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School-based support for children with conduct disorders; a qualitative longitudinal study of high need families

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Abstract

Primary school-aged children with conduct problems are at risk for future antisocial and criminal behaviour, particularly when there are additional family-level risk factors. However little is known about how school-related factors can reduce that risk. This qualitative longitudinal study investigates school-related influences on changes in the behaviour of at-risk children in high need families over a period of five years. Families of eleven children with serious behaviour problems were followed over the transition to secondary school. In-depth interviews with mothers, and with practitioners who support the child or family, explored school-related factors which appeared helpful or unhelpful in improving children's behaviour over time.

The analysis found that the disjuncture between the nurture experienced at primary school and a lack of nurture later at secondary school was problematic. Children tended to change primary school until they found one prepared to offer them a high level of nurture and supervision. Consistent relationships with supportive adults were important, but were rare after the transfer to secondary school. Literacy problems remained unrecognised or unaddressed for too long, contributing to children's lack of engagement. Inconsistent disciplinary responses to minor behaviour issues tended to escalate problems and most children were eventually excluded from mainstream education. Communication between parents and school staff was often problematic; parents sometimes experienced school contacts as burdensome, ill-informed and unsupportive. However good communication could aid development of successful approaches to supporting children with difficult behaviour.

Introduction

Primary school-aged children with serious behaviour problems are at high risk of future antisocial and criminal behaviour, particularly where there are additional family-level risk factors (Moffitt and Caspi, 2001). School provides an opportunity to intervene directly with children to reduce risk factors and enhance protective factors (Walker *et al.*, 1996). However children with behaviour problems achieve less well (Farrington, 2015) and are at high risk of school exclusion, often a critical event preceding or exacerbating antisocial behaviour (McAra and McVie, 2010). Children's transition from primary to secondary school is particularly challenging, and associated with poorer outcomes, for children with behavioural difficulties (Bailey and Baines, 2012). For children with ADHD, often co-occurring with conduct problems, the moment of transition is associated with a halt in the decline of symptoms (Langberg *et al.*, 2008).

Many studies have suggested that school environments and experiences can be protective for vulnerable children, in particular where children perceive social support from school staff (DuBois *et al.*, 1994; Jenkins and Keating, 1998). Warmth, acceptance and supervision from non-parental adults are associated with resilience in the absence of these being provided by parents (Werner, 1995). Aspects of school environments which seem to help reduce problematic behaviour in the short term include reorganisation of classes, so that disruptive pupils are taught separately at certain times, with alternative materials and using cognitive behavioural techniques; changing classroom management and teaching techniques to emphasise interactive methods; increasing student participation and the use of rewards and punishments contingent on behaviour; and changing school discipline or management, with greater involvement of pupils and the wider community (Reinke and Herman, 2002; Ross *et al.*, 2011). There is some evidence, mainly from the US, that violence prevention programmes in schools can be effective in the short term (Mytton *et al.*, 2009) and that both universal programmes delivered to whole classes, and targeted programmes delivered to children with conduct problems, can be effective in reducing aggressive and disruptive behaviours in schools (Wilson and Lipsey, 2007).

However, despite this evidence of promising approaches, examination of long-term effects is lacking, and is difficult to demonstrate given the range of potential influences and variety of schools and pupils (Ross *et al.*, 2011). Wilson and Lipsey (2007) suggest that the lack of effects found for comprehensive, multimodal programmes in their meta-analyses may be due to the long-term nature of these programmes, and a consequent dilution of intensity, focus and pupil engagement. The authors highlight how little evidence exists about ‘real-world’ effectiveness; their previous work suggested, similarly, that programmes in routine practice had smaller effects than those in ‘demonstration programmes’ mounted for research purposes (Wilson, Lipsey and Derzon, 2003). Intriguingly, a recent meta-analysis of long-term effects from school-based social and emotional learning programmes did find small but statistically significant effects on conduct disorders (mean follow up length 113 weeks) despite non-significant effects immediately post-intervention (Taylor *et al.*, 2017). However, as these authors comment, it is not clear what aspects of programmes are important and further research is called for into the role of environmental supports including teaching practices and parenting (Weissberg *et al.*, 2015).

Qualitative research can help illuminate the ways in which children might benefit from particular aspects of support through in-depth exploration of individual cases. A UK ethnographic study of pupil experiences of building relationships with teachers following transition to secondary school, for example, noted the importance of ‘enabling transition contexts’ which give attention to the formation of interpersonal relationships which can then lead to learning relationships (Tobbell and O’Donnell, 2013). Processes linking school environments to student health and wellbeing have been studied qualitatively, and Jamal and colleagues’ conducted a review and meta-ethnography, finding 19 qualitative studies (Jamal *et al.*, 2013). They found unhappiness at school led to risky behaviours associated with ‘escape’ such as truancy or drug-taking. Aggressive behaviours were found to often be a source of status or bonding when pupils feel educationally marginalised or unsafe; positive relationships with teachers appear critical in promoting student well-being and limiting risky behaviours. Sadly, the review found poor student-staff relationships to be common: once pupils feel that staff do not understand them they are unlikely to respond to their intervention.

