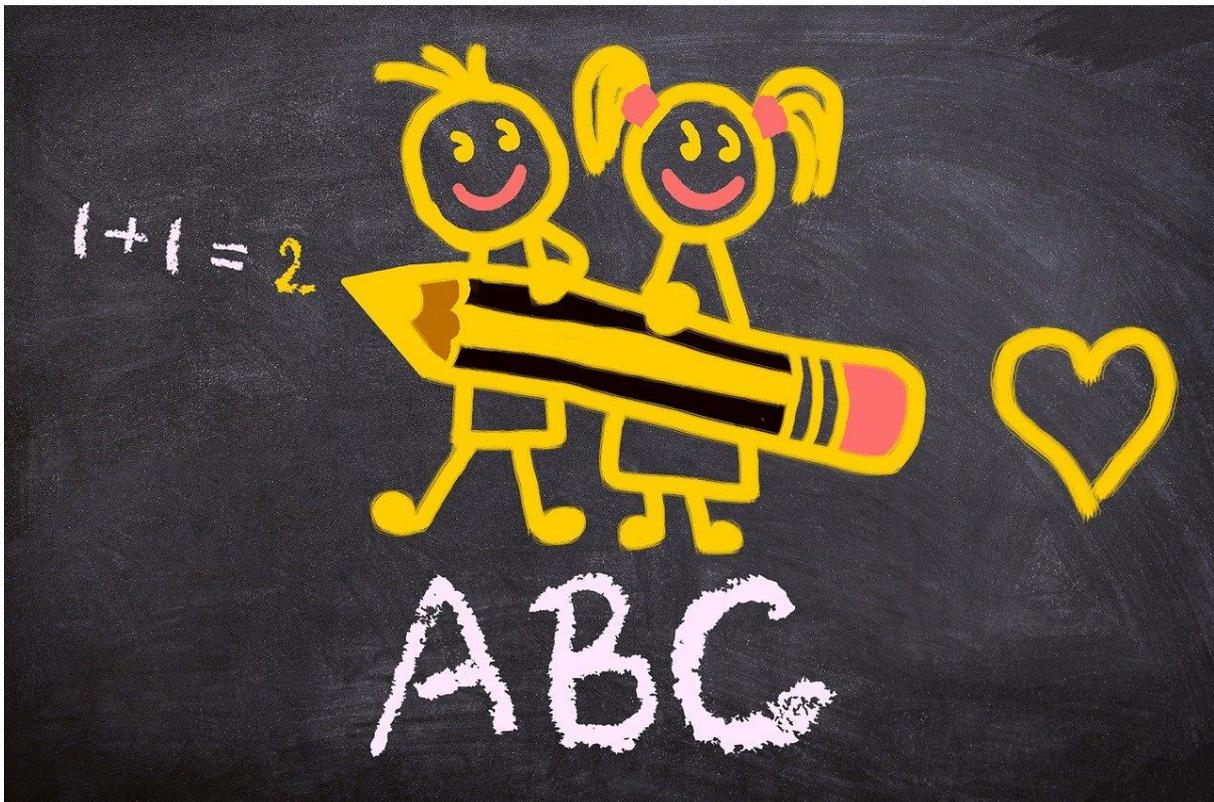


# SEND INCLUSION IN PRACTICE: TRANSFORMING SCHOOL POLICIES

**Faith M. Newton**

Occupational Therapist



**SchoolOT**  
occupational therapy for your school

## **SEND Inclusion in Practice: Transforming School Policies**

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### **Author**

Faith Martha Newton, Highly Specialist Occupational Therapist.

Founder of SchoolOT and ND Kids Occupational Therapy and Consulting.

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### **Contact details**

[faith@schoolot.co.uk](mailto:faith@schoolot.co.uk)

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## Introduction to Inclusive School Policies

More and more children are being identified with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). At the same time, it is widely recognized that the current SEND system is broken. Large numbers of children and young people are out of school – many due to unmet SEND needs. The Government is keen for the majority of students with SEND to attend mainstream schools.

If that is to happen, schools need to radically change to meet needs. A Whole School Approach (WSA) to SEND inclusion is required. A Whole School Approach A Whole School Approach can be defined as ‘everyone working together to bring change’.

WSA has some specific elements that can guide us in our interventions

- The vision, values and ethos.
- Staff development and support.
- Curriculum planning and teaching.
- The student voice.
- The school environment.
- Family and community engagement.
- Policies and practices.

Whilst all these factors are important this document seeks to address how changes to policies and practices can make mainstream schools more accessible for more children. These changes won't just benefit children with additional needs.

My perspective is that of a children's Occupational Therapist who has worked with neurodivergent children for over 13 years. I also am a parent to two autistic children – both of whom are out of school as their needs weren't met within a mainstream environment.

This document offers practical ways to change current school policies to make inclusion a reality, not just an aspiration. I don't pretend to have all the answers, but I do hope that this document stimulates conversations and helps decision makers and educators think through alternative ways of doing things. These ideas are not just 'pie in the sky'. I offer examples throughout of how a few forward-thinking schools are already putting these things into practice.

