

Are children who are known to child protection services more likely to be suspended from school?

Findings from the NSW Child Development Study

Snapshot

- New results from the NSW Child Development Study show that children who are reported to child protection services in early childhood are at higher risk of being suspended from primary school.
- Among these children, those with substantiated Risk of Significant Harm (ROSH) reports and those in out-of-home care were at greatest risk of being suspended. Both groups were over four times more likely than non-reported children to receive a suspension.
- Children with reports that did not reach the ROSH threshold were almost twice as likely and children with non-substantiated ROSH reports were almost three times as likely as non-reported children to be suspended from school.
- Suspension has an impact on academic achievement and school disengagement because it weakens students' sense of school belonging. Suspension creates gaps in education by taking children away from teaching and learning, rather than providing them with the support and positive guidance they need.
- Personalised Learning and Support Planning for children in out-of-home care is designed to increase educational outcomes and attendance, and decrease suspensions, by ensuring that children's developmental and educational needs are understood, met, monitored and reviewed annually to help them reach their full learning potential.
- The NSW Department of Education's Student Behaviour Strategy encourages schools to explore a range of evidence-based changes and options for how suspensions are issued and managed. This Strategy aims to create a safer learning environment for all, set up students with the social skills needed in later life and reduce early suspensions, particularly for vulnerable student cohorts.

Introduction

Out-of-school suspension, which means a temporary exclusion from school and activities, is a core part of many schools' behaviour management policies. This is despite evidence that suspension is associated with adverse educational, health, justice and welfare outcomes, and is used disproportionately with students from marginalised and minority backgrounds.^{1,2,3,4} Children with adverse childhood experiences, including maltreatment, can have difficulty adapting to the school environment and are

more likely to receive a suspension.^{5,6} Alongside strategies to monitor and evaluate the use and effectiveness of suspension relative to other school disciplinary practices, opportunities for prevention and early intervention are needed. These may involve identifying and supporting at-risk students to manage their behaviour and engage effectively with learning at school.

Research from the NSW Child Development Study (NSW-CDS) examined the relationship of child maltreatment and a range of other early childhood factors (up to 8 years of age; end of Year 2) with subsequent suspension from primary school (during Years 3 to 6). This Evidence to Action Note outlines the key findings from this research study 'Early Childhood Predictors of Elementary School Suspension: An Australian Record Linkage Study'.⁷ It also discusses the implications of this research for policy and practice.

Why is preventing primary school suspension important?

Exclusion from school is linked to a range of negative outcomes for students. Research from the US shows that suspended students have reduced exposure to protective factors associated with being in school and increased exposure to multiple risk factors.^{1,3,8} They have lower educational achievement and lower school completion rates. They are more likely to repeat a year and drop out of school altogether.⁴ Students receiving suspensions may have no opportunities to make up for missed classes and assignments and they may develop a negative attitude toward school.¹ Suspension is also associated with a loss of friends in one's year and greater involvement with substance-using peers, and increased odds of being arrested or having some contact with the juvenile justice system in later years.^{2,8} Male students, students from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds, and students with disability are known to be disproportionately affected by suspension.⁴ In Australia, Aboriginal children and young people are suspended from school at

disproportionate rates and for disparate reasons.⁹ It is crucial to challenge implicit bias, racism, and discrimination wherever they exist, including in schools and child protection services, and to strengthen culturally appropriate evidence-based prevention and intervention frameworks.

Most suspensions are given to secondary school students (Years 7 to 12), but early suspensions are particularly high-risk events for further suspension and future poor outcomes.^{10,11} This makes primary school suspensions especially important from a prevention and early intervention perspective.

The research from the NSW-CDS focuses specifically on identifying factors in early childhood that increase risk for students to be suspended during primary school, including child maltreatment.



What data did this study use from the NSW-CDS?

The NSW-CDS is a longitudinal population study following the development of a cohort of 91,635 children in NSW from birth.¹² To date, the study has linked administrative records from 2001 to 2021 from multiple NSW agencies, including Education, Health, and Communities and Justice, with cross-sectional survey data. Parental records are also available for children in the study whose births were registered in NSW.

