The use of tents or other confined spaces in schools

Introduction

An increasing number of schools utilise specially constructed PVC tents or 'dark dens' within classrooms. While these can serve as valuable tools for sensory regulation, they are often used without clear guidelines, leading to potential misuse.

This document specifically addresses the use of these physical structures. It is intended to complement the broader **Guidance on Isolation and Seclusion** (2026) and **Guidance on Isolation and Seclusion** (2026 Plain English Guide), which cover the legalities of disciplinary rooms and booths.

If schools use tents or confined spaces for any purpose, there must be clear, written protocols to prevent intentional or unintentional harm. Specifically, if a student is placed in a space where they are prevented from leaving of their own free will, e.g., if a tent is zipped from the outside, an exit is physically blocked or the student perceives they cannot leave, this constitutes seclusion (DfE, 2026).

Tents vs. isolation spaces... what is the difference?

While 'isolation rooms' are often designated spaces for discipline, tents are frequently marketed as therapeutic. However, the legal threshold remains the 'free to leave' test:

- **Therapeutic use**: A tent is a voluntary, student-led choice for sensory regulation, where the student can enter and exit at will.

- **Seclusion**: If a student is directed into a tent and prevented from leaving (psychologically, e.g., they've been told they must go there, physically or through zips), it is a high-level restrictive intervention.

- In line with the **UNCRC** (2023) and **WHO** (2024), the use of any confined space that involves coercion is now viewed as an indicator of systemic failure rather than a valid 'teaching strategy', and is certainly not therapeutic.

Meeting sensory needs: the right to agency

Clinical guidance (NICE, 2015) and recent research confirm that sensory environments must be individualised and student-led.

- In line with the **neurodiversity paradigm**, sensory differences are seen as natural variations. Tents should support a student's unique sensory profile rather than attempting to 'train' them to tolerate overwhelming environments (Dwan and Brice, 2025).

- Providing students with **control** over their sensory input (e.g., adjustable lighting or sound inside the tent) is associated with reduced anxiety. A tent should never be a place where sensory input is forced or restricted by staff.

- Qualitative studies (Condliffe, 2021; Mallon, 2025) reveal that young people experience confined spaces as places of powerlessness. Schools must ensure sensory tents are perceived by the student as a resource, not a 'cage' or a place of unbelonging.

Understanding the body's response

By looking at how a student's nervous system responds to their environment, we can understand the biological impact of confined spaces (Polyvagal Theory; Dwan and Brice, 2025).

- **Feeling safe [Ventral Vagal State]**: For some students, a tent provides a low-stimulation environment. Teachers will see the student start to relax, use a softer gaze, and more able to engage at their baseline, e.g., talk or play again. This only happens if the student enters the space voluntarily.

- **The danger of 'shutting down' [Dorsal Vagal State]**: If a student is forced or coerced into a tent, their body may go into a state of 'functional collapse' or 'stillness'. Teachers might see the student become very quiet, still or look 'blank' and dissociated. While the student looks 'calm' they may actually be in a state of high internal stress and have 'given up'.

- **Relational regulation (co-regulation):** Regulation is a relational process; it is something we do with others, not just by ourselves. A tent should be a tool for co-regulation (where a safe, calm adult supports the student) rather than a tool for forced self-regulation. A student should never be left to manage high levels of distress alone in a tent.

Sensory regulation vs. ‘exclusionary inclusion’

A critical distinction for teachers is the difference between supporting sensory regulation and creating a space that facilitates exclusion.

- Neurodivergent students often carry a heavy emotional load/burden from unpredictable, exclusionary and sensory overwhelming environements (Lukito et al., 2025). If a tent is the only place a student feels ‘safe’, the school must ask if the classroom itself is causing psychological harm.
- Many neurodivergent children report ‘longing to belong’ but feel collectively ‘disliked’ by the environment (Pearson et al., 2025). Claiming a child is ‘included’ while they spend time in a PVC tent is a form of **exclusionary inclusion**.
- Moving away from behavioural ‘fixing’ we must use an **Experience-Sensitive Approach** (McGreevy et al., 2024). This means prioritising how the child feels over how they behave. If the tent feels like a hideout from a hostile world, the world needs fixing, not the child.

