed approaches are anchored by felt safety for pupils and by whole-school cultures and visible leadership that hold these approaches in place. Panellist comments add a note of caution about implementation.

> *"Yes, but this is misunderstood as fluffy and permissive. It shouldn't be permissive. It should be structured with clear boundaries and limits. This has been misperceived and created permissive practice, which exacerbates behavioural issues." (Senior Educational Leadership panellist)*

These comments do not contradict the rating result. They specify what the panel takes the statements to mean. The broader endorsement of relational and trauma-informed practice is not an endorsement of any particular operationalisation of it.

The transition-points statement did not meet the threshold. Just over half of panellists endorsed it, with substantial neutral and disagreement responses. Transitions are a recurring observation in the practitioner audio diaries and the walking interviews. The expert panel's cautious endorsement suggests that while transitions are clearly a feature of behavioural patterns in some settings, the proposition that they account for most incidents was not one the panel was willing to accept across the board.

Working together and learning together

Round 1 evidence on multi-agency working and on professional learning converged on a single structural point. Schools occupy a unique and increasingly burdensome position within the multi-agency system. As a universal service, they cannot disengage from a child in the way other agencies can, which leaves them carrying coordination and onward-referral responsibilities for which current multi-agency arrangements were not designed.

> *"At times, lack of resourcing means that Police Scotland and social work do not turn up to Team Around the Child meetings, but when they do engage fully that is when outcomes are most positive.*

They are also most successful when agencies other than the school are a key driver. All the problems of the world cannot be solved by schools." (Senior Educational Leadership panellist)

"Social work is stretched to the extreme and generally only reaches very high-tariff young people who present with violent or aggressive behaviours. There is no capacity to support young people or families in a preventative or proactive manner when minor issues first become evident." (Senior Educational Leadership panellist)

Co-located or embedded multi-disciplinary teams, including the community schools model in which social work and health staff are sited within schools, were identified by several panellists as consistently more effective than referral-based working. Youth workers featured prominently as an example of how non-teaching staff integrated into the school environment bring a different skill set and can connect with pupils who do not respond to conventional approaches.

On professional learning, trauma-informed and neuro-affirming practice emerged as the strongest theme. Staff wellbeing and emotional labour, including access to reflective supervision, were consistently identified as integral rather than ancillary to effective professional learning. Several panellists identified a significant gap between current Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and the level of need now present in classrooms. Panellists with research backgrounds raised the case for higher-level, credit-bearing study and closer alignment with European qualification frameworks. One Senior Educational Leadership panellist pushed back on the implicit model of professional learning as continual upskilling.

"We need greater time to collaborate and enact joint planning, more ability to create bespoke curriculum for young people, and an alternative range of curriculum pathways. All of this requires additional resource. 'Upskilling' teachers yet again to absorb more and more into their daily classroom responsibilities is moving the goalposts and laying responsibility for a changing community onto them." (Senior Educational Leadership panellist)

Round 2 returned four statements on inter-professional and structural changes. Two met the rating threshold. The ranking task identified a single clear priority.

Table 17. Working together and learning together ratings (n = 21)

Statement	% top-two	Median	IQR
Co-located, wraparound multi-agency working organised around schools should be prioritised over referral-based models that leave education to manage alone.	90.5%	5	1
Initial Teacher Education provides insufficient grounding in additional support needs, trauma and behaviour-as-communication relative to the level of need now in classrooms.	81.0%	5	1
GIRFEC arrangements were not designed for the level of coordination, assessment and onward referral now expected of education. The resulting administrative burden displaces direct support.	71.4%	4	2
Investment in youth work and informal learning, embedded in or alongside schools, is among the most cost-effective preventative approaches available.	66.7%	4	2

Co-located, wraparound multi-agency working drew the strongest agreement on the page and the clearest priority signal anywhere in Round 2. Sixty-four per cent of panellists placed it as the inter-professional change most in need of action and ninety-six per cent placed it in their

top three (Annex E, Table E3). The panel does not split this priority across multiple reforms. They converge on a single one.

The ITE statement met the rating threshold and drew broad ranking support, although panellist comments suggested some disagreement about the precise locus of the problem. Several panellists noted that ITE in Scotland is short, that the induction year is part of the picture, and that not all of the gap can or should be closed within initial training.

> *"ITE supports new teachers for entry into the profession. What is happening in the induction year? There needs to be more joined up thinking about what happens across ITE and what happens in the induction year." (Senior Educational Leadership panellist)*

Two statements did not meet the rating threshold. The GIRFEC statement attracted seventy-one per cent top-two agreement but with a wide interquartile range, indicating a more divided panel. Comments suggest the panel is split between those who experience GIRFEC as a useful coordinating framework and those who experience its administrative weight as displacing direct support. The youth work statement drew two-thirds top-two agreement, with comments indicating that panellists are not sceptical of youth work itself but of the specific framing that locates it alongside rather than within schools, and of any implication that informal learning should substitute for in-school support.

The contemporary social environment

Round 1 evidence on the broader social environment identified online and digital culture as the strongest theme across all four professional groups. Panellists pointed to a cluster of interconnected pressures, including smartphones in school, social media platforms, gaming, exposure to misogynistic content and the manosphere, online bullying and exploitation, and the displacement of face-to-face peer interaction by screen-based alternatives. Poverty and community conditions were also raised across multiple groups, with panellists describing children arriving in school in a state of heightened alertness shaped by the environments in which they live.

> *"Mobile phones give access to inappropriate content. Portraying unrealistic ideas about sex, gender-based violence, and misogyny dressed up as cool, fashionable or funny." (Child Welfare and Safeguarding panellist)*

> *"Children themselves will report having to 'be ready' and 'have my face on' when they live in areas of poverty. They report a hyper-vigilant, defensive state. This means they overreact to perceived threats and can be volatile in education settings." (Therapeutic and Developmental Support panellist)*

Round 1 also surfaced staff burnout and the cycle of absence and turnover as a contemporary pressure on the workforce, intersecting with the increasing complexity of need in classrooms. A distinctive sub-theme, concentrated within the Senior Educational Leadership group, concerned the changing character of home-school relationships, including parents using WhatsApp groups to coordinate complaints and young people contacting home before staff can do so. Round 1 also identified the reversion of policy language to 'challenging behaviour' as a contested meta-finding.

Round 2 returned four statements on contemporary pressures on schools and the workforce. Three met the rating threshold. The ranking task identified two near-equal priorities for pressingness.

Table 18. Contemporary social environment ratings (n = 21)

Statement	% top-two	Median	IQR
Online and digital culture, including smartphones, social media, gaming, and exposure to misogynistic and violent content, is a major driver of in-school conflict and aggression. Adults are behind pace in managing it.	90.5%	5	1
Staff burnout, absence and turnover, partly driven by emotional labour around traumatised children, perpetuate a cycle of reduced capacity to respond well.	90.5%	5	1
The reversion of policy language to 'challenging behaviour' is a retrograde step that risks reframing distress as misbehaviour and licensing punitive responses.	90.5%	5	1
Post-Covid parental disengagement from education, including parents acting as judge and jury on incidents and backing their child against the school, is a significant new pressure on staff.	66.7%	4	2

Online and digital culture and staff burnout share the strongest position. They drew identical rating and top-three ranking figures (each 90 per cent top-three) and differ only in the distribution of first-place placements (Annex E, Table E4). The panel identifies an upstream pressure on children and young people coming through online and digital culture, and a downstream pressure on the workforce arising in part from the emotional labour of responding to it.

> *"Content is not moderated and deeply concerning. Young people are being exposed to the most extreme content, this is happening routinely with algorithms leading young people to content which is highly damaging. The government needs to take a stand on this (in line with other countries)." (Senior Educational Leadership panellist)*

The proposition that reverting to **'challenging behaviour'** in policy language represents a retrograde step met the rating threshold and was ranked in the top three by nearly three quarters of panellists. Round 1 had already flagged this framing as a contested meta-finding, and Round 2 confirms that the panel sees the reversion as a substantive policy concern rather than a terminological preference. One panellist's comment captures the structural reading.