This research used linked data for a subsample of 34,885 children in the NSW-CDS to examine a wide range of child and contextual factors that might operate as risk (or protective) factors for primary school suspension. These factors included sociodemographic, pregnancy and birth, and parental factors, early childhood developmental vulnerabilities, and factors that indicate a need for support from education, health, and/or social services. This Evidence to Action Note describes the relationship between contact with child protection services and primary school suspension in the context of the other factors.

How did the researchers measure contact with child protection services?

The researchers identified children who were the subject of at least one child protection report up to the end of Year 2 (approximately 8 years of age). Children who had been reported to child protection services were allocated into mutually exclusive subgroups based on the highest level of child protection response they had received. For example, if a child had a recorded out-of-home care (OOHC) placement and a substantiated risk-of-significant harm (ROSH) report, they were placed in the OOHC group.

The four levels of child protection services were:



OOHC placement: children with at least one placement in OOHC. This was deemed the highest service response, as it may reflect more severe maltreatment of the child or the inability of a family to continue caring for their child.



Substantiated ROSH report: instances of actual or risk of significant harm verified by child protection case workers but not resulting in removal of the child from their family. A child is deemed to be at risk of significant harm if the circumstances causing concern for their safety, welfare or wellbeing are sufficiently serious to warrant a response by a statutory authority, with or without the consent of their family.



Unsubstantiated ROSH report: including reports that initially met the threshold for risk of significant harm but no actual or risk of harm was determined during follow-up by case workers, or the report was not further investigated because of resource constraints.



Non-ROSH report: children with reports that did not reach the threshold for risk of significant harm.

How did the researchers measure out-of-school suspension?

Out-of-school suspensions were measured during Years 3 to 6 of primary school for children who attended a NSW public school throughout this period. (Suspension data was not available for children attending Catholic or independent primary schools.)

Children could receive short suspension(s) of up to 4 days for aggressive behaviour or continued disobedience. Children could receive long suspension(s) of up to 20 days for physical violence, persistent or serious misbehaviour, use or possession of a prohibited weapon, use of an implement as a weapon, criminal behaviour in relation to the school and possession or use of an illegal substance.