This paper reports a qualitative longitudinal research study addressing the gap in understanding of what aspects of school-based support could be important in the longer-term for children with conduct problems. A qualitative longitudinal approach can point to the possible mechanisms by which change take place (Pawson and Tilley, 1997), allowing the exploration of contexts, mechanisms and outcomes at the individual level (Farral, 2006), and the understanding of transitions, adaptations and trajectories (Millar, 2017). The study looks in depth at school experiences over time, from the perspective of parents of children considered to be at high risk for school exclusion and future antisocial behaviour. Rather than examining a particular intervention or approach, the study explores what aspects of schools’ support are helpful or unhelpful for children with difficult behaviour.

This qualitative study was part of a larger mixed methods study which used quantitative cohort data from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC) to examine associations between school-related factors and children’s antisocial and criminal behaviour in early adulthood. Children with conduct disorders at primary school age were less likely to display future antisocial behaviour if they had been happy at secondary school and liked their teachers, and where parents felt well-informed by school about their child’s behaviour (Stevens, forthcoming). However, from cohort data it is not possible to conclude that these relationships had a causal association, as both the school-age factors and the later antisocial behaviour could have been due to pre-existing or unmeasured risk factors. The in-depth qualitative longitudinal analysis reported below aimed to investigate the school-related experiences of high need families. The research involved interviews with a small group of hard-to-reach families, repeated at different time points to aid interpretation of experiences in relation to the types of factors which facilitate or hold back improvements in children’s behaviour in the longer term. Interactions between schools, children and parents were explored in order to consider possible mechanisms by which school experiences might affect, and could prevent, children’s future behaviour problems.

Methods

A qualitative longitudinal research study based on repeat interviews with parents, and interviews with practitioners they found helpful, explored children's school experiences over five years. The study is rooted in the perspectives of parents and follows the children rather than the schools so that reasons for, and reflection on, moves between schools can be considered. Families' experiences of non-school services, and the role of family, community and societal factors were also investigated and are published separately (Stevens, 2018).

Sample

The study made use of an existing sample of 14 families who had agreed to participate in a pilot of a 20-week therapeutic parenting programme, the Helping Families Programme (HFP), in 2010-11. Families had been referred to the programme by a Family Intervention Project and a Youth Offending Service. Referrals were made because a primary-school aged child in the family was considered to be at risk of future anti-social behaviour, due to their conduct problems and the presence of additional risk factors in the family. Baseline information on the child's behaviour at home and school, and on the family's use of services, was collected for all families, although not all eventually took part in the programme (For more information on HFP see Day, Ellis and Harris, 2012 and Stevens *et al.*, 2014). The families were contacted three years later and invited to take part in a follow-up study, whether or not they had completed HFP.

The original inclusion criteria were:

Child aged five to eleven years displaying behaviour meeting definitions of Oppositional Defiant Disorder or Conduct Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) and currently excluded, or at risk of being excluded, from school. In addition, the parent was subject to at least one of the following risk factors:

- Harmful substance use
- Interpersonal conflict with their child, partner, close family and/or school
- Inability to maintain a tolerant, stable and regulated mood
- Lack of supportive family/social networks
- Frequent crises

Intensive efforts were made over several months to contact the 14 families originally referred to HFP, including letters, phone calls, address visits, and contact via services and schools. Contact was eventually made with parent-figures in eleven of the families, as well as the school of the child in a twelfth family. One parent-figure declined to participate in the follow-up study and the remainder agreed and were re-recruited. Participants were offered £20 as a thank you for their time taking part in interviews and completing questionnaires. Two children had been taken into local authority care since the original study, one retained contact with the mother, who participated in the follow-up study. The other child taken into care was the child of the twelfth family. The child was not in contact with the mother but he remained in the study, with data provided by his school so that children from eleven families are represented. All parent/carer interviewees were mothers except one who was another female relative. All are referred to as mothers below. Ten of the children were boys and one a girl, age range at baseline (pre-HFP) five to eleven years (mean and median age is 8 years). All had transferred to secondary school by the final follow-up, five years after baseline. Only one child had a live-in father figure.

Data collection and analysis

There were four data collection points: Pre-HFP baseline (2010-11), post-HFP (for the six families who completed the programme, approximately 20 weeks later), first follow-up (2013-14) and second follow-up (2015-16).