> *"This is a function of stress. When people experience stress, we become concrete, direct, reactive in our thinking. We were making good progress nationally ten years ago, then we began to reduce resource, covid hit and society shifted. Reporting and data demand on teachers has also risen, attainment pressure too." (Academic and Research panellist)*

The clearest negative signal in Round 2 relates to **post-Covid parental disengagement**. The statement fell below the rating threshold and was not ranked in the top three by a majority of panellists. The pattern across both rating and ranking is unusually consistent and suggests the panel does not simply place this lower in priority but actively rejects the framing. Comments help explain why. Several panellists indicated that the experience described is real but partial, that it applies to a small minority of parents, and that broader characterisations risk obscuring widespread parental engagement.

> *"This is a small number of parents. The vast majority of parents continue to be supportive and are engaged and invested in their child's education. However, this small number of people can have a significant impact on staff wellbeing." (Therapeutic and Developmental Support panellist)*

This finding does not mean parental relationships with schools are unproblematic. It means the specific framing of post-Covid disengagement, with parents acting as judge and jury, is one the panel as a whole does not accept as a representative description.

Distinctive observations

Three statements were carried forward from Round 1 as distinctive single-source observations rather than as established findings. Panellists were asked to evaluate each individually, with no ranking task.

Table 19. Distinctive single-source observations ratings (n = 21)

Statement	% top-two	Median	IQR
Statutory regulation of social media for under-16s would meaningfully reduce in-school behavioural pressures.	61.9%	4	2
Free bus passes, while overwhelmingly positive, have enabled a small number of children to be involved in antisocial behaviour and organised-crime exploitation at a larger scale than previously.	38.1%	3	1
The expansion of funded ELC hours may be associated with rising dysregulation among the most vulnerable young children, given the size of free-play environments.	28.6%	3	2

None of the three statements meets the threshold for strong agreement. These propositions were carried forward for testing to establish whether they would attract broader endorsement, and the Round 2 result is that they do not. The statutory social media regulation statement drew the strongest support of the three but with substantial dissent, with several panellists agreeing in principle but qualifying their support with concerns about evidence and implementation. The bus passes statement attracted active disagreement and counter-examples. The ELC expansion statement drew the lowest agreement, although the comments are varied. Some panellists agreed with the underlying observation about dysregulation among very young children in large free-play environments, while others were sceptical of the proposed link to expanded hours.

These observations were raised by experienced practitioners and warrant attention but did not, in this exercise, attract panel-wide endorsement as established findings. The result also demonstrates that the rating and ranking exercises functioned as discrimination rather than acquiescence. The nineteen statements that met the threshold did so against a comparator of seven which did not.

Summary

Nineteen of the twenty-six statements rated in Round 2 met the pre-specified threshold for strong agreement. Of these, six were also identified through the ranking tasks as priorities for action, change, or pressing-ness.

The pattern of agreement is coherent. The panel converges on a developmental and relational framing of behaviour, identifies a clear set of system conditions that constrain what schools and ELC settings can do, endorses relational and trauma-informed practice as the most effective long-term response, and identifies a small set of contemporary pressures that act on both children and the workforce.

The pattern of priority across the ranking tasks is also coherent. Three priorities stand out.

First, the **resourcing of mainstreaming**. Half the panel placed this as the single system-level condition most in need of change, and three quarters placed it in their top three. The second and third priorities for system change, the reactive orientation of the system and long CAMHS and specialist-service waits, sit alongside it as the upstream conditions that determine what is possible inside settings.

Second, **co-located, wraparound multi-agency working organised around schools**. This was the clearest priority signal anywhere in Round 2. Sixty-four per cent of panellists placed it as the inter-professional change most in need of action and ninety-six per cent placed it in their top three.

Third, the contemporary pressures arising from **online and digital culture** and from **staff burnout**. The two share top position and the panel did not separate them in priority.

The Round 2 findings are reported here as areas of strong expert agreement and relative priorities among the panel. They capture structured expert judgement across four specialist fields and surface where that judgement converges most strongly. They do not establish the prevalence of the conditions described in the wider workforce or pupil population, nor do they substitute for the experiential evidence gathered in the other strands of the study.

Conclusions

This study was undertaken to understand how violence and aggression are experienced in schools and Early Learning and Childcare settings, what contributes to challenging behaviour, and the conditions that help to prevent and reduce it. The conclusions and implications below draw on the points where the findings of the four strands align, and on the strongest patterns within each strand.

Conclusion 1

Most children and young people are happy at their ELC or school, and a substantial proportion experience disruption, witness aggression, or are bullied. Both findings hold simultaneously and neither cancels the other.

The aggregate picture is one of broad satisfaction alongside a real and consequential minority experience. Within the parent and caregiver survey returns, approximately three-quarters of children are described as very or fairly happy at their setting (76%). At the same time, 58% of children were reported to experience disruption to learning or play from peer behaviour at least weekly. In the last twelve months, two-thirds (67%) had witnessed peer-to-peer aggression, just under half (47%) had personally experienced verbal or physical aggression, and 29% had experienced at least one form of bullying.

Conclusion 2

Behaviour and safety in schools and ELC settings are produced by the interaction of structural conditions and relationships.

On the evidence assembled in this report, approaches that locate the source of challenging behaviour solely in individual children, or that respond only at the level of incident management, are unlikely to address the conditions under which incidents arise. Conversely, conditions that schools and ELC settings can shape, or that can be shaped around them - school culture, adult presence in transitional spaces, predictable routines, staffing continuity, the felt fairness of responses - are conditions that the evidence identifies as consequential.

The empirical strands converge on this framing. Practitioner audio diaries identify transitions, environmental conditions (crowding, open plan spaces), staffing levels and changes in the adults present as recurrent precursors to incidents across ELC, primary and secondary settings. In walking interviews, pupils described safety as inseparable from who is present in a space and how those people behave and - in the primary case - from a shared school culture pupils could name and explain. ELC play observations record practitioners drawing on the physical environment, predictable routines and co-regulatory strategies as active tools for prevention. The Q-methodology surfaces systemic perceptions, including fairness, supervision and the adequacy of response, as central to how pupils in the senior phase construct their experience. Parent and caregiver open-text responses frame difficulties in terms of staffing, pupil-staff ratios

and the gap between inclusive aspiration and resourced practice, rather than in terms of individual pupils alone.

Conclusion 3

Behaviour described as challenging or aggressive is, in many cases, more accurately understood as communication of distress or unmet need.

Four lines of evidence align with this framing. ELC practitioners interpret the behaviours they record developmentally and communicatively, treating them as expressions of distress rather than intentional aggression. The primary diaries show a developmental reading and the protection of staff and peers operating together, not as alternatives. Among the Delphi panel, the proposition that challenging behaviour is in most cases best understood as communication of distress or unmet need drew the firmest endorsement of any single statement on individual and developmental factors. Parents and caregivers with a basis to judge rate restorative, relational and individualised approaches, including peer mediation, nurture groups, and personalised or modified curriculum, as effective at substantially higher rates than punitive approaches. This framing is not without qualification. Panellists noted that a developmental reading of behaviour does not displace expectations about conduct, and that the protection of staff and other pupils remains a precondition of any relational response.

Conclusion 4

Relational continuity, trusted adult presence and felt safety are the most consistently identified within-setting protective conditions.