## Attendance Awards

As attendance figures remain low, schools are using attendance awards as an incentive to improve attendance.

However, these awards are unfair, penalise students who have been ill, unfairly impact students with SEND. Research shows that attendance awards can be counter-productive, and may be illegal, encouraging discrimination against protective groups. School attendance awards need to stop.

### Attendance awards are unfair

I've always found awards that reward children for their parent's behaviour unfair.

A few years ago, I observed a class of reception children. The children who had read a book at home that week got a biscuit, those whose parents hadn't signed the log didn't. I remember thinking at the time that those children whose parents who were too busy to sign the log, who forgot because they were worried about bills or were sick, or those who didn't care were already disadvantage. Did they really need to miss out on a biscuit for something that wasn't their fault?

The same is true of attendance awards. Students who are fortunate enough not to get sick get rewarded. As do those who enjoy school, or who don't have any special educational needs or disabilities which may make 100% attendance more challenging.

Unlike the reception class I observed, the reward for attendance isn't just a biscuit. Many schools are going far beyond a certificate and are giving out ice-creams, cinema tickets, trips and even bikes to those with 100% attendance. As [blogger and author Rachel Wright says](#): *If 'attendance awards' are being handed out then, like fines, they ought to be targeted at the parents'.*

### Attendance awards penalise students

This point is the opposite of the above. Students who find school challenging, or who are dealing chronic conditions, or who are simply unlucky enough to catch an illness, miss out. As do students who are dealing with a family bereavement, or whose parents are struggling with issues that make it hard to get their children to school every day.

### Attendance awards spread illness

By encouraging 100% attendance, schools are encouraging the most conscientious (or desperate) pupils to come into school even if they are ill. Even if they have Covid or have vomited a few hours before. This obviously puts staff and students at risk of contracting the illness, making it likely to spread. There is little point in having a sickness policy stating that children should be off school for 48 hours after sickness or diarrhoea if you are giving out bikes and trips for 100% attendance!

### Attendance awards encourage masking

Many Autistic students 'mask' at school. Masking is when people hide parts of themselves to try and 'fit in' or appear 'normal'. It involves children suppressing their anxiety, stims, and how they are really feeling, so they appear fine.

They mask their emotions, appearing fine when distressed, or stressed. They mask their preferred Autistic ways of being and communicating, forcing themselves to adopt neurotypical ways of being like making eye contact, or small talk to try and fit in. An Autistic child who has a high regard for rules and a desire for approval may go to school even when they are too physically or mentally unwell to go. Autistic adults are now speaking out about the [long term damaging effects](#) that masking does to their mental health and sense of self.

### Damaging to relationships

Some schools give attendance awards to the class with the highest attendance. The thinking behind this is that peer pressure and wanting to help the class win will result in better attendance.

There are two problems with this. Pressure is put on children who bring the class average down. Their classmates may get frustrated with the child who is absent for preventing them from achieving an award, and this may affect the way they treat the child.

The second problem is the rest of the class are unfairly affected. My son's class won an attendance award before Christmas. He is still on roll but doesn't attend. Does that mean his class never has a hope of winning? How do they feel about that?

### Attendance awards are not effective

Conversely, attendance awards aren't going to work for students who really hate school. My son has experienced emotionally based school avoidance. School was so challenging for him, that he was too anxious to attend. No reward or certificate was going to motivate him to go in.

Interestingly, [a study](#) by Harvard Kennedy School demonstrated that the promise of a reward had no impact on the attendance of students. Researchers measured the impact of attendance awards on over 15 000 high school students.

### A Counter-productive Measure?

The same study by Harvard Kennedy School found that students who received a certificate for 100% attendance resulted in more absence the following month! Absence increased by 8% in students who had been rewarded for their attendance.

There seem to be [several reasons](#) for this:

- Rewards communicated to students that 100% attendance was something special and rare, rather than the norm. This gave the message that students had earned taking some days off.
- Attendance awards rely on extrinsic motivation which can then reduce students' internal motivation to attend.
- Older students might feel that 100% attendance awards mark them as different from their peers. They may miss some days of school to fit in again with their peers and achieve a 'cool' social status again.

### Attendance awards may be illegal

Disabled students are protected by law from discrimination under the [Equality Act](#). Schools should ensure that children with disabilities are not disadvantaged and that reasonable adjustments are made.

However, the Department for Education has not issued any guidance to schools on how this relates to attendance awards. This means that each school decides itself how to implement such schemes. Attendance awards given for 100% that don't account for absence due to disability are discriminatory and [likely illegal](#).

### Attendance awards need to stop

Some alternatives to attendance awards are:

- Building relationships of trust with students. Ensure that students are warmly welcomed to school. Instead of being met with criticisms about uniform or lateness, focus on the positive that the child is present. There are too many stories of children who struggle to attend school due to their mental health being put in detention on their first day back for a minor infringement – being 5 minutes late or wearing the wrong shoes.
- Building relationships with parents, and working together to understand and overcome barriers to inclusion.
- Understand the underlying reasons for absence – do you need to make school more inclusive? Invest in mental health? Reduce the sensory demands so children don't experience overwhelm and need a day off to recover.