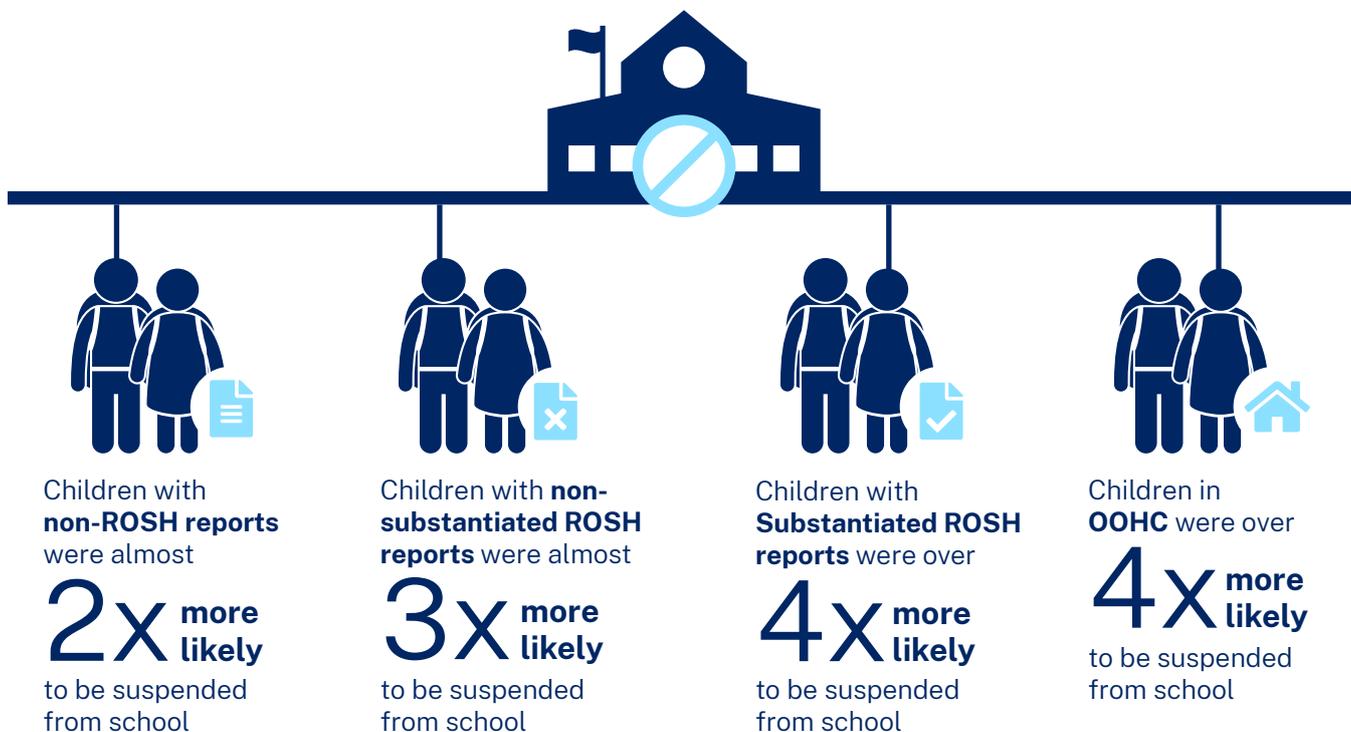
In this study, the researchers used a record of either a short or long suspension for any reason as the measure of out-of-school suspension.

What did the study find?

There are associations between all levels of child protection contact and suspension from primary school

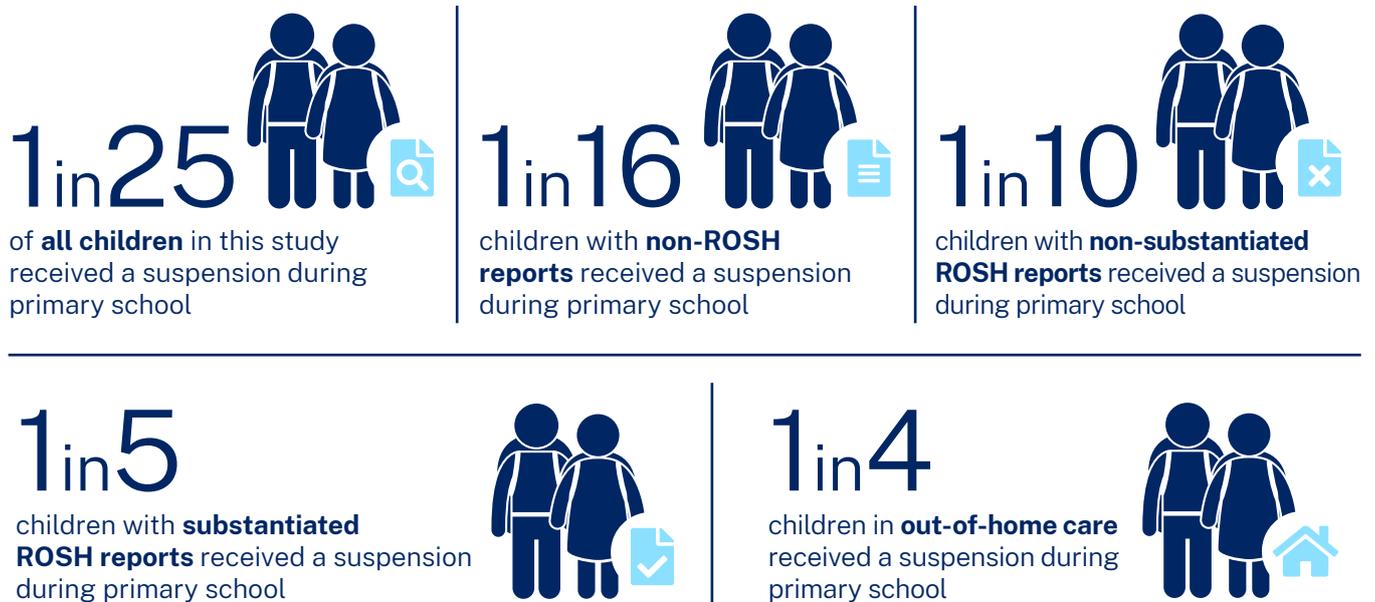
A key finding from the study is that children who had contact at any level of child protection services by the end of Year 2 (approximately 8 years of age), including those deemed not to meet the risk threshold for further investigation, all showed an increased risk of suspension from primary school during Years 3 to 6 relative to children with no child protection report. The greatest risk of suspension was observed for children with an OOHC placement and children with a substantiated ROSH report. Both of these groups were over **four times** more likely than non-reported children to receive a suspension. Children at the lower levels of child protection services response were still significantly more likely to receive a suspension than non-reported children. Children with non-substantiated ROSH reports were almost **three times** as likely to receive a suspension, and children with reports that did not reach the ROSH threshold were almost **twice** as likely (as non-reported children) to be suspended from school.

