

Support not sanctions

Making school fair
for 2 million children

#SupportNotSanctions

REVEALED:

**Why 78% of teachers
say children with speech and
language challenges are
being unfairly punished**



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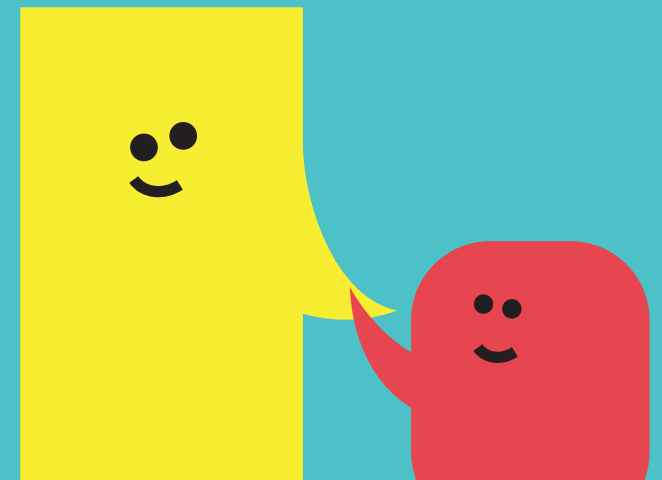
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About us

For at least 2 million children in the UK, learning to talk and understand words feels like an impossible hurdle. This affects every aspect of their and their families' lives. They are vastly more likely to fail in key subjects at school, more likely to be lonely and have mental health problems, more likely to end up in the criminal justice system and more likely to be out of work as an adult.

There has never been a more important time to help the growing number of children with speech and language challenges. We work to give every child the skills they need to face the future with confidence.

- **We design innovative tools and training** for thousands of early years staff and teachers to use in their classrooms.
- **We generate new practices from our two special schools** that we then share with mainstream and special schools across the UK.
- **We give families the confidence and skills** to help their children.
- **We put pressure on politicians** to prioritise help for speech and language challenges.



What we found

The number of children with speech and language challenges is on the rise. In the last three years alone, numbers have risen by 35% to a record high of 2 million children.

Now we can reveal that these children are being punished in our schools because of those challenges.

According to 78% of teachers, children who struggle with talking and understanding words are being punished because of it.

Additionally, 44% of families we surveyed felt their child had been punished because of a lack of support for their speech and language challenges.

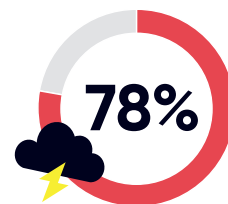
This finding comes as the UK Government plans to reform our education system. The experiences of children with speech and language challenges need to be at the heart of these reforms across all year groups. They are being profoundly failed at the moment.

About the research

YouGov polled 1,003 teachers, 49.6% of whom were primary teachers and 50.4% of whom were secondary – August 2024.

The Family and Young People survey ran from 11 March to 17 May 2024. A total of 1,866 individuals responded to the survey. Of these, 57.3% (1,070 respondents) were either related to a child or young person with speech and language challenges. The survey was supported by members of the Speech, Language and Communication Alliance.

Summary



78% of teachers say that children who struggle with talking and understanding words **are punished because of it.**

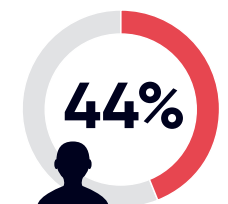
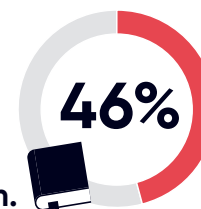


1 in 5 children in the UK are affected by speech and language challenges (a record high).



49% of teachers feel they haven't had **sufficient training to support** pupils' speech and language development in the classroom. There's an urgent and widespread need for training.

46% of teachers say their school's **behaviour policy doesn't prioritise** children's speech and language enough. How the DfE's guidance on school behaviour management is interpreted by schools is a key part of the problem.



44% of families we surveyed reported that their child had been punished **because of a lack of support** for their speech and language challenges – we know the true number is likely to be much higher.

What is going wrong?

Children with speech and language challenges are being profoundly failed – 2 million children are currently at risk of being unfairly penalised and punished in our schools.

When children with speech and language challenges fail to comply with rules immediately or misunderstand instructions, they are unjustly viewed as intentionally disruptive or defiant.

