

Rights, Research, and Relational Practice: A Guide to Isolation and Seclusion



Summary

Introduction

In 2026, the way schools manage student behaviour has undergone a 'paradigm shift' - this is a fundamental change in how we think and act. We are moving away from traditional punishment toward getting rid of unnecessary **coercion** (using force or threats to make someone do something). This document bridges the gap and explains modern legal and ethical rules schools must follow.

Global mandates from the UNCRC (2023) and the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2024) have reframed enforced isolation as an indicator of 'systemic failure'. This means that when a school uses isolation, it is a sign that the school's support system is not working. This guide uses Department for Education (DfE, 2026) statutory requirements (official government rules) with the latest research to help students, parents and practitioners challenge these practices.



Defining the continuum - from seclusion to isolation

Clarity in terminology is essential. When definitions are blurry schools risk engaging in illegal deprivations of liberty (taking away someone's freedom) or using high-level restrictive interventions for minor rules.

Seclusion (am I 'free to leave' test)

The DfE (2026) defines seclusion as the "supervised confinement and isolation of a person, away from others, in a room or area from which they are **prevented from leaving**."

- Seclusion is happening whenever a pupil is kept alone and is not allowed to leave of their own free will. This applies whether the door is physically locked or if the child feels they cannot leave because a staff member is blocking the way, or because they fear even worse punishment if they walk out (RRN, 2024).
- **THE GOLDEN RULE - never a punishment.** The DfE (2026) states explicitly, **“Restrictive interventions, including seclusion, must never be used as a punishment.”** Any use of seclusion as a disciplinary consequence, e.g., for non-compliance with school rules or ‘disruption’ that does not pose a risk of significant harm, is against statutory guidance and a safeguarding failure.

Isolation and ‘booths’ (Articles 3 and 5)

Isolation (internal exclusion) is defined as relocating a pupil as a consequence of disruptive behaviour. However, for this to remain legal isolation rather than seclusion, the pupil **must be free to leave**.

- **The ‘blurred line’ warning:** The EHRC (2025) says there is a dangerous ‘blurred line’ in school policies. While the DfE allows for relocation, if a child is forced to stay and cannot leave, it has functionally become seclusion. **It is never lawful to use seclusion or isolation as a means of punishment.**
- Isolation booths, e.g., desks with tall partitions often facing a wall, are designed to stop students from seeing or talking to anyone. Research by Mallon (2025) and Condliffe (2021) found that students often describe these as ‘prison-like’, creating a psychological pressure that makes them feel physically and mentally trapped.

Systemic inequalities and the ‘targeting’ crisis

Evidence from the #BeeWell study (Thornton et al., 2025) shows enforced isolation affects certain groups of students much more than others, leading to indirect discrimination (Article 14).

- **The 1 in 12 crisis:** Roughly 8.3% of pupils experience at least one episode of internal exclusion weekly, losing an average of **8.44 hours of curriculum learning**.
- **Gender and ethnicity:** Boys are significantly more likely to be isolated due to the ‘social construction of danger’, the unfair idea that boys are naturally more ‘threatening’. Similarly, minority ethnic students often face ‘adultification’, where they are treated as if they are older and more guilty than they actually are, e.g., deserving punishment rather than help.
- **‘Protective seclusion’ trap:** LGBTQIA+ victims of bullying are sometimes placed in isolation ‘for their own safety’. This functionally punishes the victim by removing them from their friends and lessons while the bullies stay in class (Mallon, 2025).
- **SEND and SEMH:** Pupils with neurodivergent traits (like the need to move or sensory sensitivities) are often secluded for ‘non-compliance’ with booth rules that forbid movement. This essentially punishes them for the symptoms of their disability.

The biological reality of enforced isolation

Schools often claim isolation is for 'reflection'. Current research proves this is neurobiologically impossible (the brain simply cannot do it in that state).

- **Threat physiology:** The human brain sees social isolation as a threat to survival. This triggers a 'biological trauma response', flooding the brain with stress chemicals like cortisol and adrenaline.
- **Cognitive shutdown:** In this 'survival state', the pre-frontal cortex (the part of the brain we use for thinking, empathy and reflecting) shuts down and does not work. You cannot 'reflect' while your brain is in threat mode.
- **Lost learning:** When students are given 'meaningless work' (like copying from a book) in isolation, it leads to a 'rupture of the social contract'. This means the bond of trust between the student and the school breaks. Students stop seeing themselves as learners and start seeing themselves as an 'isolation kid'. This affects learning, mental health and self-esteem.

The impact

Enforced isolation does not just hurt the student, it damages everyone involved.

- **For the student:** Being separated for a long time leads to thwarted belonging (the feeling that you are no longer part of the group). This is a major cause of mental health decline. Students describe feeling 'deleted' or 'invisible'.
- **For the practitioner:** Staff (like LSAs and teachers) who have to enforce these policies often experience 'moral injury' (the psychological pain felt when your job forces you to act against your own values). Moving from a 'nurturer' to a 'guard' leads to burnout and a 'hardening' of the school culture.
- **The narrative of shame:** Being forced to face a wall is a 'visual of punishment'. It strips away a child's dignity and treats them like an object to be watched rather than a person to be taught.

Proactive alternatives

The goal for students, parents and practitioners must be to replace force with relational support (focusing on the relationship between staff and student).

- **Sensory-ready spaces:** Replacing 'boxes' with voluntary, comfortable rooms (with beanbags or soft lighting) where a child can choose to go to feel safe and is free to leave at any time.
- **Supported decision-making:** Instead of a teacher deciding everything for a student ('substituted judgment'), we ask the child: 'What helps you feel calm?'

- **Advance Support Plans (ASPs):** Based on the ‘will and preference’ of the child (CRPD Article 12), are plans made before a crisis happens to say exactly how a student wants to be helped when they are overwhelmed.
- **Restorative repair:** Instead of ‘out of sight, out of mind’ schools should use restorative circles (sessions where people talk about what happened and how to fix it), to make sure the student feels they still belong in the school.

Key references

- Condliffe, E. (2021). "Out of Sight, Out of Mind": An interpretative phenomenological analysis of young people's experience of isolation rooms/booths in UK mainstream secondary schools (Doctoral thesis, University of East Anglia).
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- Mallon, R (2025) Young people’s narratives on their experiences of attending a school with an isolation space (Doctoral thesis, University of Sheffield).
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