# Title

Understanding school exclusion through creativity

# Speaker information

* Cheryl Blake (Interviewer) (Cheryl)
* Sarah Martin-Denham (Speaker 1) (Sarah)
* Hayley Hudson (Speaker 2) (Hayley)

# Description

To coincide with Neurodiversity Week 2025, this episode sees host and public partner [Cheryl Blake](https://fuse.ac.uk/publicinvolvement/meetapublicpartner/cherylblake.html) speak with [Dr Sarah Martin-Denham](https://www.sunderland.ac.uk/about/staff/teacher-training-and-education/sarahdenham/) and Hayley Hudson (parent and advocate) about the impact of school exclusion, especially on children and young people themselves. Sarah and Hayley talk about their personal experiences, key findings from the research and suggest areas for improvement and change. [More information about this episode can be found here.](https://fuse.ac.uk/publicinvolvement/fusepodcast/piecingittogetherunderstandingschoolexclusionthroughcreativity.html)

# Contact

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Fuse Podcast: Public Health Research and Me

Transcript

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[Start of recording]

[upbeat electronic music 00:00:00—00:00:05]

00:00:05 Cheryl Hello and welcome to our podcast, *Public Health Research and Me*. This podcast is led by public partners from Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health. Fuse brings together six universities in the North East and North Cumbria, including Durham, Newcastle, Cumbria, Northumbria, Sunderland, and Teesside in a unique collaboration to deliver world class research to improve health and wellbeing and tackle inequalities. Fuse is also a founding member of the NIHR School for Public Health Research. Hello, my name is Cheryl Blake and I’m a public partner collaborating with Fuse. My interests and specialist subjects are on mental and sexual health, domestic abuse, coercive and violent behaviour, and family court and social work as within that system. In this episode, I will be talking with Sarah Martin-Denham, who is an Associate Professor of Care and Education at Sunderland University, and Hayley Hudson, who is a project partner and parent. Today we’ll be talking about what excluded children, crochet squares and research have in common. So, hello to Hayley and hello to Sarah.

00:01:09 Sarah Hello.

00:01:10 Hayley Hi. Hello.

00:01:11 Cheryl Welcome to our podcast. Could you tell us a bit about your research and what inspired such a creative project involving crochet squares and children’s stories?

00:01:20 Sarah Hi, I’m Sarah Martin-Denham from the University of Sunderland. I had done some research in Sunderland, and a lot of that was talking to children and parents and professionals about their experiences of school exclusion. And what I found is—I’d published lots of things. There was lots of words and lots of articles, as you do in universities, but there wasn’t—it didn’t really capture the feeling I got when I was in the room or in that space with people who’d actually experienced it firsthand. So, what I decided to try and do was to do something a bit differently in research. So, try to use film and something more creative to try and get people having a conversation about the factors and solutions that are increasing the rates of school exclusions—so suspensions and permanent exclusions in England. And that’s kind of how I met Hayley. So, Hayley is—as she will introduce herself, is a parent advocate. 00:02:20 Hayley and I met because I was doing a film project. I’ve done films with children who had been suspended or permanently excluded from school. They’ve done really, really well in helping conversations about how we can support teachers better, how we can support children and parents, and I decided it’d be great to do something like that with parents. And that’s, really, where I started to work with Hayley, and we did a series of films with other parents. And then just wanted to—well, I say we wanted to keep meeting. Hayley might have a different view on that. But we—kind of I thought we enjoyed our time together. And we wanted to do something different, which is where the crochet came in. And I’m going to hand over to Hayley at that point so she can have a say on your perspective, Hayley?

00:03:04 INT? Yes.

00:03:05 Hayley Hi, I am Hayley Hudson. I’m a parent and advocate. So, the project that we did originally was obviously making a little bit of film. We started off just doing a little bit of craft to do with that film. Lots of questions around why children feel isolated and excluded while in the school environment, as well as the reasons why they get excluded from school and the behaviours that lead to that. So, yeah, me and a few other parents joined, I suppose, a sort of focus group, essentially. Myself and two other parents from the school that my child was at, and a few parents from another school. We did separate films. Ours was primary—the school. Theirs was a secondary school. And the films were basically around similar things about behaviour, about how the children feel when they’re isolated and so on and so forth. 00:04:02 And just allowing the children to be able to speak about their experience and how the life in school made them feel when they felt so withdrawn. And from that, we ended up wanting to stay together, I think. So therefore, a group was put together to widen the net and bring in other parents whose children may not already be in a pupil referral unit, or that sort of environment, and bring parents in to chat about their experiences and how it was making them feel with their children being possibly on the road to exclusion or suspension from school. And while we were doing that, we made our hands busy, because apparently, according to Sarah, busy hands leads to loose jaws. So, the talking obviously and sort of the understanding that you didn’t feel alone. 00:04:59 That you were part of something that was now pushing forward to try and find a solution, no matter how small, even if it just helped one child. So, the crafting just got a little bit excessive and we ended up heading towards a wool explosion… and we started crocheting. So, there you go.