Data included:

- Written feedback from schools on children's behaviour at each time point, and on how they benefitted from intervention received
- HFP case notes for all families
- Post-HFP interviews with the six families that completed HFP
- In-depth interviews exploring children's school experiences. with ten mothers at each follow-up time-point
- Interviews with 12 practitioners at the first follow-up and 9 different practitioners at the second follow-up. These practitioners were nominated by parents as helpful.

- In two cases children also commented as they were present at parent interviews.

Practitioners were 8 teachers (3 were senior leaders), 3 teaching assistants, 2 learning mentors, 1 vulnerable student support worker, 2 family support workers, 3 social workers, and 2 staff from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. School-based staff interviewed were from eleven different schools.

In-depth interviews with parents took place in their home, or in one case a café, lasted about two hours, and loosely followed a topic guide which included listing and then exploring school support and other aspects of school experiences. Changing perceptions of the child's behaviour over time, and of the role of schools and school staff were explored by asking about these at different time points and by encouraging the participant to reflect on their previous responses and experiences; parents were also asked about their hopes and fears for the future (Calman, Brunton and Molassiotis, 2013)

The interviews with parents informed the subsequent interviews with practitioners which were conducted in their work-places. Practitioner interviews at the first follow-up in turn informed the final interviews with parents and practitioners.

The analytical approach was mainly inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) within the broad aim of finding out what aspects of families' and practitioners' accounts suggested helpful or unhelpful approaches for children both in the present and in the longer term. Initial analysis was case-based across all time points. The longitudinal nature of the data allowed comparison between participants' reflections on previous service-use, and their contemporaneous views. Events and ideas which were shared between accounts were noted and subsequent stages further developed cross-case thematic analysis.

Findings

The qualitative interview study following eleven families over five years revealed many factors that appeared important in affecting children's trajectories. Problems with school loomed large in parents' experiences with their children:

It's all down to the school and things really. Once they're all at school and have a normal routine and be like a normal family, like the kids go to school... but when it's like this you're all over the place Linda, asked about hopes for the future, first follow-up.

Study children's school histories are summarised in Table 1. As Table 1 shows, while all the study children were in mainstream primary schools at the time they were referred to HFP in 2010/11, by 2016 seven of the eleven children were excluded or in alternative provision, referred to here as special schools. These are either schools for children with social, emotional or behavioural difficulties, or pupil referral units (PRUs).

Table 1 School histories

Child (Parent) Diagnosis(if any) SEN Statement*	Previous school types 2010-13	School type 2014	School type 2015/16	Summary
Shaun (Esther) No statement	Mainstream primary	Mainstream primaries	Mainstream primary- mainstream secondary	Changed primary school when fostered. The school found foster parents supportive but saw Shaun's desire to return to birth family as a barrier to progress. He was having trouble adjusting to the discipline at secondary school.
Jamie (Linda) ADHD SEN statement	Mainstream primary	Part time/shared primary schooling EXCLUDED	Special school secondary following primary PRU	Excluded from primary school in year 6 following extreme behaviour seemingly mishandled by school. Multiagency effort to obtain SEN statement allowed transfer to small secondary special school which worked closely with parents and CAMHS.
Tyler (Jenny) ADHD No statement	Mainstream primary	Mainstream primaries	Lost to follow-up	Remained at supportive primary school through care proceedings. 3 years later was adopted and moved to a different city.
Joe (Donna) ADHD SEN statement	EXCLUDED Primary PRU and mainstream primaries	Part time/shared secondary schooling	EXCLUDED Special secondary	Early exclusion & refusal. Mum banned from school for aggression. Good support from primary PRU, then from mainstream primary school. Refused to work in 1 st year secondary, literacy problems not picked up until 2 nd year. Poor peer choices. Period spent part-time mainstream and special school, with mentor. Poor relationship between parent and mentor/school, but improved with new mentor and permanent move to special school Nurture Group. Considered vulnerable.
Ryan (Mary) ADHD SEN statement	Primary PRU and mainstream primaries	Mainstream secondary	EXCLUDED Special secondary	Early exclusion but great support from primary PRU and later mainstream primary school with same TA at both; behaviour improved. Unable to focus in mainstream secondary school environment, high anxiety & poor behaviour, would only speak to one TA. Nurturing at special school suited his emotional needs but easily influenced by peers, prone to fighting. Lots of support including some one-to-one.
Mike (Kathleen) No statement	Mainstream primary	Mainstream secondary	EXCLUDED	Several short-term exclusions at secondary school but settled down, forming good relationships with several staff members, no concerns over academic ability, following booster interventions. However, by second follow-up, all key staff left, behaviour deteriorated and he was excluded at same time as traumatic exposure to local gang crime; no support from school. Sat GCSEs outside mainstream school.

