

Final accepted version

TLDR – School absences and exclusions experienced by children with learning disabilities and autistic children in 2016/17 in England

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Abstract

Purpose

This paper examines data on absences and exclusions from school amongst children with learning disabilities and autistic children in England in 2016/17.

Methodology

Data were drawn from Department for Education statistics for the school year 2016/17 on school absences (authorised and unauthorised) and school exclusions (fixed-period and permanent) for children in the primary special educational needs categories of Moderate Learning Difficulty (MLD), Severe Learning Difficulty (SLD), Profound & Multiple Learning Difficulty (PMLD) and Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Findings

Authorised school absence rates were higher for all groups of children investigated compared to children without special education needs, primarily due to illnesses and health-related appointments. Rates of unauthorised school absences were low.

Rates of fixed-period and permanent school exclusions were higher for children with MLD and ASD compared to children without SEN, and lower for children with SLD and PMLD. Reasons given for exclusions were similar across children (persistent disruptive behaviour, physical assault against a pupil, verbal abuse against an adult), although physical assault against an adult was also commonly mentioned for children with SLD, PMLD or ASD.

Implications

Reducing school absences for children with learning disabilities and autistic children will involve co-ordination of health and social care support to ensure they are convenient and efficient for children and families. In terms of exclusions, schools need to consider the extent to which they are making reasonable adjustments for children with learning disabilities and autistic children.

Originality

This paper presents in one place statistics concerning school absences and school exclusions for children with learning disabilities and autistic children in England.

Introduction

There are ongoing concerns about children with learning disabilities and autistic children in England in terms of absences from school and school exclusions.

Research has suggested that a wide range of socio-economic, family, school, and child factors (including special educational needs) are associated with permanent school exclusion by the age of 16 (Ford et al., 2018; Paget et al., 2018). School exclusions can also have wide-ranging negative impacts on the child and their family in the short and long term (e.g. Berridge et al. 2001; Parker et al., 2016; Pirrie et al., 2011). Rates of absence from school have also been noted as higher for children with special educational needs (Hatton et al., 2016).

This brief paper summarises the Department for Education statistics on school absences and school exclusions for children with learning disabilities and autistic children in England for 2016/17.

Datasets

Information on the education of children with special educational needs (SEN) associated with learning disabilities is provided in a series of annual reports published by the Department for Education (DfE). The Special Educational Needs (Information) Act 2008 requires the Secretary of State for Education to publish information about pupils in England with SEN each calendar year in order to help improve the wellbeing of these pupils. This requirement has led to the publication between 2009 and 2014 of the annual series *Children with Special Educational Needs: An Analysis* (see Hatton et al., 2016, for details and references). In 2015, the format of this reporting changed to a summary report and extensive signposting of potential users to relevant source data, the most recent of which is available for 2017 data (Department for Education, 2017)

The primary source of information for reporting on SEN is the DfE's National Pupil Database. Children with SEN in this database are identified through the school census. This survey, undertaken each school term, collects information on all children enrolled in all English state funded schools and non-profit making independent special schools during that term. Schools have a statutory responsibility to return school census data under section 537A of the Education Act 1996.

Children not included in the school census include those being educated at home, in independent (non-state funded) mainstream schools or in for-profit independent special schools. It has been estimated that the school census includes information on approximately 97% of English children of statutory school age (Emerson, 2012).

The most recent statistics available are for 2016/17, for school absences (Department for Education, 2018a) and school exclusions (Department for Education, 2018b).

Absence from school is measured as the average percentage of half-day sessions throughout the year for which the child was absent. Absences are recorded as authorised or unauthorised:

- authorised absence involves permission from a teacher or other authorised representative of the school for absences for which a satisfactory explanation has been provided
- unauthorised absence includes all unexplained or unjustified absences. Arriving late for school, after the register has closed, is recorded as unauthorised absence.

Information is available on fixed period and permanent exclusions. A 'fixed period exclusion' is recorded when a child is excluded from a school but remains on the register (as they are expected to return once the exclusion period is over). A 'permanent exclusion' is recorded when a child is excluded from a school and their name removed from the register.

In both school absence and school exclusion statistics concerning specific Special Educational Need (SEN) categories, children are included if they have been identified as having a primary special educational need in that category, and if they have either an Education, Health and Care Plan or are being supported at the equivalent level to School Action Plus (a broader level of support than EHCPs but less broad than the general SEN Support level). This paper will include information on four separate SEN categories as defined in DfE statistics: Moderate Learning Difficulty (MLD); Severe Learning Difficulty (SLD); Profound & Multiple Learning Difficulty (PMLD); and Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Findings

School absences

Information on school absences for children with special educational needs are reported in terms of the percentages of authorised and unauthorised school half-day sessions missed over the course of the school year, broken down by primary special educational need. These figures are for children aged 5-15 years old, enrolled in schools.