### Case Study

[Thameside Primary School](#) have ditched individual attendance awards. Their reasons for doing this are similar to those I outlined above, namely that good attendance is not within a primary school child's control, that awards reward children who are 'lucky' enough not to be ill or have a chronic condition and that awards can cause victim blaming.

Instead they celebrate meeting whole school attendance targets by holding termly '[Attendance Celebration Days](#)'. On these days children can do fun things like wearing jeans to school for a day or doing face painting.

### Conclusion

Attendance awards have no place in an inclusive school. They are discriminatory, unfair, harmful and promote a culture of exclusion.

## Behaviour

### Punitive policies

Behaviour policies are increasingly punitive at secondary schools with students receiving behaviour points for not having their shirt tucked in, forgetting a pen or looking out of the window. If a student gets 3 behaviour points in a day they get a detention. If they accumulate more in a week they may get an internal isolation day. This is driving up young people's level of anxiety. One young person I worked with was so worried about getting a detention that he spent all his time checking his shirt was tucked in, instead of focusing on his work.

### Sitting still

From a very young age schools expect children to sit still for long periods of time – way before they are developmentally ready to. And all this sitting is having a detrimental impact on our children's health and well-being:

- Incidences of back pain are on the rise.
- Obesity is a national issue.
- Children are not developing the foundational gross motor skills that they need.
- Attention and concentration are suffering.

Giving children more opportunities for physical activity at school can make a world of difference. I've been often to help a child who 'won't sit still'. When I've observed the class I've often seen the same situation – children who need to move, and who becomes disrupted or disengaged when they aren't allowed to move.

The stakes are high. Children who need to move but aren't given opportunity to are often labelled 'disruptive'. They may be kept in at break times, or have their name moved down the reward chart. Their unmet need for movement can lead to them disliking school which affects their academic achievement and their futures.

### Withholding playtime as a sanction

Withholding playtime as a consequence for misbehaviour is a common sanction. However, it disproportionately affects children with SEND. Playtime offers a chance to regulate, socialise, have fun and refocus. Taking it away is counter-productive and experts have called on schools to stop this practice.

*As I walked through the hall on the way to the staffroom for a cup of tea I noticed four boys sat silently on benches. Whilst their friends played outside they had to stay in the hall – missing playtime as a punishment for talking too much, not finishing their work on time, and moving around the classroom without permission.*

*My heart sank because these were the children who most needed the chance to move and a break from the social, sensory, and academic demands of the classroom.*

*This punishment was likely to make the rest of the day more of a challenge for them and their teachers. It was going to do more harm than good.*

### A common practice

Taking break times or lunchtimes away from pupils as a consequence is commonplace.

In a survey on X (formerly twitter) I conducted 64% of 252 teachers replied that this is a sanction in their school's behaviour policy. Similarly, a [Nuffield Study](#) (2019) found that 64% of schools surveyed used withholding break or lunch time as a sanction for misbehaviour in class or not finishing work.

This practice seems so commonplace that it is rarely questioned. However, just because something is common doesn't make it effective or right.

### The impact of losing playtime

Studies show that break times have [physical, cognitive, social and emotional benefits](#) for children. So what is the impact of being kept in at playtime?

**Less chance to self-regulate:** Break times give a chance for children to run, shout, talk with a friend and have a break from the classroom and the teacher. All of this helps with self-regulation.

Think about when you have had a difficult work meeting or an argument with a loved one. Did you do any of the following?

- Go for a walk or express your frustration physically
- Shout and swear
- Leave the room, office or house
- Talk to a friend or loved one
- Take a break to calm down – have a cup of tea or something stronger!

How would you find it if, following a difficult situation, you had to stay in the same room, with the same person, and do more work? Would it help you calm down?

Unlikely. So why do we expect it to help children? Or are we just using this strategy as a punishment – a deterrent to others, rather than something to help the child?

We should also note that many children with SEND struggle to regulate due to sensory needs, and levels of anxiety and stress that they experience in the school environment.

**No break from sensory demands:** Playtime provides an opportunity for children get the sensory input they need to help them regulate. They may spin or climb to get vestibular input, eat a crunchy snack or hug a friend to get proprioceptive input or dip their hands in rainwater to get tactile input.

The playground contains less sensory demands than a classroom. Even a barren inner city concrete jungle is less overwhelming. There is more space, less visual stimulation and noise and smells are diffused.

This sensory break is important as difficulties with sensory processing can lead to a child being stressed and dysregulated. And stressed child will find it hard to follow the rules and learn.

**Poorer focus and attention:** Break times have been shown to increase children's [attention, memory and focus](#). They help children process what they are learning, and foster creativity. Taking away a child's break time means they will find it harder to focus on the next lesson, making it more likely they will get into trouble again and not learn.

**Missed social benefits:** Break times provide children with a chance to develop and maintain friendships and develop social skills. During play children learn to deal with conflict, share resources and solve problems together.