Pupils, practitioners and expert panellists describe the same pattern: behaviour and safety improve where children and young people experience themselves as known and respected by adults they trust. Pupils described safety in terms of relationships rather than rules or spaces alone. Where the relational fabric is disrupted, through staff turnover, sickness absence, lone working or inadequate staff-pupil ratios, the conditions for de-escalation and accountability degrade together. Delphi panellists endorsed relational, trauma-informed, nurture and restorative approaches, consistently implemented across whole settings, as the most effective long-term response. ELC observations record co-regulatory approaches, including calm verbal repetition, physical comfort and indirect guidance, as consistently effective at de-escalation. The audio diaries describe primary support work as built on close knowledge of individual children, and record escalation following the absence or change of familiar adults.

However, relational approaches are not permissive. They are structured, with clear limits, and require skilled leadership to implement well. Relationships are not an adjunct to behaviour management. In this evidence base, they are the substrate on which preventive practice depends, and that substrate is sustained by the balance between the demands made of practitioners and the resources available to respond well.

Conclusion 5

Reported incidents understate the level of aggression and bullying; erosion of trust in institutional response is one contributing factor.

On this evidence, pupils and parents are not asking primarily for harsher sanctions. They are asking for responses that are visible, consistent and followed through. Where responses are perceived as inconsistent, opaque or protective of the institution rather than the child, trust erodes. The Q-methodology factor "Witnessing Injustice" describes pupils who see aggressors returned to class quickly and victims overlooked. Among parents who responded, 16% of applicable child-records for aggression, and 42% for bullying, had not been reported to the setting at all.

Identity-based aggression recurs across strands. Primary diaries recorded racially targeted abuse directed at staff and racist language in the playground, pupils in one secondary school described homophobic, transphobic, racist and ableist language as so common that reporting it felt daunting, and parents reported prejudice-based bullying for 7% of children, rising to 12% at secondary.

The practitioner diaries suggest a parallel gap in the recording of harm to staff. Diarists described frequent aggression as unremarkable, and coordinated, gendered harassment of the kind described as 'rage baiting' falls below the threshold of reportable violence. One teacher met resistance in recording an injury.

Confidence that settings will work collaboratively with families is generally high among survey respondents, falling to 57% at secondary. Primary is the stage at which parents most frequently disagree that staff appear well-supported in managing challenging behaviour (36% agree, 41% disagree) and the stage at which reports of witnessed physical aggression and worry about safety are most concentrated. The parent-staff relationship varies across stages and settings and should not be treated as uniform.

Conclusion 6

Within-school variation in children's experience is substantial, and school-level indicators do not capture it.

Pupils in the same building, sometimes the same year group on the same day, can experience their school in fundamentally different ways. Both Q-methodology factors, "Safe, Supported, and Able to Learn" and "Witnessing Injustice", were present in each participating school. In the walking interviews pupils in the same setting described different experiences of school space, depending on who was in that space and the quality of relational supervision. Aggregate measures, including incident counts, exclusion rates, inspection summaries and survey averages, can show a school performing well overall while a meaningful proportion of its pupils experience it as unsafe or unfair. On this evidence, policy and practice on behaviour and safety need to be calibrated to the full range of pupil experience, not solely to the school average.

Conclusion 7

A small number of children with complex unmet needs absorb a disproportionate share of practitioner and system resource, with consequences for them, their peers and the staff who support them.

Practitioner diaries across participating ELC, primary and secondary settings return repeatedly to the same children and young people, whose needs absorb significant adult time across multiple entries. ELC observations record that one-to-one support for a child in distress commits other staff to the remaining group, creating pressure that intensifies when staffing is tight.

The expert panel reached the same view through structured priority-setting. Asked to identify the system-level condition most in need of change, half of the panel placed the gap between mainstreaming and its resourcing at the top of their list, and more than three quarters placed it in the top three. No other system-level condition attracted comparable ranking weight. Panel comments make clear that this is not an argument against mainstreaming as a principle.

The parent survey describes the same pressure from outside the workforce. More staff and improved ratios is the dominant theme in open-text responses on what would better support pupil wellbeing, and parents report cumulative effects on other pupils in the same classes. The account that emerges is of inclusion that parents experience as under-resourced rather than ill-intentioned, captured in one parent's phrase, "exclusion by inclusion".

Mainstream classrooms have absorbed a profile of need that the accompanying staffing, specialist input and physical environment do not currently match. The resourcing of inclusion, on this evidence, has not kept pace.

Conclusion 8

The conditions under which staff can sustain relational, preventive practice are not consistently in place

Across strands, practitioners describe the same gap: an aspiration to relational, preventive work that the conditions of the job do not consistently allow them to deliver. The audio diaries record staffing pressures, lone working in periods of high need, and the displacement of preventive contact by reactive incident management.

The Delphi panel identified the same pattern as a system-level finding. Funding sustainability, class size, staffing and support assistant investment, and staff burnout and emotional labour recurred across multiple Round 1 domains as constraints on effective practice. Panellists in all four professional groups described a system configured to react rather than prevent, in which downstream demand repeatedly displaces investment upstream. Reactive orientation produces crisis demand, crisis demand consumes the resource that prevention would require, and specialist services constrained by their own resource architecture arrive too late to break the cycle.

Initial Teacher Education was identified as providing insufficient grounding in additional support needs, trauma and behaviour-as-communication relative to the level of need now present in classrooms and continuing professional learning as constrained by funding and restricted non-contact time. Multi-agency and specialist support, including CAMHS and educational psychology, was identified as a key constraint on what schools and ELC settings can do alone. Where these services are slow to access, inconsistently available, or withdrawn at the point of greatest need, the burden of holding complex situations falls back onto education staff working without the specialist input the situation requires.

Survey responses from participating parents repeat this claim. The dominant theme in open-text responses on what would better support pupil wellbeing is more staff and improved ratios. At primary, in particular, parents most frequently disagree that staff appear well-supported in managing challenging behaviour (see Conclusion 5).

The convergent picture is not one of practitioners lacking the disposition or skill for relational, preventive practice. It is one of practitioners working in conditions that are not reliably configured to support it: in staffing levels, in the balance of preventive and reactive demand, in access to specialist services, and in the time and resource available for professional learning. The capacity of staff to sustain the relational practice the policy framework expects of them depends on conditions that the present system does not consistently provide.

Conclusion 9

Staff wellbeing is not separable from children's wellbeing.

The wellbeing of the staff who teach and care for children cannot be treated as a separate concern from the wellbeing of children themselves. The emotional demands made of ELC practitioners and teachers are considerable and are variably supported. The staff diaries describe a marked variation in the affective register of practitioner accounts. At one end, equanimity sustained by distributed team support in an ELC. At the other, injury, sustained vigilance and fear of the professional consequences of intervening. The most serious physical harm recorded in the diaries came from the early primary stages, where accounts describe injuries to teachers or support staff requiring medical attention. Secondary entries add physical threat and the damaging effect of false allegations against staff. What separates these accounts is not the disposition of the individual practitioner. It is the conditions under which they are working.

The expert panel identifies two contemporary pressures as bearing heavily on the workforce. The first is staff burnout, absence and turnover, which the panel describes as partly driven by the emotional labour of supporting children affected by trauma and as perpetuating a cycle of reduced capacity to respond well. The second is the broader online and digital environment in which children and young people now live. Smartphones, social media platforms, gaming and exposure to misogynistic and violent content were identified by the panel as contributing to in-school conflict, with adults less equipped to manage these pressures than the rate of change in the online environment requires.

Staff are asked to sustain the relational, preventive practice that pupils, practitioners and panellists identify as protective for children (Conclusions 4 and 8). However, that practice does not stand apart from the conditions of the work. It rests on the capacity of the adults who deliver

it. The wellbeing of the adults who support children is, on this evidence, a condition of children's wellbeing rather than a parallel concern.

Implications

Several implications for policy and practice follow from the conclusions above. They are presented in no order of priority. The Delphi panel identified relative priorities for action, change and pressing-ness within the expert exercise itself, and these are reported in Section 6. The implications below draw together the points that follow from the convergent findings across the strands of the study. The strands were designed to warrant different kinds of claim, and the implications are advanced as the actionable consequences of what this evidence supports.