Figure 1 shows this information for children with MLD (235,680 children), SLD (25,120 children), PMLD (8,260 children), ASD (93,710 children), and children with no identified SEN (5,803,795 children).

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Figure 1 shows that for authorised absences, compared to children without special educational needs (3.1% authorised absences), children with MLD (4.2% authorised absences), SLD (6.4% authorised absences), PMLD (13.2% authorised absences) and ASD (5.0% authorised absences) all

experienced more authorised absences from school. In any one term, a child with PMLD was likely to miss eight days of school due to authorised absences.

Rates of unauthorised absences were much lower than rates of authorised absences. For unauthorised absences, compared to children without special educational needs (1.1% unauthorised absences), children with MLD (2.1% unauthorised absences) and ASD (1.5% unauthorised absences) reported slightly higher rates of unauthorised absences, and children with SLD (1.0% unauthorised absences) and PMLD (1.0% unauthorised absences) reported equivalent rates of unauthorised absences. For children with MLD, with the highest rates of unauthorised absences, this equates to missing one school day per term.

Department for Education statistics also report the proportion of children in each SEN category defined as 'persistent absentees' – these are children who have missed 10% or more of school sessions over the school year 2016/17 whether these absences are authorised or unauthorised. On this definition, 17.9% of children with MLD were 'persistent absentees', as were 22.3% of children with SLD, 43.2% of children with PMLD, and 17.3% of children with ASD.

In terms of the reasons for absences, a detailed analysis of this for children with special educational needs was last conducted for 2013/14 data (Department for Education, 2016). Illness and medical/dental appointments accounted for 57% of absences of children with MLD, 72% of absences of children with SLD, 78% of absences of children with PMLD, and 64% of absences of children with ASD.

School exclusions

Information on school exclusions are reported separately for fixed-period and permanent exclusions across the school year 2016/17. Statistics are reported in two ways. First, the rates of school exclusions are reported (the total number of school exclusions divided by the total number of children in enrolled in school), broken down by category of special educational need. However, a single pupil can undergo more than one school exclusion within a school year, a particular issue for fixed-period exclusions. Therefore, for fixed-period exclusions the number of pupils undergoing at least one fixed-period exclusion in the school year is also reported.

Figure 2 shows the rates of fixed-period and permanent school exclusions for the year 2016/17, for children with a primary special educational need of MLD, SLD, PMLD and ASD, and for children with no identified special educational need.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Figure 2 shows that, for fixed-period exclusions, children with MLD (10.5 fixed-period exclusions per pupil) and ASD (9.6 fixed-period exclusions per pupil) were reported to experience rates of fixed-period exclusions more than three times greater than children with no identified SEN (3.1 fixed-

period exclusions per pupil). Children with SLD (2.5 fixed-period exclusions per pupil) and PMLD (1.0 fixed-period exclusions per pupil) were reported to experience low rates of fixed-period exclusions.

The proportions of children experiencing fixed-period exclusions (as children may experience more than one in a school year) mirrored the findings on rates of fixed-period exclusions, with proportionally more children with MLD (4.5% of all children with MLD) and ASD (4.5% of all children with ASD), and proportionally fewer children with SLD (1.2% of all children with SLD) and PMLD (0.5% of all children with PMLD), experiencing fixed-period exclusions compared to children with no identified SEN (1.6% of all children with no SEN).

DfE statistics also report the reasons given by schools for fixed-period exclusions. For children with no identified SEN, the reasons identified for 10% or more of fixed-period exclusions were persistent disruptive behaviour (27.8% of fixed-period exclusions), physical assault against a pupil (17.8%) and verbal abuse or threatening behaviour against an adult (17.8%). For children with MLD, the most common reasons for fixed-period exclusions were persistent disruptive behaviour (32.0%), verbal abuse or threatening behaviour against an adult (16.6%) and physical assault against a pupil (15.0%). For children with SLD, the most common reasons for fixed-period exclusions were physical assault against an adult (26.1%), persistent disruptive behaviour (20.1%), physical assault against a pupil (17.6%) and verbal abuse or threatening behaviour against an adult (15.2%). For children with PMLD, the most common reasons for fixed-period exclusions were physical assault against an adult (42.9%), persistent disruptive behaviour (14.3%) and verbal abuse or threatening behaviour against an adult (14.3%). Finally, for children with ASD, the most common reasons given for fixed-period exclusions were physical assault against an adult (21.5%), persistent disruptive behaviour (21.0%), physical assault against a pupil (17.7%) and verbal abuse or threatening behaviour against an adult (16.8%).