This social time is very important. Most days when I ask my son what his favourite part of school was that day, invariably he says 'playing with John at playtime'. This is backed up by the Nuffield survey which showed that break times were the most enjoyable and memorable times that children have in school.

Often it is the children who most frequently miss play times, are the ones who need it most – they need to find parts of school enjoyable, and they need the social benefits that playtime can bring.

### Time for a Change of Policy

Psychologists in the UK have released a [position paper](#) about the importance of play, stating that:

*“Withdrawing break time opportunities for play in school should never be used as a punishment (e.g. for misbehaviour or completing unfinished work), nor the threat of*

*withdrawal be used to control children's behaviour."*

The British Psychological Society, Division of Education and Child Psychology

Similarly, the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) have called on schools to not withhold break times. They state that *"recess is a necessary break in the day for optimizing a child's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development...and it should not be withheld for academic or punitive reasons."*

The Nuffield report observes that working adults and teachers have a legal right to breaks, but that pupils do not. They encourage policy makers to consider making this a right for children too.

Denying a child break time is usually counter-productive. In my experience, keeping a child in is likely to result in the rest of the day also going downhill for them. There is no opportunity to reset or for them to start again.

Missed play times can:

- Make self-regulation even more difficult so the child is likely to get into more trouble.
- Make learning even more difficult.
- Affect social relationships and self-esteem.
- Impact on their desire to be at school.
- Disproportionately impacts children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

#### Case study: non-punitive

[Westbourne Primary School](#) have adopted a therapeutic behaviour approach which includes:

- 'planned ignoring' of low-level behaviour;
- positive language;
- restorative practice;
- rewards that are given unexpectedly (not as a form of bribery).

#### Case study: emotional and sensory regulation

[St Peter's Catholic Primary School](#) uses 'Zones of Regulation' as part of a whole school approach. Children who identify that they are not in the green zone are supported before they begin work. The school decided to adopt this inclusive practice because of a [need they identified](#) across the school.

Staff found that 'many children across the school, not just those with an additional need, lacked the ability to talk about their emotional state or self-regulate and this

was affecting readiness to learn. We concluded our behaviour system felt outdated. It only really worked well for compliant children and we needed something to develop long-term improvements in behaviour and emotional well-being’.

[St Andrew’s C of E Primary School](#) has [sensory toolboxes](#) , called ‘[Getting to My Green Zone](#)’, in every class, available for all students. These boxes contain calming activities and visuals for regulating activities and breathing exercises. They also have a mini-trampoline outside each class!

The boxes are just one part of sensory provision at the school. The focus on emotional regulation has led to positive outcomes for students and staff. Staff report a significant reduction in time spent on behaviour management and children report that they can focus and listen better.

#### Case study: flexible seating

[Mayfield Primary School](#) did an [evaluation project of flexible seating](#) across the whole school. Eleven different kinds of chairs were trialled across 14 classrooms. After 6 months students and staff feedback was obtained. Students were very positive about flexible seating and talked about how different types of seats affected their concentration levels, movement and comfort.

Staff reported that the use of flexible seating made teaching and supporting pupils easier, and they felt it led to improved pupil engagement, behaviour, comfort, mood, motivation and peer-to-peer collaboration’. They have now adopted flexible seating as a permanent inclusive practice. Flexible seating is particularly helpful for children with ADHD and those who are sensory movement seekers as it offers children more [movement opportunities](#).

## Physical Education (PE)

A Women in Sport report released in January 2026 found a drop in the percentage of girls who love sport, and a significant fall in the number of girls who dream of reaching the top levels of sport. This report identified gender stereotypes and structural barriers holding girls back.

Similarly, in October 2023 the BBC ran an article titled [‘Low confidence and periods stop girls liking PE’](#). The article reported on the findings of a Youth Sport Trust survey, which showed that only 59% of secondary school girls ‘like’ PE or ‘like it a lot’, compared to 84% of boys. The proportion of girls liking PE has dropped from the last survey when the proportion of girls enjoying PE was 74%.

Among the PE community these results have been met with dismay. Despite the best efforts of PE teachers many girls do not find PE enjoyable. Below I explore some of the barriers that girls face – lack of choice, changing and PE kit, feeling rubbish at sport, ability grouping, and managing periods. I then go on to briefly look at challenges that can affect girls who are hypermobile, autistic or have ADHD before concluding with a list of suggestions for reducing these barriers.

### Lack of choice

Whilst some girls enjoy competitive sport, research has shown that a curriculum that focuses on competitive sports tends to [favour boys](#) and those who already enjoy PE. As Lee Sullivan writes in his book [‘Is PE in Crisis?’](#), a sports driven model of PE rewards students who are already good at sport and causes those who with less competency and experience to have negative experiences of PE.

[One study of teenage girls](#) found they were bored and disappointed by the lack of variety in activities offered in PE. Rather than playing traditional sports like rugby or hockey, they preferred activities like dance, which offered enjoyment without the competitive element.