Compared to children without any child protection contact:



Communities and Justice

Overall, one in 25 (4.0%) children in this study received at least one suspension in years 3 to 6 in primary school. For children in contact with child protection services, this rate increases exponentially. Around one in sixteen (6.2%) children with non-ROSH reports, around one in ten (11.0%) children with non-substantiated ROSH reports, one in five (19.4%) children with substantiated ROSH reports, and one in four (25.6%) children in OOHC are suspended. This does not mean that contact with child protection services causes suspensions, but that there are common factors associated with both child protection contact and suspensions, such as maltreatment, neglect and trauma.



Other factors strongly associated with suspension include being a male student and teacher-reported aggressive behaviour at school entry

The researchers also considered a range of other factors in their multivariable model. The largest associations with suspensions were observed for male students (over five times more likely to be suspended than female students), and teacher-reported aggressive behaviour at school entry (over two and half times more likely to be suspended than children who did not show aggressive behaviour).

Other factors that increased the risk of suspension were observed for:

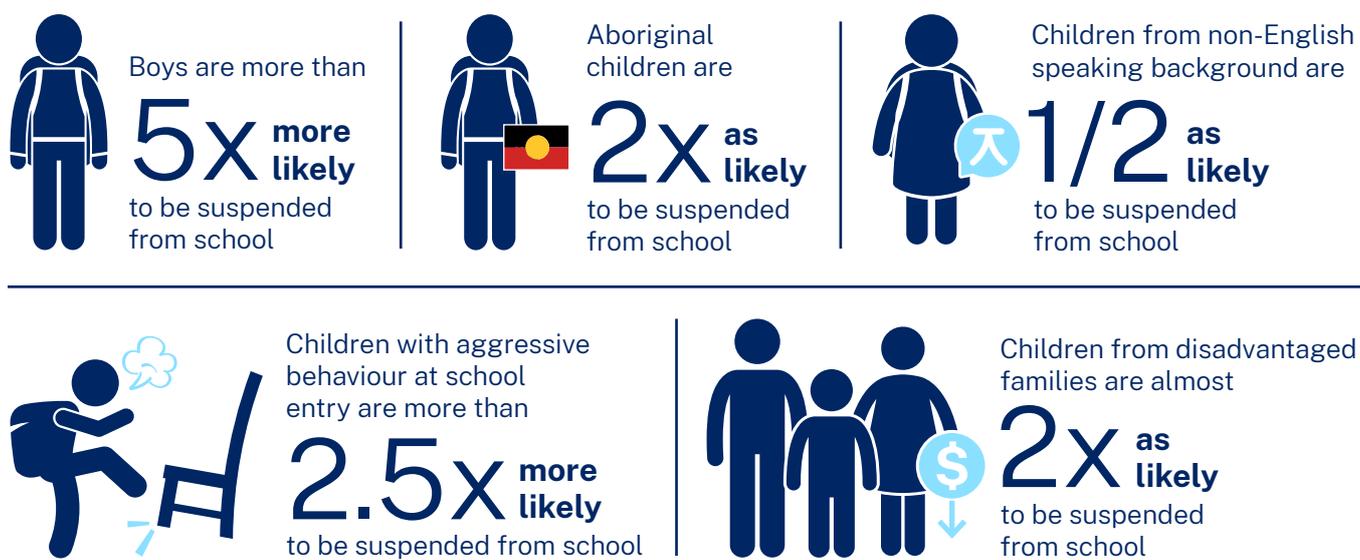
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background
- exposure to maternal smoking in utero
- socioeconomic disadvantage
- any history of parental criminal offending
- lower responsibility and respect
- two or more emergency presentations for physical injury
- emotional or behavioural problems
- poorer language and cognitive skills
- hyperactivity and inattention
- maternal age 25 years or younger at child's birth
- any history of parental mental illness.

