The effectiveness of interventions to reduce school exclusion in the UK: key learning from a systematic review.

Executive Summary

Background

School exclusion is increasingly recognised as a warning sign for future risk; particularly involvement in crime, violence, or exploitation. Many young people in custody have previously been excluded from school. School exclusion can disconnect young people from education, trusted adults, and support systems that might otherwise help them stay on track.

School exclusions, especially suspensions, have risen in recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic had a further negative effect by disrupting education and support. National voices such as Ofsted and the Children's Commissioner have raised concerns about the link between school exclusion and youth vulnerability.

In response, the Thames Valley Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) commissioned this review to find out what is known about *'what works'* to reduce school exclusions. The aim is to inform local pilot projects that keep young people in education and away from harm.

What Was Reviewed

Seven UK-based studies were reviewed, each evaluating different interventions to reduce school exclusion. These included:

- Whole-school approaches
- One-to-one counselling
- Multi-agency working
- Support for managing school transitions
- Youth development programmes

The review used a structured framework to assess each study, based on:

- The effect
- Whether it had a clear underpinning theory (e.g. attachment or resilience)
- How it was delivered
- The rigor of the research methods used
- The reliability the school exclusion data

Key Findings
- Three out of five studies with usable data showed a small reduction in exclusion rates.
- The most effective interventions were based on clear theories, such as attachment or resilience
- Interventions involving a mix of individual, family, and school-level work tended to be stronger
- One-to-one counselling alone was also effective, suggesting targeted support is important
- Involving the young person's support network in the support or intervention (family, teachers, professionals) adds value
- However, as several of the interventions had multiple parts, it's hard to say which element was most effective

What Works Best
- Whole-school approaches that shift culture; such as through trauma-informed or attachment-aware practice, can lead to long-term change
- Targeted one-to-one work (e.g. counselling or coaching) can make an immediate difference, particularly for young people most at risk
- Interventions should be age-appropriate:
  - Younger children benefit from group or whole-school work
  - Teenagers may respond better to focused, individual support
- A mixed approach, addressing the young person and their wider environment, is often most effective

Equity and Inclusion
- Boys were more highly represented in the studies, reflecting known exclusion patterns.
- Some studies included young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds, though this wasn't consistently reported
- A few studies considered other vulnerabilities, such as being in care, having special educational needs, or living in poverty

Recommendations

For intervention design
- Build programmes guided by strong, research-based theories (such as attachment or resilience)
- Combine whole-school strategies with individual support
- Match the approach to the child's age and development stage

For evaluation
- Use objective, before-and-after data on exclusions from school records
- Recruit participants using clear and consistent criteria
- Use trusted tools to measure outcomes (e.g. Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire)
- Gather views from multiple perspectives: young people, teachers, and families
- Ensure consistent delivery across sites to maintain quality and reliability

Implications for Thames Valley
This review of UK studies offers a strong starting point for local pilots that aim to reduce school exclusion and prevent youth involvement in violence. Approaches that are targeted, theoretically sound, and work across individual and school levels are most promising. Building these into existing education and support structures may help make them both sustainable and impactful.

Full report

Background

School exclusion is increasingly recognised as a warning sign for later involvement in crime or exploitation. Many young people in custody had earlier experiences of school exclusion, suggesting a potential link between being removed from education and future offending. However, this relationship is not simple or direct. Factors such as childhood vulnerability, care experience, and social disadvantage, all play a role. School exclusion may reduce access to trusted adults, positive peers, and support systems that could otherwise help young people stay on track.

Recent years have seen a rise in school exclusions, particularly suspensions. The COVID-19 pandemic may have made this worse by disrupting routines and limiting young people's connections with education and support services. The Children's Commissioner and Ofsted have raised concerns about this trend and its impact on youth safety and wellbeing.

To respond, the Thames Valley Violence Prevention Partnership commissioned a review to understand what works in reducing school exclusions. The aim is to identify evidence-based approaches in the United Kingdom that support young people to stay in education and avoid involvement in crime and exploitation.

This review is anticipated to inform development of local pilot interventions, acknowledging that exclusion and offending often follow complex, long-term life paths. Seven intervention studies were identified through a systematic review process. A brief outline of each intervention is detailed below.

Attachment Aware Schools (AAS) (Rose et al 2019)
- Intervention based on attachment theory, attunement, trauma informed practice & school bonding
- Whole-school training/ emotion coaching + Targeted interventions (Theraplay & Nurture Groups)
- Unclear duration/frequency: training phase + action phase
- School based
- Primary + Secondary
- YP+ School staff (teachers & support staff) + Trainers

Back on Track (BoT) (Hart et al 2022)
- Social-pedagogical intervention grounded in resilient therapy
- direct work by Resilience Coaches (RC) with YP, co-producing coping strategies ('resilient moves') + RC enhancing communication between YP, family, school & social care
- Duration: 4 months to 2.5 years
- Unclear setting
- Primary (last year) + Secondary
YP + Resilience Coaches + Family + Social Care + School