Introducing girls to different physical activity can help them find what they enjoy. One parent I interviewed for [my book](#) told me:

*“My daughter hated team games in PE. During lockdown she got into CrossFit. When she was exploring college options she said, ‘I’d like to go there because it’s got a gym’. This from someone who hated exercise! I’m really pleased that she’s found a physical activity she can do for life.”*

### Changing and PE kit

Getting dressed and undressed is such a common task that we adults may overlook just how complex it is and how daunting it can be young people to undress in front of each other. Researchers have discovered [lots of difficulties that students experience in changing rooms](#) – feeling exposed in front of others, fearing having their photo

taken, struggling with the noise and time pressure and dealing with incidences of bullying. It's not just changing that it is difficult, wearing a PE kit can cause girls embarrassment and discomfort.

School swimming can be traumatic too. Online there are lots of comments about school swimming with people describing the experience as 'torturous' and 'frightening'. One non-binary respondent talked about how wearing a girl's swimsuit caused them a lot of distress. Others who struggled with eating disorders described the shame of getting naked in front of classmates. Heartbreakingly, some young people posted that they were restricting their eating before school swimming lessons or staying off school because they couldn't cope with PE.

### Being left out

A [research study](#) of 144 students aged between 9 and 15 looked at the processes students used to select partners or team mates in PE. The study showed that girls selected other girls according to their friendships, their best friend was their preferred partner.

In contrast, boys selected other boys according to how sporty they were. As a result, the least popular girls and least sporty boys were consistently selected last.

Don't let this happen! Don't let students select their own teams or partners. [Read this article by Andy Milne](#) for great examples of building positive team relationships and reducing anxiety.

### Feeling 'rubbish' at sport

Being successful at a physical activity is a great feeling. The opposite is also true – there is nothing more frustrating and demoralising than repeatedly trying and failing at a task, especially when those around you can do it. 'Failing' at sport can lead to girls believing that they are rubbish at physical activity. How can we change this and help girls experience success?

We can use the STEP framework (Youth Sport Trust 2002) to adapt our lessons and enable girls to feel pride, happiness and achievement:

**Space:** How can you alter the space? Can you make the pitch smaller? Do you need to decrease the distance to the target? What sensory modifications do you need?

**Task:** How can you adapt the activity? Can you make the activity easier by changing the rules? Can you simplify the activity? Do students need more time to complete the task?

**Equipment:** How can you offer choice of equipment? Can you provide alternative sizes or weights of equipment? Would a wider bat help or a larger ball?

**People:** How can you facilitate positive interactions? Can students work with different peers? Have choice in their partners? Can you change the size of the team?

### Teachers focusing on sporty students

In a survey of 144 girls, students reported that their PE teachers focused on the students who were the best players. This can happen because teachers who are passionate about sport and PE naturally identify with students who share this enthusiasm. Teachers want to nurture their talent and love of physical activity. Most PE teachers work really hard at making PE as engaging as possible for all students but are stuck in a sports heavy model of teaching PE. Many teachers also feel they haven't received enough training on making PE inclusive and engaging for all.

### Ability grouping

Girls may be helped by matching them with peers of similar ability for certain tasks and games. [A study of 60 secondary school girls](#) found that differing levels of ability put some students off participating in team sports.

One girl reported she didn't want to spoil the game for potential teammates because of her low level of ability. Other girls in the study suggested that if schools formed teams of different ability levels, they would be more likely to take part: "All schools should have second, maybe third teams just so if girls aren't good enough for the first team they can still play."

Although this study focused on extra-curricular sports the recommendations are worth considering for PE lessons, too whilst being mindful that putting girls in a 'lower ability' group could also be very demoralising.

### PE and periods

Many girls report dealing with periods as something that puts them off PE and swimming in particular, especially if their periods are irregular or they aren't confident using period products.

We need positive conversations around periods, as many young people believe menstruating is unclean and something to be hidden. A report found that [56% of 14-year-old girls felt embarrassed](#) about their period.

Whilst this is an issue for many girls, it's important to remember that girls with additional needs may find this especially challenging e.g. they may have difficulty communicating their need to go to the toilet, or struggle with organisation or physically dealing with pads and tampons.

## Additional needs and neurodivergence

It is important to consider intersectionality when thinking about the barriers girls face in PE. How does race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, class and disability also impact on girls?

I do not have the experience or expertise to address most of these, but as an Occupational Therapist and mum to autistic children I will briefly talk about how disability and neurodivergence can affect girls' engagement with PE (I cover these and many more conditions in much more depth in ['Inclusive PE for SEND Children'](#)).

**Hypermobility:** Studies suggest that autistic girls and those with ADHD are [3.5 times more likely to have hypermobile joints](#) than their peers. Whilst some young people experience no negative effects of hypermobility (having extra movement at the joints) for others it can cause pain, fatigue, muscle tightness, and poor coordination.

Things that can help are allowing students to take breaks and rest when needed, and using circuits and stations to enable students to set their own pace and intensity.

