

21031 Schools 'converting toilet blocks into isolation booths'

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Schools are converting toilet blocks and classrooms to build isolation booths to accommodate “disruptive” children, the children’s commissioner has said, as campaigners warn that excessive use of the practice could be putting young people’s mental health at risk.

The official said she had heard “horror stories” about children’s experiences in isolation booths – spaces in which pupils sit in silence for hours as punishment for breaking school rules and disruptive behaviour.

Some pupils told her they had been put in isolation repeatedly for days or weeks at a time and described the experience as “distressing and degrading”, while others said they had slept because there was nothing to do.

The children’s commissioner is conducting research to find out how widespread the use of isolation booths is and what kind of children are affected in response to mounting disquiet among parents and mental health campaigners about the practice.

At one school, the commissioner said she had been told that a portable booth made out of cardboard was used to place over a child in the classroom. Pupils told her they had been put in isolation over minor uniform breaches or the wrong hairstyle.

She is also concerned that isolation is being used by some schools as a “gateway” to exclusions and that it affects disproportionately high numbers of children with special educational needs.

Last week, the Centre for Mental Health charity warned that putting challenging pupils in isolation for extended periods at school could harm their mental health and that young people who had already suffered trauma were particularly vulnerable.

However one school headteacher said, “They aren’t isolation rooms – I’ve never seen a school leave a child unattended. They’re supervised, and more often than not, accompanied by other students. So claims that these are isolation spaces is nonsense. These are safe spaces, run by adults,” he said.

Other headteachers say the use of well-run isolation rooms means lessons are disruption-free for other children. One school leader explained on Twitter that at her school 10-15 out of 900 students on average spent the day in the school’s isolation room, though booths were not used.

“The impact of this approach is that every single lesson taught at the school is disruption-free. No teacher is ever talked over. Pupils are not rude. Pupils don’t refuse to work. This system is strict but it isn’t draconian. It works because it’s fair and because everyone understands it.”

400 words