Coalfields Alternatives to Exclusion (CATE) (Vincent et al 2007)
- Intervention based on multi-agency collaboration, common ethos, inclusion & supporting pupils' agency
- managed transfers between collaborating schools of pupils at risk of permanent SE + additional support for pupils in and out of school (flexible, attuned to pupils' individual needs, varied between schools)
- Duration n/a: managed transfers
- Setting: school (mainly)
- Secondary

YP+ Multi professional panel (deputy head, pupil referral unit, LA staff, connexions, youth offending)

Place2Be (Toth et al 2023)
- Therapeutic intervention
- individual counselling sessions with YP for emotional symptoms by qualified therapists
- Duration: 40-60 min weekly for 16 to 22 weeks
- School based
- Primary + Secondary
- YP + Children therapists

The Home and School Support Project (HSSP)/ Multidisciplinary Team Intervention (Panayio-topoulos & Kerfoot 2004; 2007)
- Inter-agency & multi-disciplinary collaboration & social inclusion
- tailored assessment & treatment plan + individual therapy (CBT or psychotherapy) + family therapy + consultation with school staff
- Duration/frequency varied (not specified)
- Setting: school + other (not specified)
- Primary (all years) + Secondary (first year)
- YP+ Multidisciplinary team (Social Worker, Educational Psychologist, Community Psychiatric Nurse, Play Therapist) + School Staff + Family

The Young People's Development Programme (YPDP) (Wiggins et al 2009)
- Intervention based on overall personal development through education & motivation
- multicomponent youth development programme: education (particularly sexual health and substance misuse), training/employment opportunities, life skills, mentoring, volunteering, arts, sports, advice on accessing services
- Duration: 6-10 h weekly for 1 year
- Programme site + school setting (varied)
- Secondary
- YP+ Youth workers

Methods

The main aim of this review was to understand:
What makes an intervention effective in reducing school exclusions?

To do this, the research team created a framework to assess each intervention. This framework was based on a previous study by Keppens & Spruyt (2020), who looked at what works to reduce truancy. They identified four key things to consider when judging the effectiveness of an intervention:

1. **Effect size** – How big was the impact of the intervention?
2. **Theoretical foundation** – Was the intervention based on a clear theory (like attachment or resilience)?
3. **Intervention details** – What exactly did the programme involve?
4. **Implementation fidelity** – Was the programme delivered as intended?

The research team added two more important criteria:
5. **Reliability of exclusion data** – Was the data on school exclusions accurate and trustworthy?
6. **Strength of the study design** – How rigorous was the research, based on a standard tool called the MMAT (Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool)?

Each study was assessed using this six-part framework to help compare intervention strengths and identify what works best.

Results

An overview of the studies collectively is presented, followed by a discussion of study characteristics. The section concludes with a synthesis of the findings. The hierarchy of studies resulting from the assessment criteria concludes this section.

Overview of the Studies

Most of the studies looked at ways to help young people, their families, and the adults around them (i.e. teachers and youth workers) develop skills to stop behaviour from escalating and leading to school exclusion. Some focused on therapies such as counselling and cognitive behavioural therapy, while others used youth development programmes or support with social and emotional skills.

Only a couple of studies aimed directly to reduce school exclusion, such as offering regular counselling or targeted therapy. Others looked at broader changes such as improving school

culture or helping excluded pupils settle into new schools. Many programmes involved working with not just the young person, but also their family, teachers, or wider support network. Overall, the studies showed that such approaches can help reduce exclusions, however as most included several different activities at once, it is difficult to identify which specific part made the most difference.

Most of the studies reported whether participants were boys or girls. In general, boys were more likely to be involved than girls, which fits with patterns seen in school exclusions nationally. One study included equal numbers of boys and girls as it focused on mental health, rather than behaviour only. It's worth noting that some of the studies were small, so the data should be viewed with some caution.

Only three of the studies reported participants' ethnic backgrounds. One had a high number of Black young people, and focused on those already excluded from school. Others had a mix of White British and minority ethnic groups. These figures suggest that ethnicity may play a role in the exclusion picture, however it wasn't consistently reported.

A few studies also looked at other background information. These included whether young people spoke English as a second language, were in care or on child protection plans, had special educational needs, or came from families facing challenges like poor housing, no employment, or single parenting. These factors can all increase stress and risk, and may influence behaviour in school, which in turn can affect the likelihood of exclusion.

What the Studies Showed
This section looks at how well the different approaches worked, and how they were designed and delivered.