Although this group represents the largest proportion of pupils with SEND in mainstream education (nearly a quarter of all pupils identified with SEND), behaviour policies rarely take account of their specific speech and language challenges. These policies, often inherited from previous governments, remain rigid, inflexible, and unsupportive. Teachers also lack vital training that would equip them to both recognise and appropriately adapt their communication for children with speech and language challenges.

At the same time, a lack of Speech and Language Therapists working in schools means that children are getting less help from specialists to improve their speech, language and communication skills and more is on teachers' shoulders. They are unlikely to know how to communicate rules to children in a way that they understand and unlikely to be able to help children to explain themselves if they do break rules.

The result is systemic unfairness rather than an inclusive education system where all children can thrive.

Rigid rules



- Lack of specialists
- Teachers without training



Systematic unfairness for 2 million children



Current behaviour policies frequently overlook how difficulties in talking and understanding words can both directly influence children's behaviour

and teachers' perceptions of a child's behaviour. These policies emphasise terms like 'sanction' and 'correction' rather than understanding or adapting to individual needs, contributing to a cycle of misunderstanding and inappropriate punishment. And they are not matched by an investment in training teachers or providing specialists to help children to understand rules and communicate what is going on for them.

School policies can include:

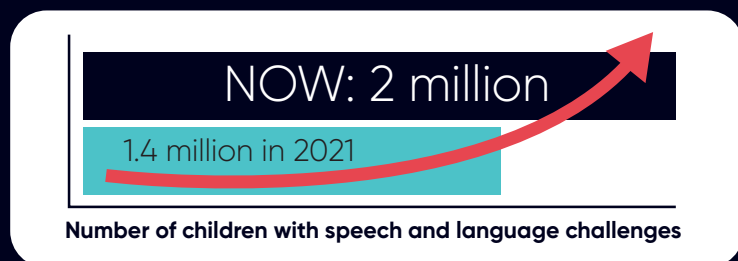
- Strict routines that leave little time for children to process and understand what's being asked – such as fast-paced countdowns.
- Sanctions for minor issues like bringing the wrong-coloured pencil to class or not keeping eyes on the teacher.
- Guidance that assumes children can repeat back directions or clearly explain their side after an incident.
- Sanctions for behaviours that may arise from difficulties with talking or understanding words – like not following instructions, copying from peers, or not answering a question.

These expectations are much harder for children who struggle to talk and understand words. Many are already overwhelmed from the constant effort it takes to listen, understand and follow what's happening around them. Yet current policies rarely prompt staff to consider possible reasons behind a child's behaviour, nor do they encourage reflection on whether the right support is in place before a sanction is applied.

This results in deeply damaging scenarios:

- **Silent and unseen:** Some young people tell us they become so overwhelmed by the effort of processing all the language around them that they 'shut down'. A consequence of this is that they become invisible in classrooms – sitting quietly, not engaging, and consequently losing out on critical learning opportunities. They also sometimes get into trouble for not doing something they were told to do but simply couldn't process.