**ADHD:** As ADD/ADHD is often overlooked in girls, it is possible that you have a couple of girls in your class with undiagnosed ADD or ADHD. Whilst this neurotype comes with many advantages, it can also bring difficulties with impulsivity, sensory processing difficulties, emotional regulation, transitions, task switching, following rules and processing verbal information.

**Autism:** Autistic girls can find PE very challenging. Again, many girls are undiagnosed and may 'mask' to try and fit in. However, they are still likely to find the following difficult: the sensory environment, interpreting and using non-verbal communication in team games, team dynamics, unpredictability, transitions, rules that aren't explicit, processing information.

One parent I interviewed said: *"She really struggled with team games and fairness of who was following the rules and who wasn't and the popularity context of the ball only being passed amongst the sporty kids."*

Another parent said: *"PE teachers didn't understand the social and communication challenges – how difficult it is to be liked, chosen for a team and put to work in a pair."*

## Case studies

At [Selby High School](#) students have the choice of doing individual sports, team sports, fitness activities and new emerging sports. This approach allows children who struggle with team sports to engage, whether due to social or sensory difficulties or because of the pressure to win or fear of letting the team down. Many students

who may not engage in traditional PE activities would enjoy doing individual sports or fitness activities.

In many schools forgotten PE kit means a child has to sit out of PE, and is often given a detention. At [Kensington Primary School](#) they have removed this barrier stating that if wearing the school PE kit is a 'temporary barrier for any pupil/s taking part in the PE session, then they may wear any sporty/suitable/colour clothing/footwear, including tracksuits, shorts, trousers and suitable top'.

## Conclusion

We have looked at some of the things that are stopping girls from enjoying PE. Here are some suggestions of ways to break down the barriers:

- Look at the PE curriculum and the balance of competitive and collaborative activities. Can you increase the variety of activities offered?
- Use STEP to think in advance about how you could adapt your lessons to help girls succeed. Be thinking, "*What can I do differently to help them engage?*"
- Consider creating teams that place students of similar ability levels together. Have teams that are focused on competition and teams that are focused on enjoyment and participation to reduce the pressure on playing.
- Involve girls in conversations about PE kit, swim wear and privacy in changing rooms. You may consider encouraging all students to wear shorts or introduce different swimwear. In Japan, schools are introducing genderless two-piece short-sleeved and long-sleeved tops that don't emphasise body contours to help students – particularly those who are non-binary or trans or self-conscious – to feel more comfortable.
- Don't enforce showers.
- Provide menstrual products and make it known that these are on offer. This helps girls who experience period poverty and girls whose periods have started when they don't have any period products with them. Talk openly about periods to challenge stigma.
- Give girls options and information about their participation in swimming during their periods.
- Allow students to take rests and go at their own pace.
- Read '[Inclusive PE for SEND Children](#)' to make your lessons more accessible for girls with additional needs and who are neurodivergent.

## Toileting

Schools are increasingly restricting students' access to the toilet. This is difficult for all children but particularly students with SEND who may have difficulties with interoception, time awareness, planning skills and sensory sensitivities. Restrictive toilet policies can cause anxiety, constipation, dehydration and headaches. Students should be able to use the toilet when they need it.

### School Toilet Policies and SEND

Some schools only allow students to use the toilet at break or lunch times unless they have a medical condition. However, many children will struggle to plan toilet trips even if they do not (yet) have a formal diagnosis.

In order to be able to use the toilets at set times, a child needs the following skills and abilities:

- Good interoception.
- Time awareness.
- Able to eat quickly.
- Good planning and organisational skills.
- Tolerance to sensory input.
- Understanding of social etiquette.

Many children who are Autistic or have Dyslexia, Developmental Co-Ordination Disorder (Dsypraxia), Dyscalculia or Sensory Processing Difficulties will struggle with the above. Let's look at the skills needed to access the toilet at set times in more detail:

**Interoception:** This is the body's ability to recognise internal feelings and signals such as being thirsty, in pain, hungry, hot, cold or needing the toilet. This is an area that can be [very difficult for Autistic children](#) as well as those with sensory processing difficulties. Children don't recognise that they need the toilet until they are bursting to go. This often results in accidents.

**Time Awareness:** Many Autistic children struggle with accurate perceptions of time. Indeed [one study](#) suggested that it may be a key feature of Autism. Children with dsylexia, DCD and dsycalculia all have difficulty with judging time. This can make it difficult to judge if they have time to use the toilet at break times, and to know how long they will have to wait until another break time.

**Ability to eat quickly:** Many children with co-ordination difficulties struggle to eat quickly. As schools cut [break and lunch times shorter](#), children who eat slowly will have little time to also use the toilet.

**Planning and Organisational Skills:** Children with DCD, Dyslexia, [ADHD](#) and Autism often have difficulties with organising themselves due to difficulties with prioritising and planning. If a student only has 15 minutes to go to their locker, get their snack, go outside, eat, talk with friends and use the toilet they may find it difficult to know what to do first, and may procrastinate or become overwhelmed.