Communities and Justice

On the other the hand, **children with English as a second language were significantly less likely to be suspended than their peers.**

For children with any child protection response, these factors should always be understood in the context of intergenerational disadvantage and trauma. In particular, being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is not a 'risk factor' in and of itself. Rather, it is the systematic response of governments, intergenerational trauma and socioeconomic disadvantage experienced by many First Nations people that may place them at risk of poorer outcomes, including educational outcomes and suspensions. The historical exclusion of Aboriginal people from educational settings still has an intergenerational impact on Aboriginal students and their families today.

Other factors associated with suspension from school



What does this mean for policy and practice?

This research highlights that integrated prevention and early intervention programs are needed to support at-risk students to manage their behaviour and fully engage with their learning at school. Specifically, the study clearly shows that all children in contact with child protection services at any level would benefit from support to reduce their risk of receiving an early suspension from school. The findings point to a need for schools to implement trauma-informed educational strategies and to create school environments that are culturally safe for Aboriginal students.

Over the past decade there has been an increased attempt to provide cross-agency educational support for children placed in OOHIC.¹³ One existing program in NSW is the OOHC Education Pathway. This program aims to ensure that all children or young people who enter OOHIC undertake Personalised Learning and Support Planning so that their developmental and educational needs are understood, met, monitored and reviewed annually to help them reach their full learning potential. This support is designed to increase educational outcomes and attendance, decrease suspensions, and help children to meet their learning needs and goals.

Personalised Learning and Support Planning requires regular child-centred and collaborative conversations between all of the key people in a child's life, including caseworkers, support people, carers, educators and the child themselves, if appropriate. Since this study shows that children with

Communities and Justice

child protection services contact are at risk of early suspension from school, the cross-agency support and targeted interventions received by children in OOHC might benefit additional children with child protection reports.

The NSW Department of Education is committed to working collaboratively with allied health professionals and caseworkers to better target the individual needs of children in care to prevent challenging behaviours and school disengagement. In March 2021, the NSW Department of Education released a new Student Behaviour Strategy, which acknowledges that supporting positive student behaviour requires a proactive, preventive and student-centred approach. The Strategy encourages schools to explore a range of evidence-based changes and options for how suspensions are issued and managed, including:

- Access to alternative educational programs and a range of alternative options to suspension, including in-school suspensions.
- Clarifying the criteria for suspension and reducing the duration of suspensions.
- Reducing the disproportionate suspension rates of vulnerable student cohorts, including students with disability, students in rural and remote areas, students experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage and Aboriginal students.
- Consideration of factors that may have played a role in producing the challenging behaviour.
- Child-centred support provided during any period of suspension.

This Strategy aims to create a safer learning environment for all, set students up with the social skills needed in later life, and reduce early suspensions, particularly for vulnerable student cohorts.