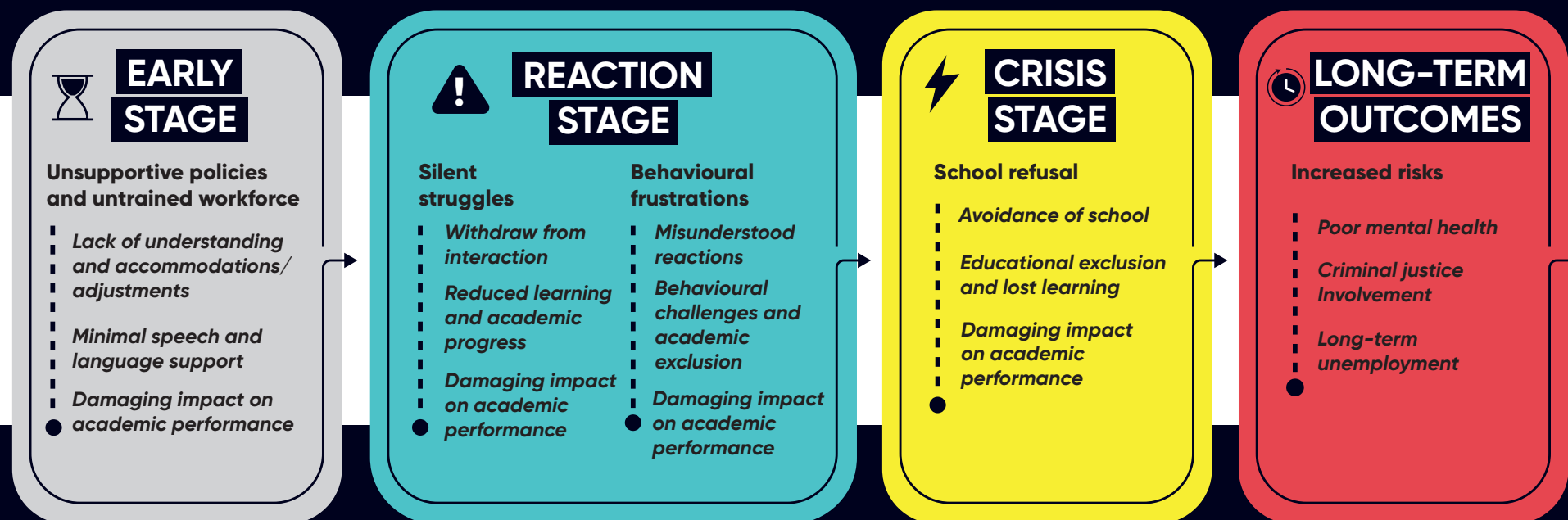
- **Frustration turning to anger:** Others, understandably distressed by repeated unjust treatment, grow frustrated and angry, which teachers often misinterpret as genuine behavioural issues. Over time, these children become increasingly isolated, labelled as problematic, and deprived of meaningful educational support.
- **School refusal:** In extreme cases, the persistent unfair treatment and lack of understanding can lead children to refuse to attend school altogether, impacting not just their education but their mental health and future life chances.



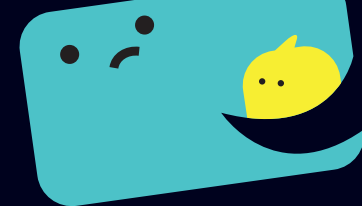
Despite this, successive governments have failed to set any policy about reasonable adjustments for children with speech and language challenges on behaviour. Its current guidance simply says that schools should consider whether special educational needs have contributed to misbehaviour and whether reasonable adjustments should be made. The message from teachers and families is clear that this is not happening. Without clear direction from government and specific examples of its expectations of reasonable adjustment, there is no incentive for schools to change.

Without change at national level, the education system will continue to disadvantage children with speech and language challenges, directly contradicting Ministers' commitments to inclusion and equality. It is simply not acceptable for government to avoid responsibility for what is clearly a systemic issue in our schools as previous governments have.

The Secretary of State and Department for Education must urgently recognise and address this glaring gap to ensure all children have an equal opportunity to succeed and genuinely thrive.



The stories behind the stats



Evie, a child's story

“It was year 1, I was playing outside. It had just stopped raining. I thought I was allowed to play on the grass, so I walked onto the grass. Miss told me off but I didn't really understand what she was saying. She made me stand against the wall but when she wasn't looking I ran back onto the grass. Miss told me off. She was angry and made me stand against the wall again. I had to stay there and miss playtime.” – Evie, year 1, age 5

Róisín, a parent's story

Parent and former teacher Róisín told us how Ellen's traumatic experience at school, as a child with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD), has had a lasting effect on her and her family.

“Ellen was often shouted at for daydreaming. She was punished, not allowed out at break time because she had to finish her work. She wasn't daydreaming. It was an overload of work on her brain, and was taking all her energy just to keep up with things.”

Róisín told us about a time in primary school when Ellen was punished because she struggled with her speech and language. The school had accused Ellen of being disruptive, shouting and swearing and Róisín was called into the school. When Róisín asked Ellen what she'd been shouting, she explained she was trying to say “Look!” and pointing at her arm. When Ellen's jumper was rolled back it revealed that she had been badly bitten by another child. Ellen struggled to say her 'L's and sadly her challenges had been missed by the teachers. She was ignored, punished and removed from the class.

“Ellen went from a confident, fun, loving four-year-old entering primary school and left as an invisible 11-year-old. The confidence and sassiness was sucked out of her. She left as a selective mute with low self esteem, aware that others saw her differently.”