**Tolerance to sensory input:** Imagine a school toilet block full of students – the noise of chatting and flushing, the smells, the touch of people brushing past. This is on top of the sensory experience of using the toilet that can be hard for many children. The toilets can be a place of sensory overwhelm, especially if everyone is using them at the same time.

**Understanding of social etiquette:** Social rules govern using the toilet and some children will struggle to identify and follow these unspoken rules – if it's OK to talk when using the urinals, whether to try and cover up body noises and smells when using the toilet etc.

### What's the problem for students?

ERIC, the national children's bowel and bladder charity, warns that restricting school toilet policies can '[aggravate or even create continence problems](#)' and can cause the following issues:

- Toileting accidents in the classroom which cause humiliation and shame.
- Anxiety around using the toilet.
- Holding in which can lead to constipation and urinary tract infections.
- Children [limiting how much they drink](#) to avoid needing the toilet. This causes dehydration and headaches.
- Lack of concentration from either needing the toilet or from dehydration and anxiety.

When children experience the above difficulties they cannot learn. And their well-being and health may be damaged. Children with SEND are placed at an additional disadvantage.

## End Restrictive School Toilet Policies

Schools need to allow all students to use the toilet when needed. This will prevent harm to student's health and prevent students with additional needs from facing further barriers to education. Teachers, Occupational Therapists and Parents can all play a part in helping to influence, and change, restrictive toilet policies.

## Uniform

School uniform causes sensory, physical and organisational challenges for many children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Students are increasingly getting sanctioned for breaching school uniform policies with some even being excluded. Making adaptations for individual students isn't enough. Schools can become more inclusive by making rigid uniform policies more flexible to allow for choice and comfort.

### What's the problem?

Rigid school uniform policies particularly disadvantage children with SEND. What do I mean by rigid uniform policies? Examples of some secondary school uniform codes are:

- Long sleeve shirt with all buttons fastened, including the top button.
- Having 9 stripes of a tie showing.
- Specific kinds of black trousers.
- Polyester blazers.
- Skirts of a certain length.
- Trousers not shorts.
- Branded coats.

Primary schools tend to be more relaxed, but many will not tolerate long sleeves under polo shirts, or different textures of trousers or dresses if the polyester ones are too uncomfortable.

### How do strict uniform policies disadvantage children with SEND?

#### **Sensory sensitivities**

Autistic children and those with DCD or ADHD often have tactile sensitivities which make certain types of clothing difficult or impossible to wear. These children often find seams, ties, labels and certain textures painful or distressing.

They have a few items of clothing that they feel comfortable in and often wear. Some children prefer to be naked at home, as they find any type of clothing uncomfortable.

For children with hyper-sensitivity to touch, any kind of uniform can pose a challenge. Things are made even worse because many schools have chosen uniform that resembles work wear with long-sleeved shirts with many buttons, polyester blazers, ties and skirts and trousers made from rough, itchy material.

It wasn't until my own Autistic son started struggling with school uniform that I realised how disabling a uniform can be:

'I hate it, I hate it, get it off me!' he screamed. I quickly removed the T-shirt from my son and hugged him as he sat crying and shaking. He was so distressed by the collar of his school polo shirt that I sent him to school in a plain T-shirt. That was the last day he wore uniform.

We were lucky. His school agreed that he could wear his own clothes. If they had insisted on school uniform he wouldn't have been able to attend school.

My son is far from alone in experiencing difficulties with clothing. Studies estimate that tactile sensitivity is very common in neurodivergent conditions such as Autism, ADHD and DCD (Dyspraxia). In fact, sensory processing difficulties are so common in Autistic children that it has been included as part of the [diagnostic criteria](#). It can also be a standalone condition – [a study of 925 neurotypical](#) children found that 1 in 6 children were over-responsive to touch or sound.

### **Physical Challenges**

Young people with co-ordination disorders often find laces, ties, buttons and zips difficult.

Trying to do up lots of small buttons demands fine motor skills and proprioceptive skills that many young people don't have. Tying a tie and laces requires motor planning and sequencing, that is a challenge for children with Developmental Co-Ordination Disorder (Dyspraxia). Similarly, dealing with zips and trouser fastenings can be difficult for many.

This makes not only getting dressed in the morning difficult, but also using the toilet and changing for PE. Jogging bottoms, pull up trousers and t-shirts or polo shirts are much easier to manage.

### **Organisational Challenges**

Students with organisational difficulties struggle to present themselves as required.

Many school policies demand that formal wear be worn neatly, with buttons done up to the top, shirts tucked in and ties at a certain length. For students who struggle with attention to detail, this is very challenging. As it is the demand of keeping track of many items of uniform and PE Kit.

In some schools, children are expected to wear different items of uniform according to whether they are representing the school or not on a formal occasion. This means students have to remember what clothing to wear when, on top of remembering which books and equipment to have for which lesson, homework deadline, transport arrangements, etc.

This is all cognitive load before any learning has actually taken place!

### Why do schools insist on strict uniform policies?

Schools do not have to have a uniform. They can choose whether to have a uniform or not, and what the uniform is. It can be casual or formal.