Child (Parent) Diagnosis(if any) SEN Statement*	Previous school types 2010-13	School type 2014	School type 2015	Summary
Aaron (Sue) ASD SEN statement	Mainstream primary	EXCLUDED Special school secondary	Special secondary – poor attendance	Original concerns all from home, none from primary school. But mainstream secondary school too challenging. Although he formed positive relationships with some adults, planned support was not put in place and he was excluded. Special school seemed worse; destructive behaviour, school-parent battles. By last interview, exclusions & antagonistic relationships with peers meant he was failing to complete vocational courses.
Paul (Bella) ADHD No statement	Mainstream primaries	Mainstream secondary	Mainstream secondary-just	Battles between mum and schools for more support. Turned down for SEN statement at primary school. Good start at secondary with close mentoring programme, checking in at beginning and end of day. But ‘graduation’ from programme left him unsupported, behaviour deteriorated, faced many ‘internal exclusions’.
Ben (Nicole) SEN statement	Mainstream primaries	EXCLUDED Not in school	Special secondary – taught one-to-one	Highly nurtured at primary school with permanent 1-to-1 support. Difficulty making friends. Primary school put big effort into transition but sent to secondary where he already had bad reputation, despite mum’s objections. Soon excluded. Eventually sent to special school where nearly all teaching was 1-to-1. Very backward in literacy& emotionally. He and mum keen for return to mainstream, but teacher did not think this was likely soon.
Darius (Amana) ADHD SEN statement	Mainstream primaries EXCLUDED	Mainstream primary	Mainstream secondary	Highly nurtured at primary school, full-time 1-to-1 TA who dealt with very challenging behaviour. Support somewhat reduced in year 6 as school and CAMHS put effort into transition. Services also support mum over school choice. However Darius had difficulty adjusting to secondary school regime, constantly in trouble for ADHD-related behaviours with inappropriate punishments and rewards. Planned support not put in place.
Harriet (Paula) LD SEN statement	Mainstream primary	Mainstream primary	Mainstream primary- special secondary EXCLUDED	Transferred straight to special school because of identified learning difficulties. Elder sister excluded for behaviour issues. Distrustful and unhelpful relationship between mother and schools.

* By final follow-up; PRU Pupil Referral Unit ; CAMHS Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services; ADHD Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder; ASD Autism Spectrum Disorder; LD Learning Difficulties; TA Teaching Assistant

Table 1 mentions key issues arising in each case, and the principle themes arising from the cross-case interpretive longitudinal analysis are described below. Theme titles indicate the implications of the findings for areas where helpful intervention could contribute to lasting benefits for children with difficult behaviour.

Managing the disjuncture between primary and secondary school environments

Several of the children had moved from primary schools which could not or would not, according to parents, cope with their behaviour, and had eventually arrived at a primary school, whether special or mainstream, where they had been intensively supported and highly nurtured. Nurturing took the form of adults getting to know the child well, the child being given a lot of tailored support to help them manage their behaviour, and adapted behaviour expectations, such as being allowed time out of class if they felt they were about to lose their temper. Crucially, all staff were aware of the child's needs. Five study children had a one-to-one teaching assistant (TA) with them all the time at primary school. Even when attempts were made to reduce children's dependence on the TA in the final year of primary school, moving towards being 'on call' rather than always there, they were generally available. As Darius's TA pointed out: 'I am never far off for him to come and find me'.

A move to mainstream secondary school, then, generally meant a switch from a highly nurturing environment to one much less likely to prioritise personal relationships, and this was challenging for study children:

Oh the primary school were excellent, really, really good, they did a lot of work with Ben... they built him up, built up his friendships, 'cause he had a lot of problems with friendships, and I just feel like all the work that primary school have done, [secondary school] have undone. That's how I feel at the moment. Nicole, first follow-up.

Children receiving intensive support at primary school had been given a Statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN). A SEN Statement is given to UK children where need for additional support has been identified and applied for by the school, and is associated with additional funding; this system, current during the study period, is being replaced by Education, Health and Care Plans (www.gov.uk/children-with-special-educational-needs). Seven of the study children had statements by the end of the study, three did not, despite their difficult behaviour. School staff said they would not be given SEN statements because their academic achievement was within the expected range. However, even for children with statements, secondary school policies did not usually encourage one-to-one support. At primary school, having a SEN statement made a big difference to the support children were provided with, but this seemed less true at secondary school, until children were excluded. Once excluded from mainstream provision, some children received resource-intensive individualised packages of support tailored to their needs.

Primary school staff and other practitioners sometimes spoke to secondary school staff, anticipating transition difficulties:

I tried to arrange a meeting quite early in to try and help to ensure they were ... pre-empting any problems ... But they were kind of saying, 'oh well, we've not got any extra support for [him] because he needs to...learn to manage himself'... You know, that's all very well, but he can't do that! CAMHS practitioner, second follow-up.