Implications at a glance

The seven implications address three connected questions. What does the system need to resource? How does it need to be configured? What does it need to do better?

Resource the foundations	Three implications concern the resourcing of inclusion, the conditions of practitioner work, and the preparation of those who do it. These are upstream of everything else. *(Implications 1, 2, 4)*
Configure the wider service around schools	One implication concerns the architecture of multi-agency support. The expert panel identifies this as the most pressing single change in how the system around schools is organised. *(Implication 3)*
Strengthen what schools and ELC settings can see and act on	Three implications concern how settings understand within-school variation, the visibility of institutional response to families, and the recognition that staff wellbeing is part of children's wellbeing. *(Implications 5, 6, 7)*

1. Resource the conditions, not only the response

The conditions that shape whether incidents arise warrant at least equivalent attention to the response when they do.

Across the strands of this study, the conditions in question are recognisable. They are staffing continuity, pupil-staff ratios, adult presence in transitional spaces, and the balance between preventive and reactive demand on practitioner time. Workforce planning and resource allocation should be evaluated against their effect on these conditions.

2. Match mainstreaming resource to mainstreaming need

Inclusion as currently resourced does not match the complexity of need now present in mainstream classrooms. Closing this gap is the precondition for everything else.

A consistent message emerges from practitioners, parents and the expert panel. Acting on it requires attention to support assistant investment, specialist service capacity, access to specialist placements where needed, and the physical and staffing environment of mainstream classrooms. Without this, the relational and rights-based framing of national policy cannot be

delivered in practice. The implication is not a retreat from inclusion. It is the resourcing that inclusion was always assumed to carry.

3. Make multi-agency support reliably accessible

The wider service architecture around schools should sit alongside them rather than at the end of a referral pathway.

Education staff are absorbing the consequences of constrained access to CAMHS, educational psychology and other specialist services. The Delphi panel identifies a clear preferred direction in response, namely a move from referral to wraparound provision. The action this implies is not faster referrals into the existing model but specialist provision configured around the child and the setting, available when it is needed, and built into the workforce architecture rather than added on top of it.

4. Recalibrate Initial Teacher Education and continuing professional learning

The grounding in additional support needs, trauma and behaviour-as-communication that the role now requires is greater than current preparation, induction and ongoing learning consistently provide.

The gap is structural rather than dispositional. Postgraduate Initial Teacher Education is short and induction support, while integral to continuing professional learning through the early career phase, can be of variable quality. Career-long professional learning is constrained by funding and restricted non-contact time. Closing the gap will need attention across the career course, not initial preparation alone, and the resourcing that allows participation without further displacement of practitioner time.

5. Build sensitivity to within-school variation into how settings are evaluated and supported

Aggregate measures of a school can show it performing well while a meaningful proportion of its pupils experience it as unsafe. Evaluation should be calibrated to that variation, with the support that requires.

Methods sensitive to within-school variation, including pupil-level qualitative methods and disaggregated experience data, give a more accurate picture of how a setting is experienced. Such methods also require time, expertise and analytic capacity that schools and ELC settings cannot reasonably absorb without external support. Loading further evaluative work onto settings without this support would compound the conditions identified elsewhere in this report.

6. Make institutional response visible to those affected and resource the work this requires

Closing the gap between incidents that occur and incidents that are reported depends on whether pupils and families can see that incidents are taken seriously. This is substantial work and should be resourced as such.

The under-reporting of bullying and aggression is partly a function of trust in institutional response. Strengthening that trust requires time for staff to communicate with families, capacity to coordinate across home and school, and the staffing stability that makes consistent follow-through possible. The implication is as much a question of resource as it is of protocol and should be supported as such in workforce planning and the conditions of the role.

7. Treat workforce wellbeing as part of child wellbeing

The conditions of adult work in schools and ELC settings are conditions of children's experience. Measures that consider one without the other will miss what produces both.

Workforce strategy, occupational health, and protections against the consequences of allegations should be developed in recognition of this connection and should extend to support staff. The expert panel describes a cycle in which burnout reduces the capacity to respond well and reduced capacity in turn produces further burnout. This is not a problem that individual resilience can resolve. It belongs in the design of the role and the conditions under which the role is performed.

Technical annex A: profile of case study settings

Table A1. Overview of case study settings

Setting	Region	Locality	Phase	Pupil roll	ASN (% of roll)	FSM (% of roll)	Attendance	SIMD profile (% of roll)
1	West Central	Large urban	Secondary	750–999	25–49%	10–24%	85–90%	Q1: 25–49%; Q2: 25–49%; Q3–5: <25% each
2	West Central	Large urban	Primary & ELC	500–749	25–49%	<10%	90–95%	Q1: 25–49%; Q2–4: 10–24% each; Q5: 10–24%
3	Eastern	Urban area	ELC	—	—	—	—	—
4	Southern	Remote small town	Secondary	500–749	25–49%	25–49%	80–85%	Q2: 50–74%; Q1/Q3: 10–24% each; Q4–5: 0%
5	Southern	Remote rural	Secondary	100–249	50–74%	10–24%	90–95%	Q3: 50–74%; Q4: 25–49%; Q1/Q2: suppressed
6	Southern	Accessible large town	ELC	—	—	—	—	—
7	Southern	Remote rural	ELC	—	—	—	—	—

Note. Data drawn from Scottish Government School Level Summary Statistics 2024. Published school-level data are not available for standalone Early Learning and Childcare settings (Settings 3, 6, and 7). ASN = Additional Support Needs; FSM = Free School Meals (P6–P7 and S1–S6); SIMD = Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (Q1 = most deprived, Q5 = least deprived). 'Suppressed' indicates values withheld for statistical disclosure control.

Technical annex B: Q-methodology details

This annex provides the technical information underlying the Q-methodology strand.

B1. Q-set development

The Q-set (the set of statements sorted by participants) was developed through a structured, iterative process. An initial concourse of 68 statements was derived from the research literature on school violence and aggression, professional guidance, and thematic domains identified by the research team. Statements were organised into six experiential domains: experiencing school safety; observing patterns and dynamics; impact on learning and wellbeing; experiencing responses; experiencing support; and experiencing the school environment.
The concourse was reduced to 54 statements through team review, then to 48 through consultation with pastoral teachers and piloting with secondary-age pupils. Four versions of the Q-set were produced, with a documented change log tracking revisions at each stage. Revisions included simplifying language, removing jargon, reframing statements in the first person, and ensuring that pupils from across the experiential spectrum - from those who feel safe and unaffected to those with significant negative experiences - could find statements that matched their reality.

The final Q-set comprised 48 statements with 23 positive (48%) and 25 negative (52%) framings, providing near-parity of positive and negative content across all six domains.

B2. Sorting grid

Pupils sorted the 48 statements into a 13-column forced distribution grid ranging from −6 (most disagree) to +6 (most agree), with the following number of statements permitted in each column:

Figure B1. Forced distribution grid for 48 statements

−6	−5	−4	−3	−2	−1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4	+5	+6
1	2	3	4	5	6	6	6	5	4	3	2	1

Top row: column values (−6 = most disagree to +6 = most agree). Bottom row: number of statements permitted in each column. Total = 48.

B3. Factor analysis and retention

Q-sort data were analysed using by-person factor analysis. In conventional factor analysis (used in surveys), the variables are items and the cases are people. In Q, this is inverted: each person's entire sort is treated as a variable, and the analysis identifies clusters of people who sorted statements in similar patterns. Each cluster represents a shared viewpoint.
The analysis used centroid factor extraction with varimax rotation and Pearson correlation, conducted in QMethod Software. The research team tested two-, three- and five-factor solutions and evaluated each against established retention criteria:

Eigenvalue above 1: a standard minimum threshold indicating that a factor explains more variance than a single Q-sort would by chance.

