Stronger Together for Autism & Neuro Divergence

The Empowerment Project - Stronger Voices for Fairer Futures

Note on “Violence” in Schools, Neurodivergence and Stigma

20 February 2026

Key Takeaways

STAND is deeply concerned by the increasing use of stigmatising language, particularly the terms "violence" and "aggression," to describe the manifestation of the distress of neurodivergent children with unmet needs.

The Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) has explicitly characterised these behaviours as "violent" in its public narrative, which validates societal prejudice and shifts moral blame onto the child.

Contents

www.standuk.co.uk info@standuk.co.uk

OSCR Scottish Charity Regulator www.oscr.org.uk Registered SCIO SC052228

Introduction

During her evidence to the Equality, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee on Tuesday 17 February 2026, Dani Cosgrove, highlighted how misunderstanding and stigma drive harm in the education system. One driver of this stigma is the narrative surrounding "violence" in schools, which often characterises the manifestation of a child's distress with intentional aggression.

This note outlines why the language used by influential organisations like the EIS is detrimental to neurodivergent children and how it undermines the very foundations of inclusive practice.

The Stigmatisation of Distress

Neurodivergent children already face daily prejudice from a society that views them as "badly behaved". It is incredibly disappointing when the EIS, the organisation representing those charged with the care and education of these children, validates this narrative.

Weaponisation of Autistic Stereotypes

One of the catalysts to the founders of STAND getting together was the exclusion of the children of two of the board members from a private nursery. Originally, the nursery had raised no concerns about the children's "behaviour", but once the board members raised allegations of discrimination against the nursery, the nursery's narrative changed. They then accused the children of being violent and aggressive as a way of justifying their actions. Many things about that whole experience were traumatising for both the children and their parents, but one of the most hurtful was the characterisation of the children as violent - especially when they were non-verbal and could not defend themselves.

Further, the characterisation of distressed behaviour as "violence", "aggression" or "bad behaviour" is, in our view, a contributing factor to the rates of both formal and informal exclusions from school. This in turn denies neurodivergent children their right to an education.

Restraint and Seclusion in Schools (Scotland) Bill

STAND has been following the passage of the Restraint and Seclusion in Schools (Scotland) Bill (the " Bill") with keen interest, given the disproportionate numbers of neurodivergent children who experience restraint and seclusion. It is staggering how many children are restrained or secluded as a result of distressed behaviour even when the school fails to properly characterise their actions as such. What is

even worse is the number of times the distressed behaviour is *caused* or triggered by the actions of the school. These include completely unnecessary inflammatory actions, like a teacher refusing to honour an agreed strategy that has been agreed via the child planning framework, which then results in distress and confusion for the child and subsequently the child's removal from the classroom through physical force. In the cases such as this which we hear about there is never any accountability on the part of the teacher or the school. Often they deny that the actions of the school constitute restraint or seclusion in the first place.

Caveat

We recognise that, at least in secondary schools, there are older children who may behave in ways which are harmful (physically and psychologically) to teachers, other education staff and other children, and where it is not necessarily the case that their behaviour is the result of distress or dysregulation. We give our views in relation to this matter in the context of our experience with neurodivergent children and their families only.

However, our impression is that most discussions about the challenges of "behaviour" in schools in the context of the Bill seems to relate to children with additional support needs, which is why we are particularly concerned about the impact of such discussions on societal stigma.

Example - EIS Bill Consultation Response

For example, in its written contribution to the Bill, the EIS focussed entirely on the issues (as they see them) arising from children with additional support needs. They begin their submission as follows:

"Before commenting on the principle of the Bill, it is important to recognise the current context in which children and young people are learning, and teachers and school staff are working in Scotland's schools.

In the last ten years, the level and complexity of additional support needs (ASN) has increased significantly, with the latest official data indicating that 40.5% of learners have an identified ASN – in a class of thirty-three, that's more than thirteen children with an additional support need. Across the country, we now have tens of thousands more children and young people in our classrooms with cognitive, social, emotional or behavioural support needs, and in many cases, a combination of needs that are even more complex to respond to."

The response then goes on to make a connection between this and the rise in “violence and aggression":

“This link between unmet ASN need and rising levels of violence and aggression in schools is clear, with over 94% of respondents to an EIS National Branch Survey on Violence and Aggression, published in November 2023, confirming that unmet need exacerbates violent and aggressive behaviour.”

The response does, at some points, attribute the issue to the lack of resources to support children with additional support needs, rather than directly blame the children themselves. However, the characterisation of the children’s distress as “violence and aggression” implies an inherent, stigmatising attitude. Distressed children should not be characterised as violent or aggressive, least of all by the profession who is tasked, as a matter of law and policy, with protecting their wellbeing and educating them to their fullest potential.

Trust

When parents and carers see their child’s distress labeled as "violence," it becomes nearly impossible to trust that school communications will be anything other than adversarial. Worse still, when children hear themselves being described as “violent” or “aggressive” this may contribute to their distress, lack of self-esteem, and lack of trust in professionals or other adults.