There was a tension between the need for nurturing support, and a desire from secondary schools, but also sometimes from the child and/or the parent, for the child to be more independent. Children did not necessarily want individual support in class because of the stigma attached. Reasons given by school staff for withholding such support included: class teachers could provide the necessary 'differentiated' input themselves; lack of evidence in the literature that TA involvement was effective, although the evidence referred to seemed to relate to academic learning (e.g. Blatchford et al., 2011); risk of stigma; risk of dependency, creating problems when a TA left, or took a day off work. To counteract this last factor, one special school instead advocated developing good relationships more widely.

A repeated theme from both parents and practitioners was that being 'more independent' at secondary school meant conforming to the same rules and behaviour as everyone else. At primary schools, where all

staff knew the child, it was often possible to be flexible about behaviour expectations and strategies, but this was more difficult at secondary school.

In my primary I was taught to, when I was getting angry, I would just run, run out the class... just go away from them and just calm down, but it's different in [secondary school], 'cause I do that and I get excluded. Ben, first follow-up.

Ryan, Joe and Aaron were all removed from mainstream secondary schools, following a difficult couple of years, to small Nurture Groups in special schools where they were taught mainly in the same class and by a small group of teachers who knew them well.

Relationships and pastoral support

In some mainstream secondary schools time constraints mean there is very little in the way of pastoral contact. One learning mentor described how the school's regular timetable did not allow space for one-to-one talks between children and teachers. Even form time was structured, and there was very little play time, a deliberate behaviour-control policy, according to the learning mentor. Although Aaron, for example, had formed good relationships with individual adults, contact was not consistent enough for this to provide a buffer against the difficulties of dealing with the school environment.

Paul's learning mentor seemed to have a system that directly dealt with this lack of pastoral support. She saw children on her mentoring scheme (which included Paul) at the beginning and end of each school day, and, according to both her own and Paul's mother's accounts, was providing a level of consistency and nurture higher than most mentors who could only see children once per week. The system allowed children to build a relationship with someone who could be aware of their difficulties and treat them fairly and with understanding. She talked to her mentees, found out which subjects they struggled with and devised strategies to deal with their difficulties. Seating plans were key to this, to aid concentration, and she sat in on classes and gave teachers tips on how to deal with the child. At the first follow-up, therefore, Paul was dealing well with the transition to secondary school. However, once the children on her programme had met their goals they no longer received her support. This is the dilemma of 'reform'. At the second follow-up we were able to discuss how Paul suffered from losing the structure and consistency of the programme once he had 'graduated', and the rapid deterioration in his behaviour.

One special secondary school used the same teacher all the time for children in the Nurture Group, but at Aaron's special school this practice had recently ended, despite the teacher's strong objections and warnings. The warnings seemed to be borne out by Aaron's difficulty adjusting to the multiple relationships when having different teachers for each subject, as recounted in the final follow-up interviews.

Several of the children had poor literacy skills and in some cases this went unrecognised because of children's behaviour, leading to ever-increasing barriers to learning. Staff taking time to get to know a child could lead to the discovery of literacy deficits and appropriate intervention, which in some cases was credited with improved behaviour.

One mainstream school staff member said that only six children in his school received one-to-one support out of at least thirty children whose statements qualified them for it. For at least five of the study children, appropriate support plans seemed to have been made, but not implemented, or at least not implemented in time to avoid exclusions:

He was meant to have a mentor in every class. Oh she'd turn up sick, or they didn't have one, or they couldn't get one, you know? It was like excuse after excuse. I said, '...if you're taking on a child and you see they've got these needs, why did you take them?'. Sue, second follow-up.

It was very helpful when children made a connection with a sympathetic adult who liked them. This happened often, and in primary school was sometimes a relationship maintained until the end of school (for Darius, Ben, Tyler) but when it happened at secondary school, although it was a potentially helpful factor, possibly crucial, it was more difficult for the relationship to be maintained, because of staff leaving (Mike, Aaron), because of the school's systems (Paul, Ben) or because the child was excluded (Aaron, Ben, Ryan).

Key seemed to be having someone to turn to when the child felt troubled. When Mike was doing well at school, as at the first follow-up interview, he had people he could talk to, even a receptionist – who could talk to him and help him calm down. By the time of the second follow-up interview all these individuals had left the school within a short space of time, Mike was excluded soon afterwards, and was in trouble with the police for activities outside school. In Ben’s case there had been an attempt to link him with a mentor and a TA but a combination of circumstances - timetable changes, Ben’s difficulty taking responsibility for his timetable, family crisis leading to absence and lack of effective home-school communication, followed by Ben being put on a reduced timetable – led to insufficient mentoring support. His permanent exclusion followed soon after. Sometimes, then, planned support for children was insufficient, while at other times planned support was not put in place.