Questions for schools to consider

1 **Intended use: is the tent a proactive, voluntary choice?**	
YES (therapeutic/co-regulating scenarios)	**NO (restrictive/psychological restraint)**
The student independently chooses the space when they notice their own body feeling overwhelmed. • A staff member joins the student in or near the tent to offer a calm, co-regulating presence through parallel play or quiet reassurance. • The use of the space is part of a collaborative ‘Advance Support Plan’ where the student has defined what sensory tools they want to use with an adult.	The student is directed to the tent as a ‘consequence’ or ‘penalty’ for a (perhaps potential) rule break. • The student feels they ‘must’ stay in the tent alone to prove they are calm to avoid further disciplinary action (e.g., psychological restraint). • Staff use the tent to remove the student so they can teach the others, occupy the student to give them more space for other things and/or so they do not have to interact with their distress.

2 **The 'zipped' test: is the student free to leave and connect?**

YES (non-restrictive/connecting scenarios)	NO (seclusion/isolation)
Zips are permanently removed or the tent is designed as a 'den' with an open front that allows for easy eye contact. • The student is observed to check for adult's presence or interacting with the environment, e.g., toys/books, indicating a search for connection. • The entrance remains completely unobstructed by staff members, furniture, or door-blocking techniques.	A staff member zips the tent from the outside, uses their body to block the doorway, holds the fabric shut, or has told the child they must go to the tent. • The student believes they will be physically stopped or further punished if they attempt to leave the space. • The student feels 'cut off' from help and perceives that no one will respond if they signal for support from within.

3 **Is the student's human rights and dignity respected?**

YES (respectful scenarios)	NO (degrading/trauma bonding)
The student has ownership over the space, including choosing the internal sensory items and deciding when they are ready to leave. • Staff treat the tent as a 'positive base', e.g., sitting outside to read a story, interacting side by side (both occupied doing different things) and/or engaging in quiet communication to maintain the bond. • The space is maintained as a high-quality resource that is clean, well-ventilated and kept in an integrated part of the classroom.	The student has been told the tent is their 'safe place' so often that they have bonded with the structure as their only source of safety (**trauma bonding**). • Staff claim the student 'prefers to be alone', ignoring that the preference is a survival response to an unbearable emotional load (Lukito et al., 2025). • The student feels a sense of shame and internalised dislike (Pearson et al., 2025) as a result of the isolation and the events that precede and follow.

4 **Is the student relaxing through connection?**	
YES (regulating/co-regulating scenarios)	**NO (dorsal shutdown)**
You see observable signs of relaxation, such as deeper breathing, that begins to mirror the calm breathing of the adult nearby. • The student's muscles visibly soften, and they gradually re-engage by playing with toys/books, looking out or initiating a small interaction. • The student is able to move out of the tent and return to a task at their own pace without feeling rushed or forced.	The student is eerily still, 'frozen', or appears to have 'given up' on communicating with those outside. • The student has a 'glassy' or distant expression and does not acknowledge their name being called. • The student appears dissociated or blank, indicating a biological response to extreme threat, not true relaxation.

5 **Environment review: is the tent a 'band-aid' for a bad classroom?**	
YES (inclusive scenarios)	**NO (avoidant/exclusionary inclusion)**
The school has adjusted the entire classroom (e.g., acoustic panels, lowered lights) to reduce the emotional load for everyone. • The tent is just one of many choices for regulation, and staff actively look for the environmental triggers that led to its use. • The student's need for the tent decreases over time because the main classroom has become more (sensory) friendly.	The classroom remains a high-stimulation environment (noisy, bright, chaotic) with no attempts at environmental adjustment. • The tent is the only way the student can survive the school day, making it a containment strategy rather than support. • Staff use the child's 'preference' for the tent to justify not making necessary changes to the wider school environment.

6 **Safeguarding: is the student safe and supported?**	
YES (active co-regulation)	**NO (neglectful)**
Staff stay within the student's line of sight and sound, actively 'holding the space' for the student's nervous system to settle. • The student's 'will and preference' are checked frequently to ensure they still want to be there and feel safe with the adult's proximity. • Every use of the space is documented as a positive support strategy to identify patterns and ensure the student isn't being isolated.	The student is left in the tent for long periods with no relational check-ins or co-regulation offered. • Staff use the tent as a way to park the student so they can focus on teaching the rest of the class without interruption. • The school justifies the isolation because the child 'looks calm' in their shut-down state or say they 'prefer' it (because the other options are inaccessible or unbearable), ignoring the biological reality of distress.

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