00:05:23 Cheryl I like that phrase. I think that’s quite a good phrase to live by, to be fair.

00:05:26 Hayley [chuckles]

00:05:28 Sarah While we were doing the filming, we were looking—so, I work with somebody called Nathan Scott, who’s fabulous, and he was looking at the data for me on the number of suspensions and permanent exclusions in England equivalent per school day. And in 2021-’22 there was two thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine. So, when we were chatting about this—we’re going to blame Karen at this point, Hayley, because she’s not here. Said that—I said she’s not here, so we can do that. Said that she enjoyed crochet, and I took in crochet hook and some wool—well, I couldn’t crochet at this point. Never had. And Karen made a square. And I said, “Wouldn’t it be great if we just could make something to show that two thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine?” And then it just kind of happened that crochet squares were what we decided. We could get the community involved with, children involved with, other parents. 00:06:21 And put a call out on social media and didn’t actually expect to get—to receive donated squares in that volume, but we hit target of two thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine. And we thought it was going to be really easy and we’d just put them together. That wasn’t the case. They were all different sizes, different thicknesses, different types of wool. Some were knitting. And then we had to border them all because we realised you couldn’t connect them very easily. So, a lot of time invested from everybody who donated the squares, right through to us kind of getting them ready and finished for the blanket to launch—which I think was June, 2024. [laughs] It seems like a lot longer ago. I think the project itself was good because everybody could get involved. I think a project that brings numbers to life for someone who—like me, who struggles with numbers. So, actually, if you go two-nine-nine-nine, it’s—you’ve just got—it’s a number. But, actually visually seeing it and knowing the care that people have put into creating that as well, I think has been the power of this particular project.

00:07:28 Cheryl I’ll say for me, as a crocheter myself, when I’ve had to make something and I need, say, I don’t know, just twenty granny squares, that’s a lot when you’re doing that. So, I think that is actually a really good idea to have that visual. That is so many squares and therefore so many children, and I think it is such a good idea to have that visual representation. So, from your research, what have you discovered about how school exclusion affects children and their families and their wider support networks?

00:07:59 Sarah So, I’ve spoken to over a hundred parents and probably over four hundred children who’ve been directly affected. And it’s…. The factors are so varied and different, but they’re all kind of coming from a place of relationships and connections, I’d say. So, schools are under a lot of pressure. And I know being an ex-teacher myself, people don’t go into the profession thinking, “I want to suspend and permanently exclude children.” But the system that we have in schools and in the education system just doesn’t work for our children. The pressure is, I think, on everybody. The pressure is on parents for children to be able to conform and behave in particular ways in school. The pressure is on teachers to get results. The pressure is on heads to fill their schools with children, so therefore having good results. And just a lack of funding is a real challenge. 00:08:56 So, what we’re ending up is putting children into schools where there maybe aren’t enough teachers, there aren’t enough teachers trained in enough subjects, there aren’t enough resources, there isn’t enough understanding. And when you bring all of these factors together—and that’s without thinking about community factors and things in the home. Perhaps maybe the family doesn’t have enough support from other services as well—so waiting lists in health. I think the factors are so broad that the research is telling us, really, I think in some respects, we just need to have a rethink and start again about what does work. Which is why the research I do with Hayley and others is all about finding solutions. So, what are the things that we can do differently from the perspective of those who are living it? I think, it’s really important. Which is why the *Pull Up a Chair* films and the projects that we’re doing now are really important. Because it’s about bringing people together to have those conversations about, “In this local area, what are the challenges and what can we do to try and overcome some of them?” 00:09:51 Because there are exclusions that are preventable and it’s how do we get to that place?