Appropriate rewards and consequences

Primary school classes are taught mainly by one teacher, and schools are small enough for all staff to be aware of appropriate expectations for a particular pupil’s behaviour. At large mainstream secondary schools it is more difficult to provide a tailored balance of consistency and flexibility. In some cases agreed strategies, about how to treat certain individual children, will be recorded, but may not be in the forefront of all teachers’ minds, given the number of children they teach, and the turnover in teachers. One TA described her battles with other staff on a study child’s behalf:

I make people see the fact that yeah, he’s just thrown a chair across the classroom, yeah, he’s hit another student, but to get to that point there hasn’t been support in his class for one; other kids were taunting him for two; and the classroom teacher didn’t deal with it how she is supposed to and give him the time out which is set in place, so therefore, you can’t exclude him for that. Teaching Assistant, first follow-up.

The special schools saw the importance of children being able to put misdeeds behind them and see every day as a fresh start. Linda compared Jamie’s school’s ethos to the mainstream school, where he had been at the previous interview, thus:

If Jamie was to get into trouble today, if he was in a mainstream school, the next day, you know, your punishment carries on. At this school, they’re always: ‘every day’s a new day’. Linda, second follow-up.

Similarly, a mainstream school learning mentor said she did not look at children’s files as she did not want to judge them from what others had said about them, but from what they said themselves.

In contrast, the inflexible behaviour system at Mike’s mainstream secondary school added up ‘behaviour points’ throughout the year until you acquired enough to be suspended from school. Schools’ approaches to rewards and sanctions could be cumbersome or ill-thought-through. Punishments, even exclusion, could be threatened and then a decision not taken for weeks. One child’s psychiatrist explained the need for swift and appropriate consequences for children so they could see the link with the misdemeanour, and to avoid anxiety. Behaviour goals given to a study child were not sufficiently specific:

It was just things like, ‘I need to behave well in class at all times’ or something like that, it was really vague. CAMHS Psychiatrist, second follow-up.

And rewards were too hard to get:

Bless him, he was trying with his reward chart, going round, and he wasn’t getting any rewards, like for weeks. They were kind of saying...oh, not quite – not quite enough to get the reward. And I was like, no, that’s not how you do a reward – you need immediate rewards. So then, at the next meeting we had, they were saying, the reward chart’s not working! CAMHS Psychiatrist, second follow-up.

Eventually the psychiatrist sent a trainee educational psychologist into the school to support the appropriate implementation of a reward system. Other children had faced similar difficulties in terms of minor misdeeds leading to constant punishments, with little positive feedback.

Dealing with disruptive behaviour and symptoms of ADHD

Six out of the ten children in this study received a diagnosis of ADHD at some point either before or during the five years of the study (Table 1). Four of these children took medication to help them manage at school. Expected standards of behaviour at mainstream secondary schools were not compatible with symptoms of ADHD:

Some of the behaviours is a part of him: fidgeting, can't stay still, that's him!... so why are you phoning me up for that? Paul's mother Bella, second follow-up.

Parents and practitioners felt, looking back, that being continually reprimanded for this low-level disruptive behaviour could be the beginning of a downward trend in terms of children's behaviour. However, school staff also described these behaviours as just the sort of disruption that makes it difficult to teach, and distracts pupils, including those like Ryan and Darius who found concentration difficult, but were also perpetrators of the behaviours.

It's constant talking, constant throwing things across the classroom, disrupting others, talking over the teacher, being rude – stuff like that – it's unbearable sometimes. Teaching Assistant, first follow-up.

Some primary and special schools provided a high degree of flexibility to combat these problems, sometimes, for example, allowing children to choose which lessons they went to, or where they worked, although not all school staff supported that approach. One TA criticised classroom teachers who showed insufficient flexibility:

Yeah, they know him, but they're just so set in their ways that kids should all be reformed in the same way – all kids should be treated the same – which doesn't work. Teaching Assistant, first follow-up.

While flexibility of approach between children was important practitioners also stressed the need for consistency in treatment of individual children. Firm and consistent implementation of rules and expectations meant children knew what to expect and what the consequences would be; this helped them to be able to take responsibility for their behaviour.

Some schools supported their TAs, who often took the brunt of children's difficult behaviour, better than others. One full-time TA suffered physically and emotionally during her years supporting a study child and, initially at least, did not feel well supported at work:

I felt like everybody was going 'Ooohhh – rather you than me! Ooohhh – I heard you today! Ooohhh – I saw you running today!' So it was always them and me, and everybody – 'good luck with that one!', and I'm thinking, I don't need good luck – I need support! Primary TA, first follow-up.