Figure 2 also shows information on the much lower rates of permanent school exclusions. Children with MLD (0.18 permanent exclusions per pupil) and ASD (0.12 permanent exclusions per pupil) were reported to experience higher rates of permanent exclusions than children with no identified SEN (0.06 permanent exclusions per pupil). Children with SLD (0.05 permanent exclusions per pupil) and PMLD (0.04 permanent exclusions per pupil) were reported to experience low rates of permanent exclusions.

DfE statistics also report the reasons for permanent exclusions recorded by schools. For children with no identified SEN, the reasons identified for 10% or more of permanent exclusions were persistent disruptive behaviour (33.3% of permanent exclusions), physical assault against a pupil (14.3%) and drug/alcohol related reasons (10.8%). For children with MLD, the most common reasons for permanent school exclusion were persistent disruptive behaviour (41.9%), physical assault against a pupil (11.8%) and physical assault against an adult (10.8%). For children with ASD, the most common reasons for permanent school exclusion were physical assault against an adult (32.0%), persistent disruptive behaviour (28.0%) and physical assault against a pupil (16.0%). The number of permanent school exclusions for children with SLD and children with PMLD in 2016/17 were too small for an analysis of reasons for permanent exclusion.

Discussion

In 2016/17, rates of authorised school absences were higher for all the groups of children investigated compared to children without identified special education needs (SEN), particularly amongst children with PMLD. Reasons for authorised exclusions for all groups primarily concerned illnesses and health-related appointments. Rates of unauthorised school absences were much lower for all groups, although slightly higher for children with MLD and children with ASD compared to children without SEN.

These findings on school absences clearly show the importance of better co-ordination of family care across health, social care and education, to ensure that the time children spend out of school for health and other appointments is minimised (Barnard-Brak et al., 2017). These absences, rather than unauthorised absences, are the major contributor to the higher level of school absences amongst children with learning disabilities and autistic children.

Rates of fixed-period school exclusions were at least three times higher for children with MLD and ASD compared to children without SEN, and lower for children with SLD and PMLD. Rates of permanent school exclusions were slightly higher for children with MLD and ASD compared to children without SEN and children with SLD and PMLD. Reasons given by schools for exclusions were broadly similar across groups of children (principally persistent disruptive behaviour, physical assault against a pupil, or verbal abuse against an adult), although for children with SLD, PMLD or ASD physical assault against an adult was also a common reason given for school exclusion.

These findings reinforce the urgent need for schools to adopt more reasonable adjustments to meet the needs of children with learning disabilities and autistic children, as part of a package of measures to reduce rates of school exclusions and thereby minimise their negative impact. Early intervention and public health measures are also needed as part of a preventive strategy to reduce school exclusions.

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Figure 1: Average percentage of half-day sessions missed due to authorised and unauthorised absences, 2016/17