However, the Department of Education encourages schools to do so, claiming that [wearing a uniform can help with:](#)

- promoting the ethos of a school;
- providing a sense of belonging and identity;
- setting an appropriate tone for education.

Similarly, supporters of school uniform argue that wearing a uniform helps children to feel that they belong and improves behaviour. However, [a study](#) of 6000 students found that wearing uniform didn't make any difference to behaviour and in fact negatively affected students' sense of belonging.

One school states that 'wearing our school uniform as expected shows that a student is not only a member of our school community but proud to be so'. Is this true?

Does adhering to school policy indicate a student's feelings about the school or does it just demonstrate that the child doesn't have sensory, physical and organisational needs?

### What is the impact of breaching uniform policies?

Many students are being punished for not complying with uniform policies. Sanctions vary from school to school, but a [recent poll](#) of 2000 parents found that:

- 22% reported that their child had been given a detention for breaching uniform policy
- 12% reported that their child had been placed in isolation
- 7% reported that their child had been excluded for wearing the wrong shoes or clothing

It is shocking that schools would give the same sanctions for clothing infringements as they would for abuse, sexual misconduct, or racism.

Teachers find themselves having to dish out sanctions for uniforms, time that [according to one teacher](#), would be better spent building positive relationships with students.

## Don't schools make adaptations for individual students?

Schools should make reasonable adjustments to uniform policy for children with SEND. However, this rarely happens. Parents report that their neurodivergent children are being punished for uniform infractions.

Some parents have written how their child who experiences emotionally based school avoidance, and had been too anxious to attend school for several weeks, was put in isolation on the day they returned to school for wearing the wrong clothing.

Individual adaptation are not enough. Firstly, it is another thing that students and parents have to fight for.

Secondly, if an adaptation is made, it is not always communicated to the rest of the staff. I have heard stories of students being sanctioned for wearing a different item of clothing, even though that had been agreed.

Thirdly, young people are singled out as different, and this may affect their self esteem and sense of belonging.

Lastly, many students whose needs aren't recognised, don't have a diagnosis of a parent to advocate for them will miss out.

## The Solution: Inclusive Uniform

Imagine how much better school could be for all students if they felt comfortable and confident in what they were wearing. If the focus could be on learning and character rather than if their shirt was tucked in correctly, or they had the right shade of top.

Imagine, if students experienced school as safe, positive places, rather than being anxious about being punished for uniform breaches.

Imagine if teachers could spend more time teaching and less time policing clothing.

We don't have to imagine. We can change school uniform policy to be more flexible and inclusive so additional physical, sensory, organisational and financial barriers don't hinder students' learning and well-being.

## Case Studies

[St Paul's Primary School](#) allows children in reception and year 1 to wear polo shirts and jogging bottoms to school, as this promotes physical activity and is easier for children with sensory difficulties.

[Kensington Primary School](#) encourages children to wear jogging bottoms, t-shirts and trainers every day, to promote physical activity.

Relaxed uniform can make a huge difference to learners with [sensory, organisational or physical difficulties](#).

### There are several solutions

The most radical would be to have no school uniform and let students wear their own clothing. This would mean that children with sensory or physical difficulties could wear clothes of choice that are comfortable and easy to manage.

The next option would be to choose clothing that is comfortable and casual. For example, make school uniform polo shirts, sweatshirts and tracksuits bottoms.

Or keep uniform but allow adaptations like the ones recommended by the [Dyspraxia Foundation](#):

- Allow t-shirt and polo shirts instead of shirts.
- Allow Velcro shoes instead of laces.
- Enable students to wear a range of textures.
- Give permission for students to wear a long-sleeved plain top underneath their T-shirt.

### Conclusion

Many schools have rigid school uniform policies that disadvantage children, particularly those with SEND. Having a more flexible uniform is more inclusive, allowing children to be comfortable, independent and able to focus on learning. It means that students are less likely to receive sanctions for breaching uniform policy, resulting in a more positive, happier environment.

Instead of making adaptations for individual students, that are hard to get, and then mark the students out as different, let's make these changes for all students.

## Moving Forward

Many common school policies have a disproportionate effect on SEND students. Students are disciplined for behaviours and struggles that are part of their additional needs. Instead of support, they are meeting with punishment and systematic exclusion.

A student who is punished for a uniform infringement; isn't able to use the toilet when they need to; feels body shame in PE; and is kept in at breaktime for not finishing their work, isn't going to be a student who is happy, healthy and academically successful. On a weekly basis I work with children and young people who are going through mental health crisis and are no longer able to attend mainstream school due to high anxiety, burnout and unmet need.

Reforming school policies so all children are included is vital. Individual teachers are often doing great work, but are constrained by the policies of the school. Headteachers want to bring change but experience the limitations of Ofsted requirements and government policy. The change that is so desperately needed has to happen on all levels – on a national playing field and in staffrooms, playgrounds and school runs up and down the country.

We can't wait any longer. Will you be part of the conversation and bring the change to really make our schools more inclusive? Can you pick one aspect addressed in this paper and advocate for change today?