Parallel analysis: a more stringent test comparing each factor's eigenvalue against what would be expected from random data of the same dimensions. Only factors exceeding the 95th percentile of this random benchmark are retained.

Humphrey's rule: the cross-product of the two highest factor loadings should exceed twice the standard error (here, $2 \times 1/\sqrt{48} = 2 \times 0.144 = 0.29$). Humphrey's rule values are reported from the unrotated factor matrix.

Low inter-factor correlations: retained factors should not correlate too highly with one another (below 0.50), confirming that they represent genuinely distinct viewpoints.

Interpretive coherence: each factor should tell a meaningful, internally consistent story about how pupils experience behaviour.

The two-factor solution was the only model in which every retained factor met all of these criteria. Its key characteristics are summarised in Table A1.

Table B1. Factor characteristics for the two-factor solution

Characteristic	Factor 1	Factor 2
Number of defining sorts	20 (incl. 1 negative)	10 (incl. 1 negative)
Percentage of study variance	28%	13%
Eigenvalue	8.82	4.24
Parallel analysis threshold (95th %ile)	2.39	2.19
Humphrey's rule value	0.64	0.43
Composite reliability	0.988	0.976
Standard error of factor z-scores	0.111	0.156
Inter-factor correlation	−0.14	−0.14
Non-loading participants	2 of 32 (6%)	
Distinguishing statements	46 of 48	
Consensus statements	2 of 48	

Both factors comfortably exceeded the parallel analysis thresholds and Humphrey's rule. Their inter-factor correlation of −0.14 confirms that the two viewpoints are near-orthogonal — clearly distinct from one another. Only two participants did not load on either factor, both with very low communalities, suggesting idiosyncratic rather than systematically shared viewpoints.
The three-factor solution was the nearest competitor. It produced a third factor focused on restorative practice and relational approaches, but this factor failed the parallel analysis threshold, correlated highly with Factor 1 (r = 0.62), and resulted in more non-loading participants. It was judged to represent a difference of emphasis within a single broad viewpoint rather than a genuinely separate perspective.

B4. The 48 statements with composite factor rankings

Table B2 lists all 48 statements with their composite ranking in each factor. The ranking shows where each statement would be placed in a single idealised sort representing each viewpoint. Statements are ordered by the difference between Factor 1 and Factor 2 rankings, highlighting the points of greatest divergence.

Table B2. Composite factor rankings, ordered by divergence

No.	Statement	F1 Rank	F2 Rank
9	I can relax and be myself at school.	+2	-6
10	I don't think much about violence or aggression during my school day.	+3	-4
41	Teachers have time to support students who have been hurt by aggressive behaviour.	+2	-5
2	I feel afraid of some students in my school.	-4	+2
4	I have changed how I get around school to avoid certain people or places.	-5	+1
21	Worrying about aggressive behaviour affects how I feel before I even get to school.	-5	+1
25	I generally enjoy coming to school.	+6	0
28	I feel I can concentrate and do my best work at school.	+4	-2
30	I see students who have been aggressive back in class very quickly after an incident.	-2	+4
40	Students who behave aggressively seem to get more attention than those they hurt or target.	-1	+5
43	I feel confident that adults in my school would help me if I was being hurt.	+5	-1
48	I feel safe in places like the dining hall, social areas, changing rooms and toilets.	+4	-2
3	Certain times of the school day feel more risky than others.	-3	+2
5	Aggressive behaviour in school has made me want to stay at home.	-6	-1
14	Social media drama often spills over into school the next day.	-1	+4
16	I see students looking out for each other.	+2	-3
27	I have felt physically unwell because of what happens at school.	-4	+1
32	The consequences for aggressive behaviour seem clear to me.	+2	-3
33	I see some students getting away with more than others.	+1	+6
39	I've seen victims of aggression get blamed or punished.	-2	+3
1	I feel safe in most parts of my school.	+5	+1
8	I feel more at risk because of who I am (my identity or needs).	-4	0
17	I have seen pupils being aggressive towards teachers or other staff.	0	+4
18	A lot of aggression happens out of sight of staff in school.	-1	+3
19	The same students tend to be involved in aggressive incidents again and again.	+1	+5
26	Aggressive behaviour has affected my friendships or social life at school.	-2	+2
29	When aggressive incidents happen, I see them dealt with quickly.	0	-4

31	I see conversations happening where staff and students work things out together after incidents.	+1	-3
42	Pupil support, guidance staff and counselling are available when needed.	+3	-1
7	Seeing violence has affected me even when I wasn't directly involved.	-3	0
15	I see prejudice and discrimination driving a lot of aggression in school.	-2	+1
23	I've seen other students become socially withdrawn or unhappy because of aggressive behaviour.	-1	+2
24	Teachers sometimes have to leave my class to deal with behaviour incidents.	0	+3
34	I see students given time and space to calm down after incidents.	+1	-2
47	Most adults in my school treat students with respect.	+3	0
6	Aggression follows me home when videos or images are shared on group chats without consent.	-3	-1
11	Most disagreements between students get sorted out without becoming aggressive.	0	-2
13	I see young people stepping in to calm down situations before they escalate.	-2	-4
35	I notice teachers trying to understand what's behind aggressive behaviour.	+1	-1
36	Students are involved in decisions about how behaviour is managed in my school.	-1	-3
37	Students are encouraged to report violent and aggressive behaviour and know how to.	+4	+2
38	Students who report aggressive incidents are well supported afterwards.	0	-2
45	Positive relationships are promoted in my school.	+3	+1
46	My school feels overcrowded.	-3	-5
12	I notice that aggressive incidents often start small and build up.	+1	0
20	Some students think being aggressive makes them look tough or cool.	+2	+3
22	I can see the impact that aggressive behaviour has on my teachers.	-1	0
44	There are calm, quiet spaces in my school where students can go to calm down.	0	-1

Statements are ordered by the size of the difference between Factor 1 and Factor 2 rankings (largest divergence first). Consensus statements (s22, s46) appear at the bottom.

Technical annex C: parent and caregiver survey sample

Scope

The findings reported here are based on 152 completed surveys received between February and April 2026. The sample is self-selected and was recruited through Connect (Scottish Parent Teacher Council), parent social media groups and university networks. The findings are best understood as the experiences and concerns of an engaged parent constituency rather than as population estimates of parental views or experiences in Scottish education. Findings for ELC (n=35) rest on small numbers and are reported with appropriate caution.

Percentage differences between groups should not be interpreted as statistically significant; they indicate directions of variation. Where parents have children in multiple sectors, child-level findings count each child once in the relevant sector group; respondent-level findings count each respondent once. Both child-level and respondent-level n values are stated alongside the relevant findings throughout.

Sample profile

The tables below summarise the achieved sample. Q1 reports the number of children per respondent (respondent-level, n=152). Q2 reports setting type at the child level (n=267). Q4 reports the location type of the child's setting at respondent level (n=152). Geographic reach is reported by ITL2 region for the 143 respondents who provided a valid postcode.

Table C1. Q1 — Number of children per respondent attending ELC or school in Scotland (respondent-level, n=152).

Children attending ELC / school	n respondents	%
1 child	69	45.4%
2 children	60	39.5%
3 children	19	12.5%
4 children	1	0.7%
5 children	3	2.0%
Total	**152**	**100.0%**

Table C2. Q2 — Setting type (child-level, n=267).

Setting	n children	%
Early Learning and Childcare (ELC)	35	13.1%
Primary School	138	51.7%
Secondary School	93	34.8%
Special School	1	0.4%
Total	**267**	**100.0%**

Table C3. Q4 — Setting location, as reported by respondents (respondent-level, n=152).

Location type	n respondents	%
Urban (city or large town, population over 10,000)	50	32.9%
Suburban (residential area on the edge of a city or town)	67	44.1%
Rural (village, small town or countryside)	34	22.4%
Remote or island community	1	0.7%
Total	**152**	**100.0%**

Table C4. Geographic reach by ITL2 region.