The findings of this study clearly show how important it is that the support needs of children who may be vulnerable to receiving suspensions are identified and addressed as early as possible.

Some of the strategies that should be considered are:

- Making suspension a strategy of last resort and replacing at-home suspensions with suspensions at trauma-informed suspension centres.
- Prioritising children with complex support needs for tutoring. This includes children with learning difficulties, disability, and trauma-related behavioural issues who are in contact with child protection and/or OOHC.
- Providing targeted, specialist support for Aboriginal students in contact with child protection and/or OOHC systems that is culturally and locally tailored to the Aboriginal community's needs, and delivered both within and outside of the school, and providing alternatives to suspensions. This could include a change in the learning environment and content delivery, for example structured learning in an outdoor setting, supported by Aboriginal teachers, caseworkers, a psychologist and Aboriginal support staff.
- Enhancing the existing Personalised Learning and Support Planning process to prevent disengagement, improve educational supports and provide early intervention for all children in OOHC.
- Offering additional child-centred planning and support for all children at risk of suspension. Regardless of the level of direct family involvement, communication between school, the child and the family should be collaborative and respectful, and place the child's needs, wellbeing and engagement at the centre of decision making.

We have provided a *Checklist for caseworkers: how to support children who are suspended from school* on the final page of this document.

More information about the study

For more information please visit the [NSW-CDS website](#).

The original research paper is:

Laurens, KR, Dean, K, Whitten, T, Tzoumakis, S, Harris, F, Waddy, N, Prendergast, T, Taiwo, M, Carr, VJ & Green, MJ 2022, 'Early childhood predictors of suspensions from primary school: an Australian multi-agency record linkage study'. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, vol. 77, Article number 101343, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2021.101343>.

Endnotes

- 1 Noltemeyer, AL, Ward, RM & McLoughlin, C 2015, 'Relationship between school suspension and student outcomes: a meta-analysis', *School Psychology Review*, vol. 44, no. 2, pp. 224-240, viewed 9 June 2022, <https://doi.org/10.17105/spr-14-0008.1>.
- 2 Novak, A 2018, 'The association between experiences of exclusionary discipline and justice system contact: a systematic review', *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, vol. 40, pp. 73-82, viewed 9 June 2022, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1359178917301210?via%3Dihub>.
- 3 Rafa, A 2019, *The status of school discipline in State policy*, Education Commission of the States, Denver, CO, viewed 9 June 2022, <https://www.ecs.org/the-status-of-school-discipline-in-state-policy/>.
- 4 Welsh, RO & Little, S 2018, 'Caste and control in schools: a systematic review of the pathways, rates and correlates of exclusion due to school discipline', *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 94, pp. 315-339, viewed 9 June 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.09.031>.
- 5 Bell, MF, Glauert, R, Ohan, JL, Preen, DB & Bayliss, DM 2021, 'Early school suspensions for children with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)', *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, vol. 76, 101300, viewed 9 June 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2021.101300>.
- 6 Maclean, MJ, Taylor, CL & O'Donnell, M 2018, 'Out-of-home care and the educational achievement, attendance, and suspensions of maltreated children: a propensity-matched study', *Journal of Pediatrics*, vol. 198, pp. 287-293 e282, viewed 9 June 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2018.03.027>.
- 7 Laurens, KR, Islam, F, Kariuki, M, Harris, F, Chilvers, M, Butler, M, Schofield, J, Essery, C, Brinkman, SA, Carr, VJ & Green, MJ 2020, 'Reading and numeracy attainment of children reported to child protection services: a population record linkage study controlling for other adversities', *Child Abuse and Neglect*, vol. 101, 104326, viewed 9 June 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104326>.
- 8 Jacobsen, WC 2020, 'School punishment and interpersonal exclusion: rejection, withdrawal, and separation from friends', *Criminology*, vol. 58, no. 10, pp. 35-69, viewed 9 June 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12227>.

