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New survey says 35% of disabled children endure seclusion and 27% suffer restraint at school





“Children have a right to feel safe at school” – Inclusion Ireland and AsIAm urgently call for guidance and regulation in schools

Inclusion Ireland and AsIAm today are urgently calling for guidance and regulation for schools concerning seclusion and restraint. The two organisations have teamed up with parent representatives to appeal to policymakers at Leinster House following the [results of a new survey](#).

The survey shows that 35% of disabled children experience seclusion, while 27% of disabled children suffer restraint at school. Parents were asked if their child ever experienced seclusion, and/or mechanical, physical or chemical restraint in school. Parents responded by sharing stark stories of children locked in rooms alone, sensory rooms being used inappropriately, children dragged across the school floor, children physically held and/or lifted against their will. Parents also reported feeling powerless and fearing retribution and the removal of [vital supports](#) they have had to fight long and hard for.

CEO of Inclusion Ireland, Derval McDonagh said: “Children have a right to feel safe at school. What disabled children are enduring in schools today is hugely damaging and a violation of their rights. In many cases these children are desperately trying to advocate for themselves and are being told over and over again from very young that what they have to say doesn’t matter and who they are is wrong. Meanwhile, parents share with us feeling powerless and facing persistent gaslighting. Not only is there no guidance for schools, there is no support for those who are guardians to these kids.”

She added: “These unacceptable practices reveal a chronic and often oblivious ableism, as well as a lack of training in some of our schools. Invisible disabilities not believed, a view that behaviours beyond typical are unacceptable, an ignorance to difference. Classmates are often witness to seclusion and restraint, learning that if you are different you are punished. This needs to end now. We will look back on this era with shame. But let’s at least today commit to preventing further scars. Our aim with this survey and tomorrow’s briefing is to continue to shine a light, with the hope of spurring on immediate action and a publication of guidance for schools which are rights based and child centred.”

Adam Harris, CEO AsIAM, said “Today’s result are a deeply distressing snapshot of the worrying failures to safeguard and meet the rights of Autistic and neurodivergent children and young people within our education system. Whilst the findings are stark, they are sadly not surprising in the absence of a rigorous, child-centred, rights-based systems of training and regulation, not just in terms of seclusion and restraint, but in understanding and meeting the needs of Autistic and neurodivergent learners.

“The Department of Education has a statutory public sector duty to uphold human rights and yet we have waited since 2018 for promised guidelines on this issue. While we acknowledge this work is underway, it is greatly overdue and we are concerned it will fall short of what is required. Day in, day out our organisations hear from families who have had alarming experiences in terms of seclusion and restraint within the classroom and a number of these cases have been the subject of various statutory investigations and processes and yet there has been a lack of urgency on this critical issue.

“The issue at hand is ultimately about child protection and yet we see families inappropriately passed from pillar to post through a Schools Complaints Procedures which has no relevance or place in matters pertaining to child protection, whether a child has a diagnosis of a disability or otherwise. It is a regrettable reality that wherever there are disabled people there is an increased risk of abuse. We have seen examples of this in Ireland, and across the world. Putting in place robust systems to safeguard young people is not about a blame game or a matter of trust, its about protecting everyone within our education system. Many of the young people in our school system who are most at risk of seclusion or restraint also attend HSE services in which much more comprehensive regulations on the use of restraint are in place. Why are our young people given one set of protections in one statutory setting and little to none in another?

He continued, “We would urge Ministers Foley and Madigan to commit to comprehensive statutory regulations which prioritise the rights of children in our schools to be free from seclusion and inappropriate restraint. Ultimately though this is about a need for a wider cultural shift in which all learners have the same chance to communicate, self-regulate, learn and be accepted in every school in the country. This means a genuine shift towards changing the system and respecting, not changing, the individual.”

The survey which was completed by just over 400 parents, included some harrowing stories. The following are some verbatims shared by different parents:

A parent said “There was one particularly memorable occasion when my child’s (with Asperger’s) class (5th in primary school) were in the school hall practicing a school Christmas play. He attempted to leave the room abruptly without permission and was rugby tackled to the floor by the female teacher. She held him there for a while and shouted at him about how struggling was futile due to her superior strength.”

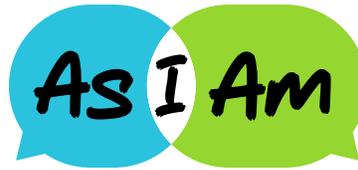
Another parent said “My son experienced physical restraint in a mainstream school, was moved to an [autism] class to ‘help’ him. Then seclusion was used and he was dragged across a school floor into this ‘safe space’ (seclusion room) where he stripped naked multiple times due to distress. The door was held shut [by] multiple persons... An animal would not be treated this way.”

A third parent added: “My son was restrained and secluded on numerous occasions in primary school, by teachers, SNA’s and sports coach’s. A teacher physically removed his hands from his ears twice when overstimulated with noise.”

“My daughter... was lifted by arms and legs by teacher and SNA into a sensory room and told she wasn’t allowed leave. She was bruised from this”, commented another parent.

A parent shared: “Hands were placed on my daughter to move her and away from me and co. to go into the school building even though she was clearly verbalising refusal. When I questioned the intention, three staff members said that I was being aggressive and the principal later said ‘why would they not!’”. The survey builds on a 2018 report by Inclusion Ireland called [‘Shining a Light on Seclusion and Restraint’](#).

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