ITL2 region	n respondents	% of valid postcodes
West Central Scotland	70	49%
Eastern Scotland	29	20%
Southern Scotland	24	17%
Highlands and Islands	16	11%
North Eastern Scotland	3	2%
Other / unclassified	1	1%
Total	**143**	**100%**

Of 152 completed responses, 143 provided a valid postcode and are classified using the Office for National Statistics ITL2 regional geography. Nine respondents did not provide a postcode. One respondent provided a postcode that could not be classified into one of the five Scottish ITL2 regions and is shown as “Other / unclassified”. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole percent.

Technical annex D: parent and caregiver survey instrument

Challenging Behaviour in Schools and Early Learning and Childcare

Section 1: About Your Family

These questions help us understand who is completing the survey.

1. How many of your children are currently attending a school or early learning and childcare (ELC) setting in Scotland?

Response options: 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

2. Please indicate the type of setting for each of your children:

Response options: Early Learning & Childcare | Primary School | Secondary School | Special School

[Responses collected per child: Child 1 – Child 5]

3. What is the postcode area of your main family home? (For example: G41, EH12, AB25 — first 3–4 characters only)

This helps us understand geographic variation across Scotland. We do not collect your full postcode.

[Open text response — maximum 4 characters words]

4. How would you describe the area where your child's school or ELC setting is located?

Response options: Urban (city or large town with population over 10,000) | Suburban (residential area on the edge of a city or town) | Rural (village, small town, or countryside) | Remote or island community

If your children attend different settings in different types of areas, please answer based on the setting where you have the most experience, or the oldest child's setting.

Section 2: Your Overall Experience

These questions ask about your general experience of your children's educational setting(s).

5. Overall, how happy and settled does each child seem at their educational setting?

Response options: Very happy | Fairly happy | Neither happy or unhappy | Fairly unhappy | Very unhappy

[Responses collected per child: Child 1 – Child 5]

6. What does your child's school or ELC setting do well to support positive behaviour and a safe learning environment, and what more could they do?

This is optional. We are interested in examples of good practice.

[Open text response — maximum 200 words words]

Section 3: Behaviours at School and ELC

The following questions ask about behaviours your children may have experienced or witnessed.

7. How would you describe the overall behaviour of children at your child's setting?

Response options: Very good | Good | Mixed | Poor | Very poor | Unsure

[Responses collected per child: Child 1 – Child 5]

8. The school/ELC effectively recognises and celebrates positive behaviour.

Response options: Strongly agree | Agree | Neither | Disagree | Strongly disagree

[Responses collected per child: Child 1 – Child 5]

9. In the last twelve months, has your child told you about any of the following positive experiences with other children at their setting?

Response options: Making new friendships | Being supported by classmates | Working well together on activities | Helping or being helped by peers | Being included in play or social activities | Unsure

[Responses collected per child: Child 1 – Child 5]

10. How often does your child report that learning time or play is interrupted by other children's behaviour?

Response options: Daily | Weekly | Monthly | Rarely | Never

[Responses collected per child: Child 1 – Child 5]

11. In the last twelve months, has your child told you about any of the following challenging behaviours by children towards other children at their setting?

These questions help us understand the range of behaviours children observe. Many children do not experience or witness these behaviours.

Response options: Verbal aggression or threats (face-to-face) | Verbal aggression or threats (online) | Physical behaviours (hitting, kicking, pushing, spitting, biting) | None of these behaviours

[Responses collected per child: Child 1 – Child 5]

12. In the last twelve months, has your child told you about any of the following behaviours by children towards staff at their setting?

Response options: Verbal aggression or threats (face-to-face) | Verbal aggression or threats (online) | Physical behaviours (hitting, kicking, pushing, spitting, biting) | None of these behaviours

[Responses collected per child: Child 1 – Child 5]

13. In the last twelve months, has each child personally experienced any of the following negative interactions with other children at their setting?

Response options: Verbal aggression or threats | Physical aggression | Prefer not to say | No, not experienced

[Responses collected per child: Child 1 – Child 5]

14. When this happened, how satisfied were you with how the setting responded?

Response options: Satisfied | Neither satisfied or dissatisfied | Dissatisfied | Did not report | Not applicable

[Responses collected per child: Child 1 – Child 5]

15. In the last twelve months, has each child experienced any of the following types of bullying at their setting?

Note: Bullying is repeated negative behaviour intended to hurt or intimidate. It differs from one-off incidents of aggression. Prejudice-based bullying includes bullying related to gender, ethnicity, disability, religion, sexuality, or other protected characteristic.

Response options: Bullying by individual | Bullying by group | Prejudice-based bullying | Online bullying | None of the above | Prefer not to say

[Responses collected per child: Child 1 – Child 5]

16. When this happened, how satisfied were you with how the setting responded?

Response options: Satisfied | Neither satisfied or dissatisfied | Dissatisfied | Did not report

[Responses collected per child: Child 1 – Child 5]

17. In the last twelve months, has your child/children expressed a worry or concern about feeling unsafe at their setting?

Response options: Yes | No | Unsure

[Responses collected per child: Child 1 – Child 5]

18. If Yes, without sharing identifying details, what was the nature of their concern?

This is optional. Please share only what you feel comfortable sharing. What specifically concerned them?

[Open text response — maximum 150 words words]

Section 4: Approaches to Positive Behaviour

These questions ask about approaches your children's settings may use to support positive behaviour and relationships.

19. In the last twelve months, have any of your children been involved in any of the following approaches at their setting to support positive behaviour or improve relationships?

	Yes	No	Unsure	Not familiar with term
Restorative conversation or circle	□	□	□	□
Nurture group	□	□	□	□
Mentoring time	□	□	□	□
Peer mediation or buddy system	□	□	□	□
Circle time	□	□	□	□
Positive behaviour support plan	□	□	□	□
Personalised or modified curriculum	□	□	□	□
Flexible timetable adjustments	□	□	□	□
Detention or supervised reflection	□	□	□	□
Exclusion – temporary removal from school	□	□	□	□

20. How effective was this approach?

	Effective	Neither effective or ineffective	Ineffective	Too early to say	N/A
Restorative conversation or circle	□	□	□	□	□
Nurture group	□	□	□	□	□
Mentoring time	□	□	□	□	□
Peer mediation or buddy system	□	□	□	□	□
Circle time	□	□	□	□	□
Positive behaviour support plan	□	□	□	□	□
Personalised or modified curriculum	□	□	□	□	□
Flexible timetable adjustments	□	□	□	□	□
Detention or supervised reflection	□	□	□	□	□
Exclusion – temporary removal from school	□	□	□	□	□

21. How could schools and ELC settings better support children's wellbeing?

This is optional. Consider staff support, resources, training, policies, or approaches.

[Open text response — maximum 200 words words]

Section 5: Communication and Parent–Staff Relationships
These questions ask about your relationship and communication with your children's educational setting(s).