00:10:07 Hayley For me, being a parent of a child who was excluded from school, I mean, even though both his exclusions were only for that one day, for us as a family, it was very upsetting for me to see him so distressed, and so embarrassed, and overwhelmed, and mortified that I’d had to come into school and collect him. And his attitude then towards school became despondent. He didn’t want to be there. He didn’t want to learn. He despised his teachers because they were the reason why he felt so embarrassed and overwhelmed. And his reaction to all of these emotions and feelings, for him, was to be angry. So, his default mode is—and he didn’t understand why he felt sad or if he was feeling sad, why he felt embarrassed or if he was even feeling embarrassed. 00:11:07 He didn’t get why he was feeling the way he did. But all he knew was that he could control his anger. He could be angry, he could make himself angry, and that made him feel like he was in control and that he had some sort of power over the situation. So, he didn’t cry, so it didn’t make him look like he was sad or upset or that they’d affected him. And obviously the issues that go beyond that is if you’ve got a child who’s misbehaving at school for whatever reason, the effect that then has on the wider environment within the classroom; the effect that it has on those teachers that have had to put that in place and have him removed from the classroom or even removed from the school; parents who then have to come out of work to pick up their children. And then there’s everything that goes on around that. 00:12:01 But if you’ve got other children and your attention is now focused on the behaviours and the attitudes and trying to make that one child that is struggling feel safe, you are then causing issues with the rest of your family because they then become your focus. And you then, I wouldn’t necessarily say neglect the rest of your family, but you make allowances then for that one child. Because for me, school was the environment that made him feel uncomfortable. So, when he started to bring that home and be angry when he first got home from school, or his behaviour would change just before he left for school, I then made allowances and allowed him to get away with quite a lot because I needed him to have a good day at school. It’s quite hard. And as a parent, when other parents know that your child’s being excluded from school or suspended or whatever it is, being that parent in the school yard isn’t very nice either. 00:13:04 Being part of that family, “Oh, stay away from that child.” You know, which then isolates them even more. So they feel worthless, they feel like nobody likes them, they feel like they’ve got no friends. And it’s—I mean, it’s heartbreaking. Absolutely heartbreaking.

00:13:21 Cheryl It definitely has a knock-on effect, doesn’t it? Everything—you know, it’s just one sort of small thing to—at the start and then just everything is just a knock-on effect. And I don’t think a lot of people realise the difficulties that that brings home. Something that’s happened at school as well then carries on at home or, like you say, throughout the rest of the sort of family life as well. It’s a big knock-on effect. So, how many parents or carers have participated in your research and what have you learned from their lived experiences? And have any of the children themselves contributed to the project? Like making the squares. Any of them helped make their own squares or shared their own stories?

00:14:02 Sarah Yeah. So, all my research is about their stories. So, of the four hundred plus children I’ve spoken to, they’ve all had options to express views in ways they want to. So, some it’s been a conversation where I maybe go and meet them at school or somewhere else with parents or members of school staff. But I always, always take—I’ve always taken creative things with me. There’s something that Hayley said about using your hands, it just relaxes you and makes you feel—regardless of what you’re talking about, it just makes you feel like you can have conversations that are harder when you’re just face-to-face with someone. I always take chocolate Jenga. Now that’s become a hit. I tried with that about—I think it was last year sometime. So, playing chocolate Jenga with them before you start any conversations about how they want to share their voice. So, some of them don’t—maybe don’t want to talk to you. 00:14:59 They want to draw something, they want to write something, they want to have a think and you come back another time. But I think the thing with crochet is… that lots of—children have contributed squares, but crotchet is quite hard. I don’t know if—I know you said that you do it, but it took me, I think, a good five months to create a square, that, really, probably wasn’t a square, it was just a series of knots. It is hard. But the children have contributed. And I think it’s quite a nice activity that from this project, schools are continuing to do with children. Because it’s just really calming, isn’t it? Like, apart from, like, the parents, like Hayley, will go into—and Mags as well; one of our other parents, will go into bit of like a—what do we call it? It’s not a crochet tantrum. It’s like a crochet rage, where you just—and crochet quitting. We’ve had a lot of crochet quitting within our little group of parents and myself that meet because of—

00:15:58 Hayley No, it’s a rage quit, Sarah—rage quit.

00:16:00 Sarah It’s a rage quit! It’s a rage quit where you just go, “I’m not doing it any more!” But, yeah. So, yeah, lots of parents, lots of children have took part in this project. The film project as well was really good. That involved—in total, about, I think, a hundred and thirty voices of children were included. Also an exhibition of their artworks at the National Glass Centre that was great.

00:16:23 Cheryl Oh, wow!

00:16:23 Sarah And there was something about that—yeah, their work at the Glass Centre was really powerful, because for many of them, they hadn’t been to the National Glass Centre before. Even the art teachers were like, “Well, I’ve never had my work exhibited at the National Glass Centre.” So, that was lovely, seeing them come in and see their work presented on walls. It was really positive. It’s just giving them that sense of confidence and worth, I think, that they’re worth it. That they’re worth listening to. They’ve got things to say that really matter. I think it’s really it’s been really important. Yeah.

00:16:55 Cheryl That’s a really awesome memory as well for them, isn’t it? To take on, to go forward. Like they’ve—like you say, you know, that it would give them confidence and to know that they matter enough to be put onto a wall, you know. [chuckles] Like that’s pretty amazing that, like… That is really special. I’m sorry, I have to ask. What’s chocolate Jenga?

