

Questions to ask about the use of restraint in schools – for parents

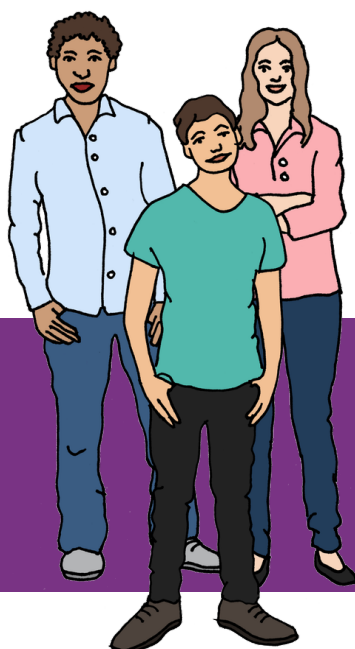


A Human Rights and Neuro-Affirming Guide

Introduction

This document represents a paradigm shift in educational support, moving away from behaviour management toward a culture of relational safety.

It serves as part of a suite of resources including the RRN Guidance on Isolation and Seclusion (2026) and the RRN Guidance on Tents and Confined Spaces (2026).



The foundation: is my child's distress being understood?

Current research (Lukito et al., 2025; Pavlopoulou et al., 2025) suggests that distress is the final endpoint of a high '**emotional burden**'. Before discussing physical intervention, ask these foundational questions:

- Does the school recognise the 'heavy internal load' my child carries just to survive the school day (Lukito et al., 2025)? Is the 'behaviour' seen as a communication of a nervous system that is overwhelmed?

- Does my child feel ‘collectively outwardly disliked’ by staff/peers and/or the environment (Pearson et al., 2025)? If a child feels they do not belong, they remain in hyper-vigilance, and so how is the school building a sense of safety instead of ‘monitoring’ them?
- Does the school prioritise how my child feels over how they behave (McGreevy et al., 2024)? Are sensory pain and social rejection validated as real distress inducing experiences, or are they dismissed as non-compliance?
- What was the distress communicating in the lead-up to the incident? Was the school ‘fixing’ the child's reaction, or were they fixing the environmental trigger (noise, light, social demands)?

Identification: what actually happened to my child?

Schools can sometimes use ‘blurred’ terminology when talking about restraint. Use these questions to identify if a restrictive practice took place:

- **Physical restraint (the use of force)**: was force used to overcome my child's resistance or to restrict/subdue their movement? (If they went willingly, it was an intervention; if they were forced (including feeling psychologically coerced), it was restraint).
- **Seclusion (the ‘free to leave’ test)**: was my child kept alone in a room or area and prevented from leaving? If the door was locked, blocked by a staff member, or if my child believed they would be punished for leaving, was this documented as seclusion?
- **Isolation (internal exclusion)**: was my child relocated as a punishment? If so, were they strictly ‘free to leave’ at any time? If not, has this functionally become unlawful seclusion?
- **Confined spaces**: if a tent or dark den was used, was it zipped or held shut? Was my child directed there as a ‘consequence’? If so, was this recorded as a restrictive intervention rather than therapeutic support/management?

The proportionality principle: was this a rights violation?

Restraint is an interference with a child's human rights. For it to be lawful, ask:

- **Is it lawful?** What specific legislation is the school citing to justify this restriction of liberty?
- **Is it necessary?** Was the situation truly life-threatening or involving a risk of significant harm? Or was the ‘behaviour’ swearing, shouting or refusal to sit down, in which case the threshold for rights restricting intervention is not met?

- Did the restraint result in **less harm** than the behaviour? If the hold caused greater harm/distress, e.g., bruising, breathing distress, or trauma, how was that 'proportionate' to the original risk?
- Was my child released the **very moment** the immediate/significant danger passed? (Keeping a child held to 'calm them down' could be an unlawful deprivation of liberty).
- **Recurrence as failure:** is this same restraint happening regularly? If so, is it no longer an 'emergency' but instead part of routine management? What is the school changing (e.g., in the environment) to prevent this recurrence?

The biological reality

Research shows restraint is a physiological crisis. Ask:

- Does the school understand that my child's body perceives restraint as a survival threat, triggering a biological trauma response?
- If my child became 'still' or 'compliant' during the restraint, does the school recognise this could be a **functional collapse** (dissociation/shut down) rather than 'calming down'?
- How is the school addressing the fact that restraint can shift the teacher-student relationship away from educator/supporter/carer?

Blanket policies

Research shows that 'zero tolerance' or 'blanket' behaviour policies (where the same rules are applied to all children regardless of difference or individual needs) often lead to indirect discrimination. Ask:

- Has the school adjusted its behaviour policy for my child (e.g., made reasonable adjustments)? If the policy punishes 'non-compliance' but my child's disability makes compliance impossible in that moment (e.g., sensory overwhelm), is the school breaching the **Equality Act 2010**?
- Does the school use a one size fits all disciplinary system? If my child is being restrained for symptoms of their neurodivergence (like needing to move or self-regulate), how is the school justifying this as a proportionate response?
- Does the school monitor if children with SEND/SEMH, ethnic minorities or other marginalised groups are being restrained or isolated more than their peers? If so, what systemic changes are being made?

School policy and support

1. Does the school policy prioritise sensory regulation and emotional safety over 'compliance and control'?
2. Does the policy explicitly ensure children with vulnerabilities are considered and ban holds that cause pain, restrict breathing (positional asphyxia) or floor-based restraints?
3. **Advance Support Plans (ASPs)**: Does my child have an ASP made before a crisis, based on their 'will and preference'?
4. How are staff supported to remain nurturers? Does the school monitor if staff are becoming 'hardened' when enforcing coercive policies?

Reporting and rights: what are my next steps?

- **Mandatory recording**: can I see the incident form immediately? Does it clearly document the **legal justification**, the **proportionality**, and the **minimum force** used?
- **The LADO**: if force was used as punishment, was disproportionate, or caused injury, do I know how to contact the **Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO)**?
- **Article 3 protection**: if the restraint was unnecessary or degrading, have I informed the school that I believe this may breach the Article 3 threshold for **degrading treatment**?

Key references

- Lukito, S, Chandler, S, Kakoulidou, M, Griffiths, K, Wyatt, A, Funnell, E, Pavlopoulou, G, Baker, S, Stahl, D and Sonuga-Barke, E J S (2025) Emotional burden in school as a source of mental health problems associated with ADHD and/or autism: development and validation of a new co-produced self-report measure. **Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry**, 66(10), 1577-1592. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.70003>
- McGreevy, E, Quinn, A, Law, R, Botha, M, Evans, M, Rose, K, Moyse, R, Boyens, T, Matejko, M and Pavlopoulou, G (2024) An experience sensitive approach to care with and for autistic children and young people in clinical services. **Journal of Humanistic Psychology**, 1-27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00221678241232442>
- Pavlopoulou, G, Chandler, S, Lukito, S, Kakoulidou, M, Jackson, I, Ly, E, Matejko, M, Harvey-Nguyen, L and Sonuga-Barke, E J S (2025) Upsetting experiences in the lives of neurodivergent young people: a qualitative analysis of accounts of adolescents diagnosed with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and/or autism. **JCPP Advances**, 5(3), e70038. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcv2.70038>
- Pearson, A, Brennan-Devine, N, Clarke, C, Kakoulidou, M, Kelly, L, Moyse, R and Pavlopoulou, G (2025) "I guess when a lot of people collectively outwardly don't like you, you start to find a dislike within yourself": experiences of belonging among autistic adolescents assigned female at birth in mainstream school settings. **School Mental Health**. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-025-09813-7>