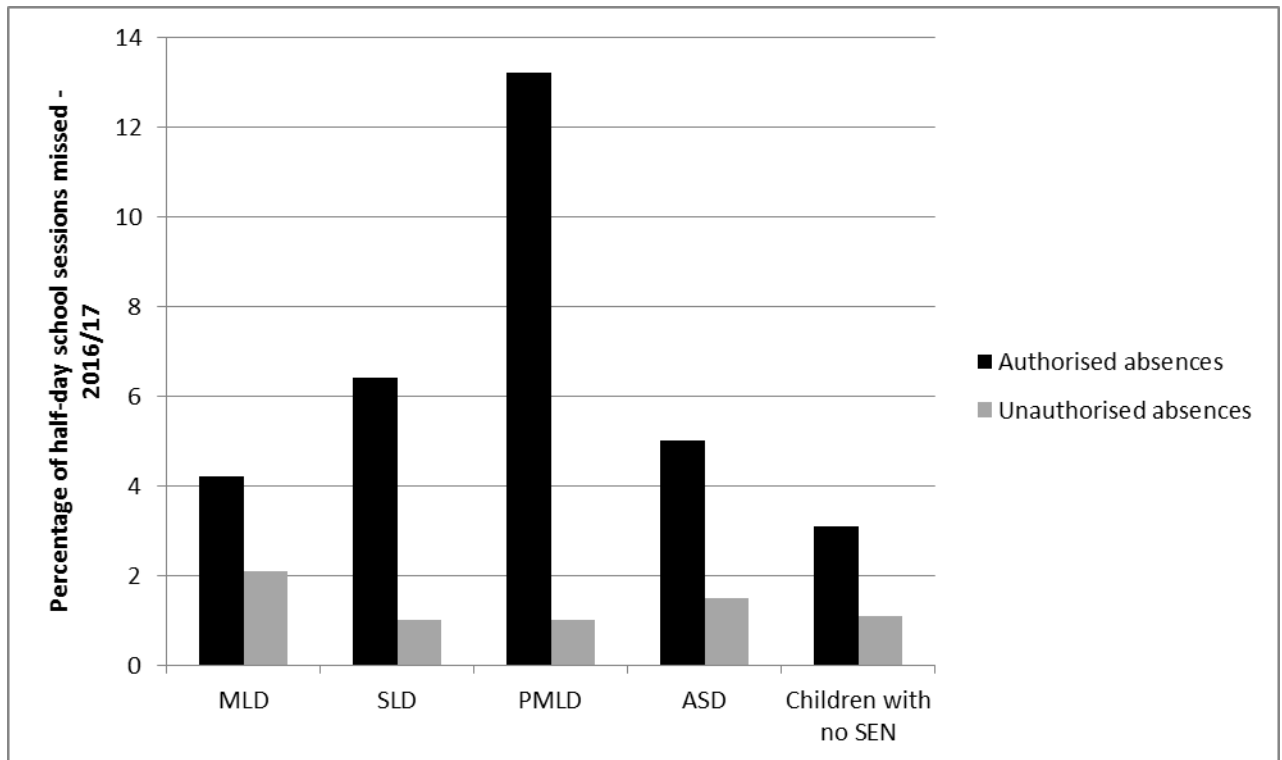
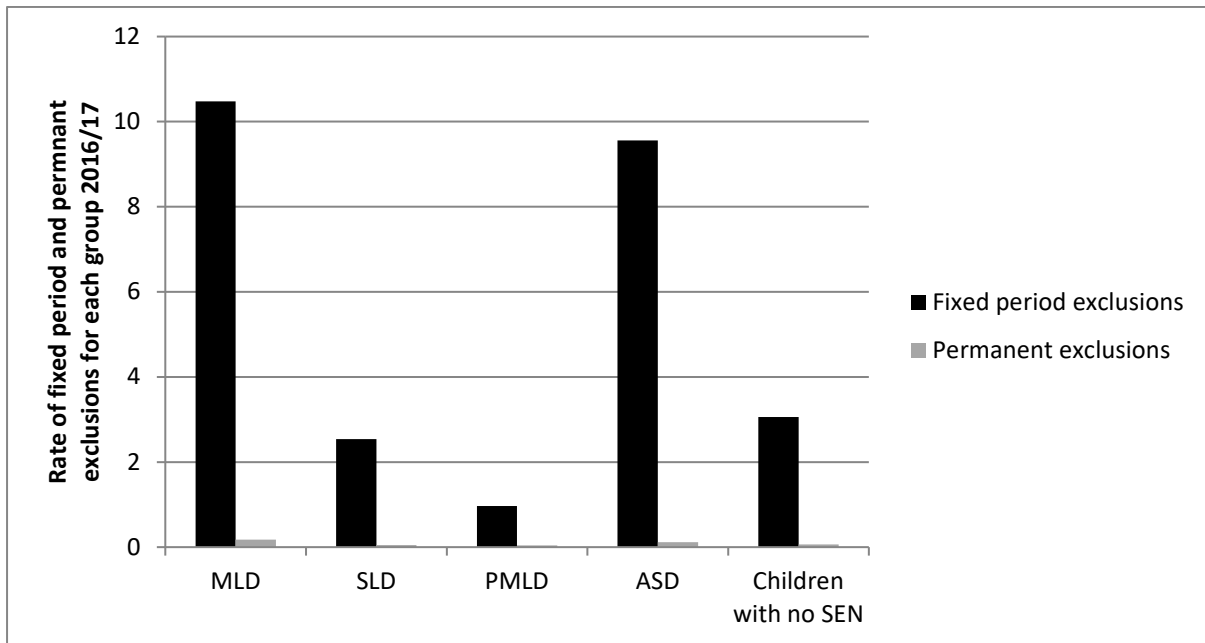


Figure 2: Rate of fixed-period and permanent school exclusions, 2016 to 2017



Acknowledgements

The writing of this paper has been supported by Public Health England, as part of the work of the Public Health England Learning Disabilities Observatory. Views expressed in this paper are those of the author, and not necessarily those of Public Health England.