00:17:15 Sarah So, you just have to buy—I don’t know if we’ve played it, Hayley. You just buy—like, it doesn’t work with all chocolates. So, say, you buy like fifty bars of Wispa chocolate—so I don’t always buy the same chocolate, but you have to buy pretty standard length and thickness, and then you just Jenga chocolate it. So, you put it in rows of three and then you’ve got to just—the same as Jenga. But when you get a bar of chocolate out, you keep it. And what’s lovely with the children is often they’ll take chocolate home for parents or give them to teachers that are really, you know, working well with them. I mean it is bad for a National Institute of Health Research type funded project that I go around giving children chocolate, but it’s just how about—it’s about how you break the ice, isn’t it? [00:18:00].

00:17:59 Cheryl Yeah, definitely. And I think that’s really important to help make the children feel, like, safe and comfortable for them to be able to share their stories, like you say.

00:18:08 Sarah Yeah. Yeah, definitely.

00:18:11 Cheryl I just—sort of something I picked up on there. You were saying about how difficult it is with the crocheting and the rage and everything. And I just—I find that quite interesting, actually, because it’s—to me, that kind of represents the struggle. You know, the—it’s not just what the squares represent, it’s the story behind it. That you are all trying to make this thing that’s meant to represent something, but you are actually struggling to make the thing that’s meant to represent something. So, [chuckles] it kind of sort of is very similar to what you were saying, Hayley, about the continued struggles in the background that nobody sees. Like, I don’t think that’s actually the story that you’re bringing forward, is the struggle that you’re having in making this blanket that’s meant to represent something but that actually also kind of highlights the hidden struggles that you have as a family and parent and carer.

00:19:01 Hayley Yeah. There might be a crochet blanket coming in just from the parents.

00:19:04 Cheryl [laughs] That sounds like a good idea.

00:19:08 Sarah Yeah. What’s interesting about the blanket as well—so it’s on tour now, kindly funded by the NIHR. So, it’s touring England. And it is starting to unravel, so odd squares have started to come apart. And when we take it on tour around the country—so, we go together, me and the parents. We talk about how each square represents a child and really keeping that in mind, that, “You’re looking at this huge blanket. And, yes, it is beautiful, but think about what it means and what each of these child have made. What their journeys have been like to this point.” And I think the squares unravelling, there’s something about—that’s children, like Hayley’s described about her child. And not all children come through this unscathed. Not all teachers come through unscathed, and schools, as well. But the children and the parents—and it’s being—and seeing the unravelling squares, I think, brings that into focus when you look at that. 00:20:07 So, we did start off at first trying to repair them, but now we’ve kind of just thought, “Well, when it comes back in June—” and we will do an event when the blanket comes back in June. It’s been around the sixteen different organisations around the country. And I think that’s the next conversation, isn’t it? It’s, “Well, look at the state of it.” It’s had all these moves—as children do, as we know. They get managed moves, they get new schools, they get permanent exclusions, and go to another school. And that’s without all the usual transitions between schools. And then—yes. So, we’re also—I don’t want to do a spoiler, but I think it would be great if Hayley could talk about what happened next. So, we’re currently working on something else at the moment because the numbers of exclusions are continuing to rise.

00:20:55 Hayley Yeah. So, the numbers have risen and there was a lot of discussion regarding what to do for the next group of children that have been forgotten and excluded. We spoke about different things that we could do to represent these children. Because we do feel like, you know, we’ve done it now so the next project that we do, it needs to be bigger. And not necessarily bigger just because the numbers are bigger. We did a lot of crafting together as a group, a lot of brainstorming, a lot of pros and cons, and we came back to crochet. So, that was fun. All of us rage quit crochet and we wanted to do something else, but we did come back to doing the crochet blanket again. 00:21:45 Originally, we were going to add to the blanket that we had, knowing full well that a lot of the time the children that are these numbers are—a lot of the time they are the same children that are being excluded week in, week out, year in, year out, so that would’ve worked; having the children from one school year, and then add to the blanket for the children for the next school year. However, we decided that we were going to do a full new blanket and—but we were going to crochet the squares on a bit of a smaller scale. So, rather than doing the ten-by-ten that we’d requested the first time, we were now doing five-by-five. The blanket will be bigger only because, even though it’s—the numbers haven’t doubled. The numbers for the new school year are four-one-nine-one, so my maths brain—I don’t have a maths brain. That’s a lie. 00:22:46 I was going to say, “My maths brain can’t work that out quick enough,” but if I actually had a maths brain, it probably would—of the difference in number; one hundred and thirty something—one thousand and thirty something. Sorry. Yeah. So, the new crochet blanket, we are putting out social media pleas to ask people to crochet some more, children, I suppose, for us, so we can rage quit crochet some more. Happy days.