22. I feel treated with respect by staff at my child's setting.

Response options: Strongly agree | Agree | Neither | Disagree | Strongly disagree

[Responses collected per child: Child 1 – Child 5]

23. I feel comfortable approaching the school/ELC with concerns or complaints.

Response options: Strongly agree | Agree | Neither | Disagree | Strongly disagree

[Responses collected per child: Child 1 – Child 5]

24. I feel confident the school/ELC will work with me to resolve any issues that arise.

Response options: Strongly agree | Agree | Neither | Disagree | Strongly disagree

[Responses collected per child: Child 1 – Child 5]

25. I have sometimes found communication with staff at my child's setting frustrating or difficult.

Response options: Strongly agree | Agree | Neither | Disagree | Strongly disagree

[Responses collected per child: Child 1 – Child 5]

26. Are you aware of the positive behaviour and relationships policy at your child's setting?

Response options: Yes, fully aware | Aware, but not in detail | Not aware | Not sure if there is one

[Responses collected per child: Child 1 – Child 5]

27. I am aware of the behaviour and relationships policy at my child's setting and it is appropriate and fair.

Response options: Strongly agree | Agree | Neither | Disagree | Strongly disagree | N/A

[Responses collected per child: Child 1 – Child 5]

28. For children in primary or secondary school: Are you aware of the mobile phone policy at your child's school?

Response options: Yes, fully aware | Aware but not in detail | Not aware | Not sure if there is one | Not applicable (ELC)

[Responses collected per child: Child 1 – Child 5]

29. If you are aware of the mobile phone policy, how do you feel about it?

Response options: Strongly support | Support | Neutral | Oppose | Strongly oppose | Don't know enough to say | Not aware of school policy so cannot say

30. When behaviour concerns arise involving my child, I feel involved in discussions about support strategies.

Response options: Yes | No | Not applicable

[Responses collected per child: Child 1 – Child 5]

31. Staff at my child's setting appear well-supported in managing challenging behaviour.

Response options: Strongly agree | Agree | Neither | Disagree | Strongly disagree

[Responses collected per child: Child 1 – Child 5]

Section 6: Journey to and from the Setting
These questions ask about travel to and from educational settings.

32. Are there areas in or around your children's setting(s) that you would prefer them to avoid?

Response options: Yes | No | Unsure

[Responses collected per child: Child 1 – Child 5]

33. If Yes, what kind of areas? (Select all that apply)

Response options: Areas immediately outside the school/ELC gates | Specific routes to/from school | Areas within the school/ELC grounds | N/A | Other

34. If other, please specify.

Please leave blank if you did not select other.

[Open text response — maximum free text words]

35. I feel confident each setting will support me and my child in addressing incidents that happen outside of the school or ELC setting.

Response options: Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree or disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree

[Responses collected per child: Child 1 – Child 5]

Section 7: Final Comments

36. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about safety, challenging behaviour or aggression in your children's educational setting(s)?

This is optional. Please share any perspectives not captured elsewhere in this survey, including positive experiences and examples of effective practice in promoting positive behaviour and strong parent–staff relationships, or suggestions for improvement.

[Open text response — maximum 250 words words]

Technical annex E: modified e-Delphi process

Twenty-six draft statements were generated from the analysis of qualitative responses in Round 1. These were graded in terms of evidential warrant: tier 1 statements are derived from constructs recurring across at least three domains with broad cross-group spread (n=12); and tier 2 statements derived from constructs with strong within-domain salience and cross-group spread but more localised reach (n=11). Tier 3 statements are distinctive single-domain or single-source observations included for testing rather than as established findings (n=3).

Tier 1. Convergent statements

1. Behaviour described as 'challenging' or 'aggressive' is, in most cases, more accurately understood as communication of distress or unmet need.
2. Poverty and the chronic stress, hunger and disrupted sleep that accompany it materially shape children's capacity to engage in school and contribute to behaviour described as challenging.
3. Children with neurodivergence and additional support needs are at heightened risk of being misread and inadequately supported in mainstream environments designed for neurotypical learners.
4. Trauma, including ACEs and developmental trauma, plays a substantial role in patterns of behaviour and must be a central frame for response.
5. The presumption of mainstreaming has not been matched by adequate funding, staffing or specialist support, and this gap is a primary driver of behavioural escalation in mainstream settings.
6. Long CAMHS and specialist-service waits leave schools and ELC settings managing high levels of unmet mental health and developmental need without the support they require.
7. Short-term, ring-fenced and bid-based funding cycles undermine the consistency, reach and sustainability of effective approaches.
8. Relational, trauma-informed, nurture and restorative approaches, when consistently implemented across whole settings, are the most effective long-term response to challenging behaviour.
9. Felt safety, built through predictability, consistency, structured routines and meaningful autonomy, reduces the likelihood of behavioural escalation.
10. Co-located, wraparound multi-agency working organised around schools should be prioritised over referral-based models that leave education to manage alone
11. Online and digital culture, including smartphones, social media, gaming, and exposure to misogynistic and violent content, is a major driver of in-school conflict and aggression. Adults are behind pace in managing it.
12. The system as currently configured is designed to react rather than prevent. Investment in early intervention is repeatedly displaced by crisis demand.

Tier 2. Patterned statements

13. Most behavioural incidents occur at transition points, including transitions between activities, between lessons, at unstructured social times, and between sectors.

14. Pupil Support Assistants are systematically undervalued in pay, voice and access to training despite carrying disproportionate weight in supporting the most vulnerable learners.
15. Class sizes of up to 30, combined with the rise in additional support needs, prevent the relationships and individual attention needed to prevent and respond to challenging behaviour.
16. Staff burnout, absence and turnover, partly driven by emotional labour around traumatised children, perpetuate a cycle of reduced capacity to respond well.
17. Post-Covid parental disengagement from education, including parents acting as judge and jury on incidents and backing their child against the school, is a significant new pressure on staff.
18. Investment in youth work and informal learning, embedded in or alongside schools, is among the most cost-effective preventative approaches available.
19. A relentless focus on attainment and comparative performance marginalises learners with social, emotional and behavioural needs and crowds out wellbeing-focused practice.
20. Whole-school cultures and visible, values-based leadership are necessary conditions for sustaining relational approaches. Isolated 'champion' practitioners alone cannot make it stick.
21. Initial Teacher Education provides insufficient grounding in additional support needs, trauma and behaviour-as-communication relative to the level of need now in classrooms.
22. GIRFEC arrangements were not designed for the level of coordination, assessment and onward referral now expected of education. The resulting administrative burden displaces direct support.
23. The reversion of policy language to 'challenging behaviour' is a retrograde step that risks reframing distress as misbehaviour and licensing punitive responses.

Tier 3. Distinctive observations tested in Round 1 (single panellists)

24. Free bus passes, while overwhelmingly positive, have enabled a small number of children to be involved in antisocial behaviour and organised-crime exploitation at a larger scale than previously.
25. The expansion of funded ELC hours may be associated with rising dysregulation among the most vulnerable young children, given the size of free-play environments.
26. Statutory regulation of social media for under-16s would meaningfully reduce in-school behavioural pressures.

Table E1. Round 2 ratings: frequency distributions and statistics by statement (n=21 each).