Did the interventions reduce school exclusion?
Out of the seven studies reviewed, five gave enough data to estimate how big an impact they had. Three of them showed a small drop in exclusion rates after the intervention. One study showed a clear, meaningful effect; the other two showed a small improvement, but not a strong enough one to be certain. Two studies showed that the comparison groups (those who didn't get the intervention) actually did slightly better.
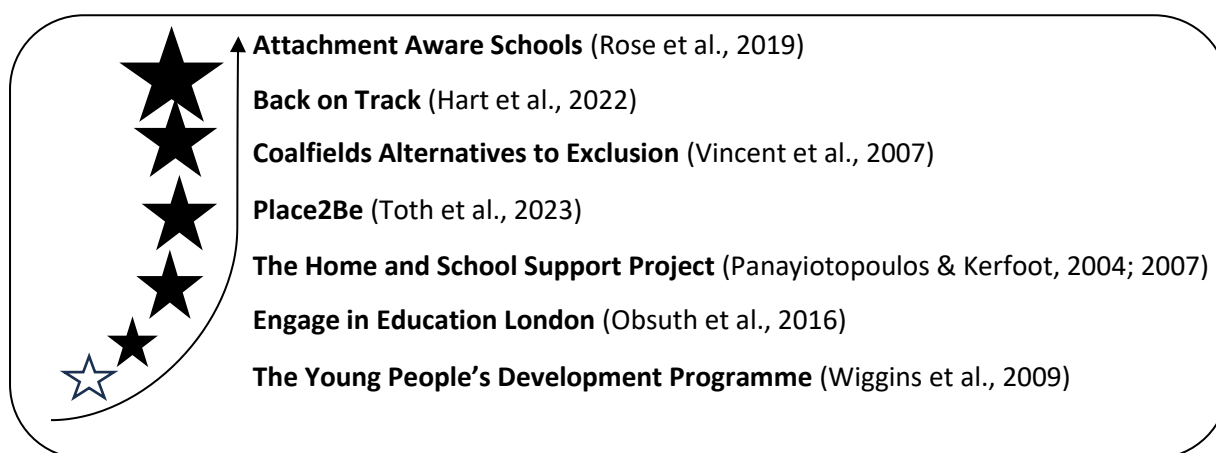
Was there a clear idea behind the intervention?
The strongest studies were based on well-known theories about how young people develop; such as attachment and resilience theories. The least successful study had a more general approach, focusing on youth development without a specific theory. Most of the other studies used methods like therapy, support through school changes, or behavioural strategies. In general, when an intervention had a clear theoretical foundation, it was more likely to be effective.

Who was involved in the intervention?

Most interventions involved more than just the young person; including teachers, family members, social workers, or school staff. The most successful studies often had this kind of "multi-level" approach. However, the study that only offered one-to-one counselling also showed good results. This suggests that while involving many people helps, targeted support for the young person is key.

Hierarchy of interventions

Attachment Aware Schools (Rose et al., 2019)

Back on Track (Hart et al., 2022)

Coalfields Alternatives to Exclusion (Vincent et al., 2007)

Place2Be (Toth et al., 2023)

The Home and School Support Project (Panayiotopoulos & Kerfoot, 2004; 2007)

Engage in Education London (Obsuth et al., 2016)

The Young People's Development Programme (Wiggins et al., 2009)

What we have learned

This review looked at which types of support reduces school exclusions. This is important as being in school keeps young people safer and less likely to become involved in crime or exploitation.

We focused on UK studies for contextual transferability. The strongest projects all had a clear goal to reduce exclusions, were based on solid theories (such as attachment or resilience), and worked at several levels (young person, school staff, families).

What Works Best?

Some projects supported whole schools to change their culture, increasing awareness of how children and young people form attachments, or cope with difficulties. Others focused directly on the individual young person with support such as counselling or coaching. The most effective programmes often did both, helping the individual but also part of a wider support system.

While broader approaches that try to change the whole school culture may be more long-lasting, targeted support (such as one-to-one counselling) can also make a big difference, especially as an early intervention approach. This might be more realistic within the funding and timeframe of local violence reduction work.

The Bigger Picture

National strategies that combined government support, local delivery, and individual support such as the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy or the Healthy Schools Programme, had long-lasting success. Something similar could work for school exclusion. For example, an "Engagement Aware School" model could focus on finding out *why* a young person isn't engaged in school leading to tailored support.

Cost Considerations

Whole-school approaches might be built into existing systems like staff training or pastoral care, making them cost-effective over time. Targeted support, such as counselling, would require more specialist staff and funding, but might be the quickest way to help some young people.

Recommendations

Designing an intervention

- The most effective approach seems to be a whole-school, multi-level programme based on a clear theory (such as attachment or resilience). This kind of approach is likely to create lasting change across the whole school
- Targeted support for individual pupils, such as counselling or coaching, also works well, especially for helping reduce exclusions for those at greatest risk
- The intervention should suit the age and developmental stage of the children involved:
  - Younger children benefit more from whole-school or group-based approaches as they depend on adult support to learn
  - Teenagers may respond better to focused, one-to-one work that helps them build independence and self-control

Designing a study

- Always include clear, before-and-after measurements of exclusion, based on actual data.
- Choose participants using objective criteria to avoid bias in who takes part
- Use existing, trusted tools for measuring outcomes, so results are more reliable (e.g. using tools like the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire)
- Get feedback from different people i.e. pupils, teachers, and parents, to understand the full picture
- If you're running the programme in multiple schools, make sure implementation is consistent across all sites

This report has been prepared by Dr Sarah Bekaert

The full review (In press, journal pre-proof) is available here:
https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740925003676?via%3Dihub [to be updated with final publication)

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