Eventually she was given time with the school therapist for her own needs. Her persistence with a child who no one else would work with, putting her own career on hold, seemed to be worthwhile in terms of his improved behaviour and aspirations, as well as improved relations between school and home.

Where children were removed from classes this was usually interpreted negatively, as punishment, or as unfair, by parents and children. Several of the children had periods of segregation where they were taken out of classes and taught one-to-one for hours, days or weeks, to enable them to catch up, or when they had difficulty focussing in the class environment. Sometimes they were excluded from class, or school, explicitly as a punishment. Temporary exclusions, given to most of the children at some point, seemed a problematic approach. It could lead to increasingly negative sentiments towards school, the feeling that "if

they don't want me, I don't want them either". It also meant the children fell even further behind with learning or missed out on other intervention.

Communication between parents and schools

Communication was a common theme in interviews. Many schools said they worked hard to encourage close relationships with parents, and to give positive feedback. Parents reported sometimes being called every day. Part of the aim of this communication appeared to be a) to ask parents to support the work being done by the school and b) to get parents to reinforce discipline with repercussions (sanctions/admonishment or praise) at home. However, several parents complained about constant telephone calls from schools, although attitudes could change over time. Donna described her response when she was called by Joe's special school about his behaviour:

'Well, you have to deal with it. I'm not being funny. I have to deal with it [at home]. That's what all your teachers in there are meant to be trained, so why are you ringing me?' And then I get stressed. You know what I mean? Donna, second follow-up

The one institution Donna was very positive about, looking back, was the primary PRU; she said that by contrast they never used to telephone her. Instead they invited parents to school once a week to take part in activities. However, at the first follow-up interview Donna had wanted *more* communication from the mainstream secondary school saying she needed to be kept informed so that when Joe had misbehaved she could implement consequences at home. Although Donna was belligerent and would tend to start by taking Joe's side, she would, the school agreed at the second follow-up, eventually back up their disciplining once she was persuaded that Joe was in the wrong.

Bella was infuriated by constant calls from Paul's mainstream secondary school throughout the day and the staff's apparent lack of internal communication. She felt teachers were not being informed about Paul's behaviour and needs and were pointlessly calling her as a punishment to him for every misdemeanour:

You said you could handle him, and you could support him, but obviously not because the teachers that are calling me, they're not even aware that he even has ADHD, your communication skills are poor... The Head is telling me one thing but when all the teachers are calling me they're telling me a whole different thing. Bella, second follow-up.

Amana similarly imagined a day when she no longer received calls from school as meaning that their problems had been solved. At the second follow-up, secondary school had not started well in this regard and Darius's CAMHS worker felt the school communicated in an unhelpful way. She was shocked to hear him described to his mother as 'the rudest child I've ever met'. Conversely Darius's progress at primary school seemed to have benefitted from enhanced communication between mother and TA by way of a diary where they could inform each other about what had happened that day, or the night before.

The way parents communicate with schools, and vice versa, was not always effective. Donna was described as going in 'all guns blazing' and had been barred from one school playground and Sue described her contact with school thus:

I just go in for meetings to have another go at them. And have an argument. That's all I go in for. Sue, second follow-up.

Bella could also be belligerent but she and Nicole, nevertheless, were both complemented by school staff for the efforts they made on their child's behalf. Many parents were intimidated by school meetings, and practitioners from other services, including CAMHS and HFP, had supported parents at these meetings. Bella and Amana both had support from advocacy organisations in negotiating with local authorities about school support. These relationships seemed empowering; the advocate helped the mothers work out what questions they needed to ask, but the mother would ask the questions herself.

Discussion

Many studies have shown associations between childhood factors and young people's later antisocial behaviour (e.g. Murray *et al.*, 2014; Farrington, 2015). Another set of studies has debated inclusive education, the pros and cons of keeping children with difficult behaviour in mainstream schools, and the effectiveness of intervention with these children, although there is a lack of longitudinal evidence of effectiveness or the factors that moderate effectiveness (Lindsay, 2007; Powers, Bierman and Coffman, 2016). The current study took one approach to addressing this gap by examining in depth experiences of support received over a number of years, and considering what approaches seem to have lasting benefit, or what stops school-based support being effective.

The findings highlight the importance of relationships and communication, between school staff and both children and their parents. Communication *within* schools was also crucial, as poor communication could lead to inconsistent treatment of children with difficult behaviour. The findings suggest that good relationships with adults at school could be protective and that a variety of individuals, not only teachers, provide important support to children, sometimes individuals for whom this is not part of their job description. The analysis indicated that there is not a straightforward relationship between how much communication there is between parents and school, and its helpfulness. Sometimes parents felt there was not enough communication while at other times, schools were getting in contact too often, usually with complaints about the child's behaviour. The findings also raise the question of whether those whose problems were not considered severe enough to warrant a SEN statement, and the associated additional funded support this can bring, are receiving sufficient support. However, even children with a statement faced a lack of consistency in the support available.

