

Autistic children need the world to acknowledge the significance of the challenges they face

September 20 2018, by Nick Hodge



Credit: Pexels

Autistic children are increasingly being suspended or expelled from school, because of "behavioural problems" official figures show. Some

regions in the UK have seen a [100% increase](#) in these types of exclusions since 2011.

[Research](#) carried out by myself and colleagues at Sheffield Hallam University demonstrates the devastating consequences these exclusions have for disabled children and their families.

A landmark legal ruling in August stated that the [exclusion of autistic children](#) from [school](#) is a violation of their human rights. This decision by the upper tribunal should bring to a halt the alarming rise in the number of [school exclusions](#) of autistic pupils.

Schools can no longer exclude pupils for aggression if this results from the pupil being autistic and is not, therefore, an act of choice.

Autism as a problem

The ruling means that schools are now legally obliged to make reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010 to support [autistic children](#) whose [behaviour](#) they find challenging.

But while the results of the tribunal are to be welcomed, some elements of the reported ruling reproduce the fundamental misrepresentation of autism that gives rise to these exclusions – for example, Judge Rowley [asserted that](#): "aggressive behaviour is not a choice for children with autism". In doing so, Judge Rowley seems to imply that acting aggressively is an expected characteristic of being autistic.

[Thinking about "problem" behaviour](#) as a characteristic of autism has predominated within society since the condition was first formulated over 70 years ago. The American Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition ([DSM-5](#)) sets out the personal characteristics that warrant a diagnosis of autism. This defines autistic

people through terms such as "deficit" and "failure". Their behaviour is represented as abnormal and a problem:

Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction ...
Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity ... abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation ... inflexible adherence to routines.

In this way, autism is made a personal problem with social rules and practices, as well as issues with communication and coping readily with change. Thinking of autism in this way has engendered a multi-million pound [industry](#) that depends on selling the idea that autistic children are in desperate need of a cure.

Misunderstood and misrepresented

This dominant mode of thinking about autism is often referred to as the [Individual Model of Disability](#) . This is the view that a person has a disability because in some critical way their body fails them. And it is this understanding of autism that is failing autistic [children](#) and young people.

You only have to look at the issue of school exclusions, the prevalence of [mental health issues](#) and the disturbingly high level of [suicides](#) in autistic adults to know that it is time to think differently about autism.

Ask autistic people what the problem is and they won't answer that it is because there is something wrong with them. Instead they will tell you about how other people don't understand them and so reject and exclude them.

It is reported that only 16% of [autistic adults](#) in the UK are in full-time, paid [employment](#). This is not because autism makes you unable to work.

It is because employers have a very limited concept of what an employee should look like and how they should behave.

Wider acceptance

This is why the "problem" of autism needs to be reframed – making it less about the individual and more about the way society relates to and views autistic people. This approach is known as the Social Model of Disability.

Through my [research](#), I encourage education practitioners to shift from [thinking about "problem" behaviour](#) as a characteristic of autism. I ask them instead to reflect on how a child might be experiencing what is happening to them at school and why that might result in unwanted behaviours. To help with this, I offer practitioners an alternative, [rights-based](#) definition of autism to the deficit focused one presented by the DSM 5.

This still acknowledges the significance of the challenges that autistic people face. However, in this new definition, the responsibility and focus for change is placed with school practices rather than with the child. In this different way of thinking about autism it becomes defined as: "Profound and fundamental challenges with: knowing and/or applying customary social rules and practices if these are not made clear; accessing commonly available communication systems; adapting quickly to unexpected and enforced change."

It is critical to think about [autism](#) in terms of the need for schools to develop more responsive practices to meet a diverse range of pupils – rather than a fundamental problem with a child. Doing so will compel schools to recognise where the problem of behaviour really lies.

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