K, a teacher's story

Primary teacher K primarily taught early years, focusing on children aged four to five, and later expanding to include children aged six and seven. She progressed to a senior management role, overseeing her school's Special Educational Needs Coordination (SENCO), covering from nursery up to year 6. Throughout her career, she says she observed the implementation of behaviour management systems which failed to accommodate the needs of children with speech and language challenges. She said these children were often unfairly punished because they could not communicate their needs or perspectives as effectively as their peers. Her observations and experiences highlight the pressure on schools to conform to standardised expectations which can exacerbate the challenges for children who require more support. Her account highlights how behaviour management systems focus more on isolating the problem rather than addressing the root causes.

“The strategy of sending children who show challenging behaviour to another classroom as a disciplinary measure was particularly detrimental to children with speech and language difficulties. This practice felt exclusionary and often served to alienate them further rather than integrating them into the learning environment.”

“The classroom behaviour management system shamed those children with speech and language difficulties[...] Such systems do not take into account children probably needed something different.”

“There's little training on how to identify and manage children with speech and language difficulties[...] We didn't have any real knowledge taught on the different types of SEND, particularly about speech and language needs.”

“Change needs to come from the top down – from the Department for Education to senior school leaders – to have the right policies and training to empower teachers to have the time and knowledge to support better those children with speech and language challenges.”

The solutions

The current guidance from the Department for Education (DfE) fails to advise teachers how to adapt their behaviour management for children who struggle with talking and understanding words. We are calling for urgent reform to ensure school behaviour policies are inclusive, especially for children with speech and language challenges.

We are calling on the Government to:

1. Train every teacher to recognise and support children with speech and language challenges.
2. Revise government guidance for schools to develop behaviour policies to ensure children with speech and language challenges aren't unfairly punished.
3. Provide teachers with proven tools to help children communicate effectively.
4. Implement targeted group interventions for children struggling with their speech and language at every key stage.

These objectives can be realised through concrete, achievable actions. Schools and the Department for Education can immediately adopt and expand evidence-based interventions which have demonstrated substantial improvements in children's language and communication skills. Our work with thousands of schools has shown us that they need these proven interventions embedded into regular classroom practice. This will ensure consistent and effective support for all pupils needing additional help with talking and understanding words.

Ofsted need to look at the experience of children with SEND overall and ideally with speech and language challenges specifically in schools by segmenting its pupil and family data from the parent view and pupil surveys. This would allow us to have an ongoing view of whether children with SEND are being treated unfairly in our schools.

Furthermore, enhancing teacher expertise is critical. By significantly extending the training provided during Initial Teacher Training (ITT), educators can gain a deeper understanding of typical speech and language development, and practical strategies to support pupils with ongoing speech and language challenges. Current ITT provision, often limited to just two hours on speech and language development, should be expanded considerably and reinforced with ongoing professional development opportunities.

Finally, the Department for Education should work with stakeholders to develop and disseminate new model behaviour policies that are explicitly inclusive of children with speech and language challenges. These policies should exemplify reasonable adjustments clearly, providing schools with practical guidance on creating communication supportive environments. This holistic approach will ensure behaviour management strategies are fair, inclusive, and conducive to positive educational outcomes for all children.



Why does this matter?

Changing the way we manage behaviour in schools is the right thing to do to make schools fair. But this isn't just helpful for those in schools. Supporting children who struggle with talking and understanding words will create a better society in the future.

Children who have speech and language challenges at school are six to 11 times more likely to be behind in key subjects at school, twice as likely to be unemployed as young adults, make up almost half of mental health service referrals, and two-thirds of the young offender population.

Our year-by-year polling shows that teachers consistently feel they lack the training and support to help children who struggle with talking and understanding words. With more training and support, we can help these children not to fail in school and to be productive members of society, less likely to end up in trouble with the police or out of work. Better schools mean a better future for all of us.

**Speech and
Language UK**



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What next?

We are in conversation and working in collaboration with teachers and their trade unions, as well as families affected by speech and language challenges. Collectively, we call on the Department for Education to examine our findings and take urgent action.

If you're a politician or an educator and you would like to discuss these findings please email info@speechandlanguage.org.uk.

Thousands of people across the UK support our work, including those who are parents and teachers and those who are neither. Our education system is failing children who struggle with talking and understanding words, and changing that requires public support.

Join our email list to get regular updates about our work and get involved in helping all children succeed.