00:23:18 Cheryl Happy days.

00:23:18 Sarah Happy crochet days.

00:23:20 Cheryl I would definitely be happy to be involved with that. And I’m trying to convince my children to crochet, because I learned off my grandma when I was very little, but they don’t seem to be that interested. Which is a little sad, but maybe if I tell them it’s for a good cause. [laughs]

00:23:36 Hayley Well, my oldest can knit, and she did knit a few squares for….

00:23:40 Cheryl Oh, wow! That’s good.

00:23:41 Hayley And I have tried to show her how to crochet and she just—her autistic brain just can’t figure it out. Knitting is just what she does. It’s—she can knit all sorts of different knits. I don’t know what you call them.

00:23:55 Sarah [laughs]

00:23:56 Cheryl As much as I could talk about textiles all day—I absolutely adore textiles. I’m rather obsessed with textiles. I would like to know, based on the findings that you found when you were doing this really important textile research, [chuckles] what kind of areas did you find that actually need improvement to make a better end for the children, rather than constantly having to be resilient, which isn’t exactly a word that you want for your child? And what changes would you like to see to create a brighter future for the excluded children?

00:24:30 Sarah It feels like when you look at, like, an individual conversation with a child, or an individual conversation with a parent who’ve been suspended or permanently excluded, and you ask them to think back and kind of tell you from preterm what life was like, and you have that conversation. And a parent might say, “Well, I noticed something at fifteen months. There was some things that—I noticed that were different to a sibling in the family.” Or, “At the two-year check I was concerned about this. And then I was also concerned when they started nursery and we went to speech and language, but this happened.” Or, “We went to CAMHS\* 00:25:11 and this happened and we were discharged,” and there’s all these. 00:25:14 And when you, like, look at it as a—as their life, saying that by now, maybe the age of fourteen, having a permanent exclusion, you can see the points in their lives where, actually, if something had have happened different at that point, maybe their whole pathway into, like, teenagers or transition to secondary, or even transition to Key Stage 2, could have been different. And I think that’s the key thing that’s coming out for me. Is, so if they’re struggling in infant school in a classroom… why is that? Like, who’s asking the questions about, “What could we be doing differently?” And what are the—there’s no money in the system really. Let’s be honest. So, what are the things, together, talking to the child, talking to the parent, the teachers, and other people involved in that child, whether in the community or health, and thinking, “What will make a difference?” Because often, I found the children know. The children know what they need. And the parents definitely know what their children need. And how can we get those things in place quite quickly and not just—not wait? This whole idea of like, “Let’s just wait and see how they do this term.”

00:26:29 Cheryl Yeah, definitely.

00:26:30 Sarah Things seem to escalate quite quickly for some children and families. So, for me, I think it’s—this whole idea of early intervention is great. But actually what are we doing? I think I’m at the point now where I’m like, “Let’s—we know what’s not working, so let’s switch it to, ‘Well, what are we going to do about it?’” For me, that’s the difference. What can we do sooner and now, and who’s the right person to do that? But always, always with the child and parent voice at the heart of that, because they’re living it every day. And, like, Hayley I’m sure will talk about, children can present really differently at home and school. And there’s sometimes an assumption that, “Well, they’re behaving this way at school, so they must be like this at home,” or vice versa. So, it’s how we kind of trust the conversations we’re having, I think, as well.