Communities and Justice

- 9 Graham, LJ, Killingly, C, Laurens, KR, Sweller, N. 'Overrepresentation of Indigenous students in school suspension, exclusion, and enrolment cancellation in Queensland: is there a case for systemic inclusive school reform?', *The Australian Educational Researcher*, viewed 9 June 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-021-00504-1>.
- 10 Raffaele Mendez, LM 2003, 'Predictors of suspension and negative school outcomes: a longitudinal investigation', *New Directions for Youth Development*, vol. 99, pp. 17-33, viewed 9 June 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.52>.
- 11 Bowman-Perrott, L, Benz, MR, Hsu, HY, Kwok, OM, Eisterhold, LA & Zhang, DL 2013, 'Patterns and predictors of disciplinary exclusion over time: an analysis of the SEELS National Data Set', *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 83-96, viewed 9 June 2022, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1063426611407501>.
- 12 Green, MJ, Harris, F, Laurens, KR, Kariuki, M, Tzoumakis, S, Dean, K, Islam, F, Rossen, L, Whitten, T, Smith, M, Holbrook, A, Bore, M, Brinkman, S, Chilvers, M, Sprague, T, Stevens, R & Carr, VJ 2018, 'Cohort Profile: The New South Wales Child Development Study (NSW-CDS)-Wave 2 (child age 13 years)', *International Journal of Epidemiology*, vol. 47, no. 5, pp. 1396-1397k, viewed 9 June 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ije/dyy115>.
- 13 Ombudsman NSW 2017, Review of the NSW Child Protection System: are things improving? *A Special Report to Parliament under s.31 of the Ombudsman Act 1974*, Ombudsman NSW, Sydney.

Produced by

Lina Jakob and Caroline Anderson
NSW Department of Communities and Justice
6 Parramatta Square, 10 Darcy St, Parramatta NSW 2150
www.dcj.nsw.gov.au
Email: facsiar@dcj.nsw.gov.au

Associate Professor Kristin Laurens and Professor Melissa Green
Queensland University of Technology and University of New South Wales
Contact: [NSW-CDS](#)

Checklist for caseworkers: How to support children who are suspended from school

Let the carer know that they need to advise DCJ or NGO if a suspension or expulsion is likely to occur or has occurred, so DCJ or NGO can attend a resolution or disciplinary meeting and review the child's Personalised Learning and Support Plan.

If you are told that a child is going to be suspended:

Participate in discussions with the principal and carer about what has occurred, and advocate for alternative strategies to suspension (such as in-school suspensions) as a way to support the child and manage their behaviours.

Discuss what behaviour support strategies have been used, including external supports.

Work with the carer to advocate for alternative strategies to suspension and put other supports and discipline in place.

If the child has been suspended from school:

Attend the suspension resolution meeting with the carer to address the issues that led to the school's decision.

Talk with the principal to understand what led to that action. If appropriate, request an appeals resolution meeting or an appeal, and try to reduce the length of the suspension.

Find out what schoolwork has been set for the exclusion period.

Ask what strategies have been put in place to support the child's positive behaviour, meet their needs and enable their return to school.

Begin the resolution process or the appeals process so the child can be transitioned back to school appropriately.

If the child has a disability, talk to the carer and school to determine if they have been suspended due to disability-related behaviours and if so, make sure a meeting takes place to arrange appropriate disability supports for the child in the school setting. Coordinate this with their NDIS plan if the child has one.

If it is a long suspension, let the child know they can have an appropriate observer of their choosing present to provide an element of procedural fairness.

Use a trauma responsive and dignity driven lens when supporting a child who has been suspended. Explore what might be acts of resistance or what needs they are trying to meet through their behaviour. That way support strategies are more likely to be effective and meet the child's needs in a safer way.

If it is believed that an unfair decision has been made and/or that correct procedures have not been followed, consider making an appeal in writing to the Director Educational Leadership or the Executive Director within the Department of Education within 20 school days of suspension. An appeal does not stop a student from being placed on suspension.