Statement	SD%	D%	N%	A%	SA%	%T2	Md	Q1	Q3	IQR (I)	IQR (T)	Met?
Children's lives and developmental need												
Behaviour described as 'challenging' or 'aggressive' is, in most cases, more accurately understood as communication of distress or unmet need.	0	0	0	23.8	76.2	**100**	5	5	5	**0**	0.50	**Yes**
Poverty and the chronic stress, hunger and disrupted sleep that accompany it materially shape children's capacity to engage in school and contribute to behaviour described as challenging.	0	0	0	28.6	71.4	**100**	5	4	5	**1**	1	**Yes**
Children with neurodivergence and additional support needs are at heightened risk of being misread and inadequately supported in mainstream environments designed for neurotypical learners.	0	4.8	4.8	23.8	66.7	**90.5**	5	4	5	**1**	1	**Yes**
Trauma, including ACEs and developmental trauma, plays a substantial role in patterns of behaviour and must be a central frame for response.	4.8	0	4.8	23.8	66.7	**90.5**	5	4	5	**1**	1	**Yes**
System conditions and resourcing												
The presumption of mainstreaming has not been matched by adequate funding, staffing or specialist support, and this gap is a primary driver of behavioural escalation in mainstream settings.	0	4.8	0	33.3	61.9	**95.2**	5	4	5	**1**	1	**Yes**
Long CAMHS and specialist-service waits leave schools and ELC settings managing high levels of unmet mental health and developmental need without the support they require.	0	0	9.5	19	71.4	**90.5**	5	4	5	**1**	1	**Yes**
Short-term, ring-fenced and bid-based funding cycles undermine the consistency, reach and sustainability of effective approaches.	0	0	0	28.6	71.4	**100**	5	4	5	**1**	1	**Yes**
The system as currently configured is designed to react rather than prevent. Investment in early intervention is repeatedly displaced by crisis demand.	0	0	4.8	14.3	81	**95.2**	5	5	5	**0**	0	**Yes**
Class sizes of up to 30, combined with the rise in additional support needs, prevent the relationships and individual attention needed to prevent and respond to challenging behaviour.	0	0	4.8	38.1	57.1	**95.2**	5	4	5	**1**	1	**Yes**
Pupil Support Assistants are systematically undervalued in pay, voice and access to training despite carrying disproportionate weight in supporting the most vulnerable learners.	0	4.8	4.8	33.3	57.1	**90.5**	5	4	5	**1**	1	**Yes**
A relentless focus on attainment and comparative performance marginalises learners with social, emotional and behavioural needs and crowds out wellbeing-focused practice.	0	4.8	9.5	42.9	42.9	**85.7**	4	4	5	**1**	1	**Yes**
Effective practice inside settings												
Relational, trauma-informed, nurture and restorative approaches, when consistently implemented across whole settings, are the most effective long-term response to challenging behaviour.	0	0	0	38.1	61.9	**100**	5	4	5	**1**	1	**Yes**
Felt safety, built through predictability, consistency, structured routines and meaningful autonomy, reduces the likelihood of behavioural escalation.	0	0	4.8	28.6	66.7	**95.2**	5	4	5	**1**	1	**Yes**

Statement	SD%	D%	N%	A%	SA%	%T2	Md	Q1	Q3	IQR (I)	IQR (T)	Met?
Whole-school cultures and visible, values-based leadership are necessary conditions for sustaining relational approaches. Isolated 'champion' practitioners alone cannot make it stick.	0	0	0	9.5	90.5	**100**	5	5	5	**0**	0	**Yes**
Most behavioural incidents occur at transition points, including transitions between activities, between lessons, at unstructured social times, and between sectors.	0	19	23.8	38.1	19	**57.1**	4	3	4	**1**	1	**No**
Working together and learning together												
Co-located, wraparound multi-agency working organised around schools should be prioritised over referral-based models that leave education to manage alone.	0	0	9.5	23.8	66.7	**90.5**	5	4	5	**1**	1	**Yes**
Initial Teacher Education provides insufficient grounding in additional support needs, trauma and behaviour-as-communication relative to the level of need now in classrooms.	0	9.5	9.5	19	61.9	**81**	5	4	5	**1**	1	**Yes**
GIRFEC arrangements were not designed for the level of coordination, assessment and onward referral now expected of education. The resulting administrative burden displaces direct support.	0	9.5	19	38.1	33.3	**71.4**	4	3	5	**2**	2	**No**
Investment in youth work and informal learning, embedded in or alongside schools, is among the most cost-effective preventative approaches available.	0	4.8	28.6	28.6	38.1	**66.7**	4	3	5	**2**	2	**No**
The contemporary social environment												
Online and digital culture, including smartphones, social media, gaming, and exposure to misogynistic and violent content, is a major driver of in-school conflict and aggression. Adults are behind pace in managing it.	0	4.8	4.8	38.1	52.4	**90.5**	5	4	5	**1**	1	**Yes**
Post-Covid parental disengagement from education, including parents acting as judge and jury on incidents and backing their child against the school, is a significant new pressure on staff.	0	4.8	28.6	38.1	28.6	**66.7**	4	3	5	**2**	2	**No**
Staff burnout, absence and turnover, partly driven by emotional labour around traumatised children, perpetuate a cycle of reduced capacity to respond well.	0	9.5	0	38.1	52.4	**90.5**	5	4	5	**1**	1	**Yes**
The reversion of policy language to 'challenging behaviour' is a retrograde step that risks reframing distress as misbehaviour and licensing punitive responses.	0	4.8	4.8	28.6	61.9	**90.5**	5	4	5	**1**	1	**Yes**
Distinctive observations												
Statutory regulation of social media for under-16s would meaningfully reduce in-school behavioural pressures.	0	14.3	23.8	33.3	28.6	**61.9**	4	3	5	**2**	2	**No**
Free bus passes, while overwhelmingly positive, have enabled a small number of children to be involved in antisocial behaviour and organised-crime exploitation at a larger scale than previously.	4.8	9.5	47.6	23.8	14.3	**38.1**	3	3	4	**1**	1	**No**
The expansion of funded ELC hours may be associated with rising dysregulation among the most vulnerable young children, given the size of free-play environments.	19	19	33.3	14.3	14.3	**28.6**	3	2	4	**2**	2	**No**

All n = 21. Percentages computed on valid responses. SD = Strongly disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neither agree nor disagree, A = Agree, SA = Strongly agree. % T2 = combined Agree + Strongly agree. IQR (I) = QUARTILE.INC (inclusive); IQR (T) = exclusive (Tukey). 'Met?' indicates whether the statement meets the pre-specified rating threshold (% T2 ≥ 70 and IQR (I) ≤ 1).

Table E2. Ranking for system-level conditions most in need of change. Top-three of seven; positions 4-7 not collected.

Statement	1st	2nd	3rd	Top-3	Met threshold?
Mainstreaming without resourcing	50%	14%	14%	**78%**	**Yes**
Reactive rather than preventive system	23%	9%	32%	**64%**	**Yes**
Long CAMHS and specialist-service waits	14%	18%	27%	**59%**	**Yes**
Short-term and bid-based funding cycles	0%	32%	9%	**41%**	**No**
Class sizes of up to 30	5%	14%	9%	**28%**	**No**
PSA undervaluation	0%	9%	9%	**18%**	**No**
Attainment focus crowding out wellbeing	9%	5%	0%	**14%**	**No**

Column totals (1st, 2nd, 3rd) sum to approximately 100 per cent each, with rounding of ± 1 per cent, since each of the 21 panellists placed three statements in positions 1, 2 and 3.

Table E3. Working together: inter-professional changes most in need of action.

Statement	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Top-3
Co-located, wraparound multi-agency working	64%	23%	9%	5%	**96%**
Initial Teacher Education grounding	14%	27%	36%	23%	**77%**
GIRFEC administrative burden	9%	23%	27%	41%	**59%**
Investment in youth work and informal learning	14%	27%	27%	32%	**68%**

Table E4. Contemporary social environment: most pressing pressures on schools and workforce.

Statement	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Top-3
Staff burnout, absence and turnover	36%	27%	27%	9%	**90%**
Online and digital culture	27%	36%	27%	9%	**90%**
Policy-language reversion to 'challenging behaviour'	23%	18%	32%	27%	**73%**
Post-Covid parental disengagement	14%	18%	14%	55%	**46%**

Rows are presented in descending order of Top-3 share. Each panellist ranked all four statements, so column totals sum to 100 per cent. Bold Top-3 values indicate statements meeting the pre-specified ranking threshold of at least 50 per cent top-three placement.

Summary of threshold outcomes

Nineteen of the twenty-six statements rated in Round 2 met the pre-specified rating threshold. Six statements were also identified through the ranking tasks as priorities for action, change, or pressing-ness. Table E5 cross-tabulates rating and ranking outcomes.

Table E5. Cross-tabulation of rating and ranking outcomes

Domain areas	Statements (n)	Rating threshold met	Ranking task	Ranking threshold met
Children's lives and developmental need	4	4	None	—
System conditions and resourcing	7	7	Top-3 of 7	3
What works inside settings	4	3	None	—
Working together and learning together	4	2	Rank 1–4	1
The contemporary social environment	4	3	Rank 1–4	2
Distinctive observations	3	0	None	—
Total	**26**	**19**		**6**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