00:27:27 Hayley Yeah. So, for me, it’s—the thing that I think needs improvement the most is communication. More than anything, communication. Yeah. I mean, I get that training and stuff at a level before teachers and teaching assistants and anyone else working in a school comes into the school. Compassion training, really. Empathy training; the understanding of why someone’s reacting the way that they have to something that you, as a neurotypical person, would deem as being like an overreaction to something. And just having—treating children as if they are an individual and actually, you know, asking them a question. A lot of children don’t know why they act the way that they do, but just having somebody ask them, “Oh, why did you do that?” 00:28:27 Or, “Why do you think that you did that?” Or, you know, just asking them, “Are you okay?” And just being able to have a conversation with an adult outside of the home environment that they trust. My child decided that they were going to try and escape from school. He was allowed outside to regulate and he decided that he didn’t want to stay, so he went to try and climb the fence. I mean, there was no way he was getting over it. But because he tried to escape, Team Teach was then used on him. So, he was then restrained by two members of staff, one of them being his class teacher—which, you know, for the rest of the time that he was in that school, he never forgave. You know, so my child can hold a grudge. It’s just—you know, it’s like he didn’t need to—in my opinion, he didn’t need to be restrained. A lot of children probably don’t need to be restrained. 00:29:21 However, you know, I do understand that if they become a danger to themselves or others, I do get that there is policies in place for teachers where, again, their hands are tied. You know, there’s children come into school, they’re expected to act a certain way. They’re expected to behave a certain way. They’re expected to do as they’re told; sit still, answer questions, read out loud. You know, and a lot of children at a young age don’t sit still. You know, they don’t—most children at a young age, especially when you are talking sort of like Key Stage 1, unless you say their name directly, they don’t know that you’re talking to them. So, if you are basically saying to everybody, “Right. Okay. Let’s get your work out and put your pencils down and everyone sit still and have a look at the board,” if you hadn’t have said my child’s name, he’d carry on with what he was doing. 00:30:23 Because he—someone’s talking in the background, but they’re not directly talking to him. It’s not an instruction for him. And that’s the case with a lot of children, regardless of whether they’re neurodiverse or have any behavioural, social, emotional needs. That’s like the premise of being a child, is to be able to play and to not be solely focused on one thing and to be easily distracted. This is how you socialise. This is how you make friends. This is how you understand your environment. But if you’re there trying to understand your environment and you are constantly being told, “Sit down, do this, do that,” straight away, you feel as if you are doing something wrong. So, even if you’re the kind of child that then tries to change their behaviour to appease what’s happening, you then become internally frustrated and then it all explodes at home. 00:31:24 So, it’s—I mean, it’s a Catch-22. And in all fairness I just feel like if there’s a little bit more understanding to what the individual child needs rather than a one size fits all policy, again, it’s the children-to-teacher ratio in a lot of primary schools. A lot of children are sensitive to noise. Again, this is not always typically a neurodiverse thing. This is typically a child thing. I mean, it’s—you know, you’re learning new sounds or you’re learning new behaviours and socially, you are expecting other people in that classroom environment or the adults in that classroom environment to show you how to do it. But if you’re being shown how to do it or told how to do it, and you can see that that other person is visibly frustrated with you, you’re not then going to get the best from that child. That child’s not going to feel safe, that child’s not going to feel comfortable, so that child is not ready to learn. 00:32:25 So, then they’re the ‘naughty child’ or the ‘stupid child’. And then it escalates from there. By the time you get them into secondary school, they’ve got no chance. Absolutely no chance. But I mean… it’s not just within schools that you see failures, I suppose, for children who are then going on to be excluded or suspended. Because obviously these numbers that we have, the two-nine-nine-nine, these are just for the recorded amount of children that were excluded and suspended from school. This doesn’t even touch the children who are school refusal, are not going in, you know. 00:33:19 And that—it’s—and a lot of the time the—getting excluded is the purpose of a child who is school refusing. “If I can do something today that gets me sent home, then that’s not my—you know, then I can—I’m being sent home and then I’ve been sent home by somebody else and it’s not me wanting to stay off,” so then they don’t have to explain that. And again, that obviously usually starts sort of Year 6, Year 7 and onwards. And it’s just children making reasons and excuses for themselves not to have to go into school, when the main reason why they don’t want to go in is because they don’t feel safe. They don’t feel comfortable. You know, that they’re going in there, they’re being—they feel like they’re being targeted, isolated. They’re going in and they’re sit—they’re not even with their friends. They’re being put in isolation because, I don’t know, they’ve got eyelashes on or they wore the wrong earrings or, you know, their hair’s not done properly. 00:34:24 Their shirt’s untucked. They asked if they could fill up their bottle of water. [sighs] It’s beyond comprehension, the way that the rules are put in place. And I do get that, obviously, the rules are there to mould you as an adult for going out into the workplace and—but even now, workplaces are a lot more relaxed than schools are these days. The schools are moulding children into somebody going into an office in the Eighties, not what it is now. You know, “You can’t have tattoos, you can’t have piercings, you have to have your hair a natural colour. And, you know, you can’t do this and you have to wear your shirt like that and you have to behave like this, and you speak to people like this.” You know, a lot of the time this is suppressing the brilliance of a lot of these children. Because, to be fair, the majority of children that have got behavioural issues, especially from a young age, these children are probably pretty bright. They’ve probably got something. If they were just given the chance, they would probably excel at just being someone.

00:35:32 Cheryl Yeah. I’m getting—[sighs] I wouldn’t say—I don’t know if it’s—yeah, I am getting quite emotional because this is just reminding me of everything that I went through with my kids and my friends that were like—well, the kids’ friends. You know, I just can’t believe that this is still the same. Like, ten years later, it’s still the same. Everything you are saying, I’ve gone through with mine—well, my youngest. And it’s really—it’s quite shocking, to be honest, that this is still an ongoing situation, literally ten years later. And it’s not just about the money. I think it does, like you said, come—it comes down to compassion. Can you train in compassion? I don’t know. But [chuckles] I think there needs to be a lot more understanding and kindness towards a child. It’s not just because—you know, you could just try and be a bit more empathetic. And I think a lot of the issues, shall we say, would be more understood by the child if they were just talked to like a little human rather than just an issue. Were there any surprising or unexpected insights from your research? And where do you see this project heading in the future?