Inconsistently-applied discipline and high staff turnover, as shown in the cases analysed here, contribute to poor relationships (Jamal *et al.*, 2013). There is a tension playing out between consistency and flexibility towards children's behaviour. Having consistent expectations is a key theme in both parenting advice and school behaviour policies; however, findings here suggest it may also be necessary to allow flexibility in some rules to cater for individuals' particular needs; a combination of flexibility of school and staff's approaches to different children, and consistency of expectation for the individual child. The analysis found that, in the school context, consequences needed to follow on swiftly from actions, and be seen to be fair.

Educational reforms under the UK's New Labour government (1997-2010) recognised the importance of modernising educators' perceptions of the causes of pupil behaviour (Armstrong, 2014) and NICE guidance (2009) recommends that teachers are trained in understanding and managing the behaviours associated with ADHD. The current findings show that some practitioners, and some institutions, are not paying due attention to such issues, while others very much do so. Teachers have reported insufficient training in behaviour management and a link between student misbehaviour and teacher burn-out (Kokkinos, 2007). As found in the current study, Reinke and Herman (2002) report that the behaviour of teachers towards children with conduct problems too often reinforces problematic behaviours; there is an absence of efforts supporting positive behaviours in these children, and they are often reprimanded even in the absence of negative behaviours. Patience and positive attitudes towards children with special educational needs have, on the other hand, been shown to have a positive impact on student achievement and/or behaviour (Sherman, Rasmussen and Baydala, 2008).

This small-sample but in-depth and longitudinal study found that children had often been moved from their original primary school. It seems that some schools prefer not to keep difficult children in their schools while others take pride in providing an inclusive, nurturing and personalised approach. These different approaches are not explicitly stated by schools, but variation in practice between UK schools towards children and young people with mental health problems has been noted (House of Commons Health Committee, 2014). However, a key finding was the huge disjuncture between primary and secondary school environments and expectations in relation to children with difficult behaviour. The difference in how children are treated, between primary and mainstream secondary schools, means it is very hard for these

children to succeed. Difficulties with the balance between nurturing children and promoting their independence is particularly acute because the study children tend to have (eventually) found primary schools that can adapt to their behaviours, and where they are supported by key relationships. Bailey and Baines (2012) seem to support this finding; their survey suggests that where factors associated with resilience are present at primary school, but not at secondary school, pupils with Special Educational Needs are less resilient to the significant changes at their new schools.

Coffey argues in favour of concentrating on relationships for successful transitions (Coffey, 2013); the current study suggests that children with conduct disorders would benefit from a continued emphasis on supporting good relationships with adults in school in the years following transition to secondary school. However, interviews with school staff illustrated the constraints on schools' ability to contribute to improving outcomes for children with conduct disorders. These include constrained resources, including time and money, and an evaluation framework based almost exclusively on academic outcomes (Pearson, Mitchell and Rapti, 2015; Qureshi, 2015).

All the eleven study children had been identified as at risk of future problems while still at primary school. Five years later seven out of the eleven were in alternative provision. Although some would see this as a poor outcome, it may also be that alternative provision was more appropriate. The study indicated that in some cases, where alternative provision was well run, it worked well for these children, while in others problems seemed to be exacerbated. For all study children, there were clear reasons why mainstream schools presented difficult environments.

Conclusions

This study focused on the experiences of families over five years as recounted by parents, and practitioners they nominated as helpful. The sample was small, and the voices of the children themselves mainly absent, but the approach was broad and in-depth, the interpretive longitudinal analysis designed to be hypothesis-raising, a necessary pre-cursor to further investigation. The analysis enabled consideration of factors which appear helpful in supporting children with conduct disorders in the longer term but other factors which exacerbate problems. Some of these factors were investigated quantitatively in a subsequent analysis of secondary cohort data (Stevens, forthcoming). However, the qualitative analysis uncovers some of the subtleties around need for and provision of help which it is not possible to convincingly replicate in survey data. While quantitative analyses can show a range of variables on which children who later display antisocial behaviour are disadvantaged, this qualitative analysis suggests how causal pathways might be functioning.

Children with problematic behaviour have often already experienced failure and exclusion before they arrive at secondary school. Mainstream secondary schools in the study did not seem well-equipped to deal positively with the children's needs, leading to children being labelled as difficult, and often segregated from their peers. A spiral of continuing identification with antisocial behaviour can follow. The experiences of children in this study suggest that compassionate support for both mother and child can help in negotiating day-to-day difficulties and avoid difficulties leading to crises. However, key relationships are not always recognised and therefore not replaced when individual staff leave. Great care needs to be taken in making support available in a non-stigmatising way in the years following transition to secondary school.

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