00:36:48 Sarah I think the hope in the future would be—so, it was two thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine per school day reported ‘21/’22. Four thousand, one hundred and ninety-one reported suspensions/permanent exclusions ‘22/’23. And it’s looking higher again for the next first term of reported data. And my surprise, to me, is that there’s not more shock of the extent and the pace at which suspensions and permanent exclusions are rising. And if nothing else, that should be a trigger. That something, really, is very broken and we can’t have this number of children every day not in school. We can’t have this number of children every day then having to reintegrate back into school following a suspension or permanent exclusion. 00:37:48 And also the lives of teachers. I think that the teaching profession is on its knees. Teachers are leaving the profession at really high rates to a point where we’re just struggling to recruit teachers into the profession. And I think the surprise in the research for me is that all the research is out there, yet still, like Hayley said, some of the examples of the reasons why children are being suspended and permanently excluded can continue. You know, I’ve spoken to children who’ve been suspended for brushing hair at break times, for playing with Blu Tack when there’s a policy that they’re not allowed any kind of fiddle regulation toys so they go and seek them out. They find things around the classroom. You know, and we’ve got that spectrum of exclusion for those behaviours, and then we’ve got the other end of the spectrum of exclusion, haven’t we? 00:38:47 Where there’s may be drugs involved in school. And the reason a child can be suspended, they can—both of those children can be sent home. And it’s—and I think for me, some of it is the common-sense bit in your brain that goes, “Well, why have they got the Blu Tack? Why are they brushing their hair at break?” [chuckles] Like, do you brush your hair at break when you’re at work? I mean, obviously I don’t because I’ve got hair like this. But, you know, I think it’s—I just feel like we need a bit of common sense and professional curiosity around this. I’ve spoken to head teachers and teachers who are devastated when they exclude a child, but they’ve felt it’s the only way they’re going to get this child in the right school with the right support. Because it’s going to mean by permanently excluding that they’re going to get in the right provision for what they need. So, I think everybody’s—it’s a sense [sighs] that everybody’s trying but nobody’s finding that solution. Because I think it’s not a one-person job. 00:39:48 It’s not one school. It’s not one city. It’s everybody sitting together, isn’t it, and thinking, “Okay, what’s not working and how do we fix that? What do we do differently?” And this is why working with parents like Hayley, Max, Karen and Paul and all other parents I’ve worked with is really important. Them and their children and their experiences is the way, I think, that we change things. But only if people are open to listening.

00:40:16 Cheryl Yeah. Well, hopefully they will be open to listening. And I think, you know, it’s very important, what you were saying before. Hayley, I think you mentioned it, about, you know, when you go from like Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 2 there’s a massive jump. And then, obviously, you’re going into—you know, into work and it’s meant to set you for how work is. I remember people saying that to me at school. Like, “You know, you need to behave because this is how you’re going to be at work.” But work, like you say, isn’t necessarily like that these days. Work is much more understanding, so why can’t school life be much more understanding? And it—I think a lot does need to be looked at by—at the school level, rather than just assuming that a kid can change because you shout at them or you exclude them or you tell them to.

00:41:05 Hayley I mean, I find a lot of the time as well when children are told to do something in a certain way, or, “This is—” you know, they ask, “You know, well, why do I have to do it that way?” And they’re not actually given a reason. I mean, I’m a massive, you know, culprit of this at home, “You know, don’t do that.” “Why?” “Because I said so,” you know. It’s like, you know, we all do it. But in an environment where you’ve got a child who’s not—you know, I get. You know, I’ve—you know, a child’s gone in and punched another child, “So, don’t do that.” Well, you’re not going to ask why not because you sort of—you know why not. But, you know, I’ve—and, you know, going to fill your water bottle up or brush your hair, “Like what—you know, why can’t I brush my hair?” “Well, because it’s not school policy.” But just what—you know, it’s—like, it’s not—I mean, I know from personal experience with one of my children, if things aren’t explained properly then she doesn’t get it. 00:42:01 And she will keep repeating that same behaviour until she understands the reason behind why it has to be a certain way, it has to be done a certain way or she’s been told to do something. And just having that—you know, I can have that patience and understanding when I’ve got three children, so I do get that when you’ve got thirty children in a class that you don’t necessarily have that time to sit down with this one child or two children—possibly closer to ten, actually—in a classroom that don’t understand what’s expected of them and to give them that explanation. Because obviously then it cuts into the time that you should be teaching or you should be doing something else, or…. It then has a knock-on effect for the education of and the socialisation of most of the children in the class. And I get that. I do get that. 00:42:56 But if you’re not compassionate enough or understanding enough if a child asks why or asks for a more in-depth explanation of something, if you haven’t got that explanation, then surely you shouldn’t be giving out those rules. You should have a reason for why things are the way that they are.

00:43:16 Cheryl I always taught my children why. I wouldn’t like to just tell them, “Because I said so.” And that, actually, did cause a lot of problems at school [chuckles] because they wanted to know why and they weren’t told why.

00:43:28 Hayley But even as a parent going into the school and asking why.

00:43:31 Cheryl Yes, I did that quite a lot. [laughs]

00:43:33 Hayley And they—you still get the same answer?

00:43:36 Cheryl Yeah.

00:43:36 Hayley “Because it’s not school policy,” or because of this or because of that. But we don’t do that here.

00:43:40 Cheryl Yeah. It’s very hard. And I think that—[sighs] I say this going forward, and, like I say, it was about ten years ago or more now, there needs to be more communication with the child, the parent and the teachers. And it does come down to funding, unfortunately. And like, I think, Sarah mentioned before about—you know, it’s not just a case of [sighs] you can do it this way and that way. It—unfortunately, you do have these—sometimes, like you were saying, Sarah, about—for a child to be given and offered the help, the next level of help, that sometimes they have to have ticked the box that, “Oh, well, they’ve been excluded so many times.” Because unfortunately, that’s the only way you’re going to get funding. And I can’t believe that it’s still the same situation going onwards. So, wrapping things up—because I know we’ve talked quite a lot, because I think this could be a subject that we could talk about for a very long time, given how many children have been affected by this. If you had one message for our listeners to take away, what would it be?

00:44:39 Sarah My one message for listeners would be: ask the questions. Ask the right questions in the right space, in the right time with children. Not in front of a classroom full of other children, but find the right space, doing the right activities to just ask the simple questions, “Is everything okay? Do you want me to talk, or do you want to talk, or do you want me to listen?” But it’s finding that time, isn’t it? It’s finding that window of time in really busy schools where you can have those conversations where children know they’re not going to be overheard. Because I think people probably are asking questions but it’s so busy in school that children aren’t going to open up in a corridor or at the end of a class when there’s loads of children leaving. So, I think my takeaway is have a look—look at the blanket online and just imagine each one of those is a child and which one of those can we prevent? So, which of the children that you’re worried about, that keep you awake about at night, what are the things you haven’t tried yet? What are the questions you haven’t asked yet? And give them a go.

00:45:54 Hayley I think for me, not necessarily a message, I suppose, but it would be: if you have a child that is struggling in school, reach out. Speak to somebody. The parent next to you in the school yard may very well be having the same problems or the same issues, or have some insight into something that may help. So, just to know that, you know, you’re actually not—if you are having issues with your child within a school environment, especially, that you aren’t alone and that there are people that you can talk to that will understand. I mean, obviously the help out there within the school, obviously, always depends on the people that you talk to and the school that you’re at. 00:46:48 But just to be aware that you’re not the only one that has got a child that is struggling. And if that is you and you are listening to this and you are thinking, “Oh, yes. This is what it’s like with my child,” approach the school. Try and have a meeting. Be your child’s voice. Be the voice for your child. Because they may not be able to verbalise the reasons why they feel the way that they feel when they’re in that environment. And they may not be able to voice it properly to you, but you know your child. So, if you have any concerns or any worries with your child within the school environment and feel like it could get to the point of no return, then be your child’s voice. Speak out for them because you know them better than anyone.

00:47:44 Cheryl I think that’s a very important message to take away. My little add to that would be, if you have a school newsletter, ask if you can put in the newsletter about setting up a parent group. Because there is more parents out there that have the same issues and they’re probably hiding it because they’re not sure how to deal with it or they’re feeling uncomfortable because it’s not talked about. But there is support out there. And if there isn’t, make a group like you have done. [chuckles] And it’s fantastic work. We will put all the links and things in the bio description so people can try and support what you’re doing. So, if you’re a fan of our *Public Health Research and Me* podcast, please subscribe on your preferred streaming platform and let us know how we are doing with a rating or a review, and share with your friends, family, colleagues and networks. [upbeat electronic music fades in] And with that, I would like to say thank you to Hayley and thank you to Sarah, and, yes, good luck going forward.

00:48:47 Hayley Thank you.

00:48:48 Sarah Thank you. [music fades out]

[End of recording]

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