If we cannot trust the major union representing Scotland's teachers to use non-prejudicial language, who can we trust?. This misunderstanding is not limited to fringe social media comments; it is embedded in the institutions that shape our children’s futures. When the EIS describes a parent’s right to be notified about their child being restrained as "relentless bureaucracy," it demonstrates a profound lack of empathy for the trauma experienced by neurodivergent families.

Intersectionality

Stigmatising language, such as describing the distress of neurodivergent children as “violence and aggression”, can be even more harmful when a neurodivergent child is also subject to other types of bias and prejudice. For example, the response from Fiona Clarke (on behalf of a group of Autistic Disabled People’s Organisations) to the Bill stated as follows:

“Neurodivergent children (with or without a learning disability or other co-occurring disabilities) are one of the most at risk groups from have their rights breached, including being subjected to restraint and

seclusion and approaches that inappropriately focus on neuronormative and the dominant culture behavioural goals, rather than wellbeing. This risk increases for neurodivergent people with intersectionalities, in particular for those who are from racialised groups in the presence of inherent covert and overt racialised bias. An example of this is the adultification of Black children and young people where they are subjected to judgements not appropriate to their age as well as 'anger bias'."

NAIT Guidance

The current EIS narrative stands in stark contrast to the NAIT Key Messages for Primary School Staff, which emphasize that "distress is communication" and states:

"We are encouraging professionals to stop using the word 'behaviour' and instead to talk about a child's 'actions and responses' and the context in which they arise. Instead of placing the problem within the child, there is shared responsibility for the situation arising, with a need for the adults to adapt and change their actions and responses."

Other Union Responses to the Bill

It is worth noting that EIS were not the only union who submitted a response to the Bill.

NASUWT Response

The NASUWT response to the proposals in the Bill did, on occasion, use the term "violence", but the general sentiment of its response was far more balanced and, from our perspective, appeared to be more child-focussed. It rightfully highlights the issues of intersectionality, for example by saying that advice must be *"considered through an intersectional equality lens, taking, for example, appropriate cognisance of the impact of gender-based violence, and linking to the ongoing national work of the Gender Equality Taskforce in Education and Learning (GETEL) as well as the racism and racist incidents subgroup of the Anti-Racism in Education Programme (AREP)"*.

It also raises points about the safeguarding of children, for example in the context of FOI requests and the identification of pupils, and the consideration of any risks *to the child* that might arise as a result of communications with a child's parents and carers about an incident.

The response also makes an effort to discuss the harms to the children of the current situation. It quotes the words of one teacher:

“I have been bitten, hit, had my clothes and jewellery damaged by children who are not intending to cause harm but who have no sense of safety. I have not had adequate training in how to deal with this and the environment of our school is not safe for these children. I constantly worry that something bad will happen to a child in my care because our building has not been adapted in any way to take account of the needs of these children.”

This explicitly recognises that the children are not intending to cause harm, and demonstrates concern about the safety of the children who are distressed.

Of course, there are some aspects of the NASUWT response with which we might not fully agree (which is inevitable given that the unions’ interests are primarily their members, and ours are the children), but the overall tone and attitude comes across as far less stigmatising.

Unison

Unison also submitted a response. Again, although it does refer to “violence”, there is far more proportionality in their approach to discussions about children with additional support needs. For example, it states:

“The scope of this issue is wider than ASN pupils. Fifteen years of austerity cuts, growing socio-economic inequality and the associated childhood adversities are key factors in rising levels of aggression and violent behaviours within the general school population.”

That said, we must not be complacent. A recent newspaper reported comments from a Unison representative about “violence” in schools such as:

“Violent attacks on education support staff are an everyday occurrence in special schools, but also in early years and mainstream schools.”

Here, once again, we see the stigmatisation of children, not only those in special schools who will, of course, have additional support needs, but also children as young as nursery age. Do we really live in a society that characterises the behaviour of 3 and 4 year olds as “violent”?

The newspaper article goes on to quote the Unison rep as saying:

"Parents should be notified if their children have assaulted members of staff, there are no consequences for violent, dysregulated behaviour. The use of the word consequence by staff in schools is discouraged by management."

The conflation of violence with dysregulated behaviour is concerning here, as is the implication that there should be "consequences" for dysregulated behaviour. This betrays a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of dysregulation: the focus should be preventing it, not on "consequences".

STAND's Message

Stigma is a cross-cutting theme that spans nearly every challenge neurodivergent children face in Scotland. Our overarching concern is that the characterisation of the distress of children with unmet needs as "violence and aggression" contributes to this stigma - it attributes moral blame to the child rather than to the systemic failure to meet their fundamental needs, even if this is not the intention. It is the responsibility of society and educational institutions to prevent harm to children; children are not responsible for preventing harm to adults.

Inclusion is impossible while the children at the centre of the discussion are being demonised by the very systems designed to support them. We urge the Committee to recommend that the Scottish Government leads by example in openly condemning the sentiments expressed by the EIS as regards distressed, dysregulated children, and to caution the Scottish Government that failure to do so will be perceived as a breach of trust.

Clearly, issues such as the use of restraint and seclusion in schools can be polarising and opinions will differ widely, often for legitimate reasons. However, those opinions could be discussed in a respectful, non-stigmatising way, rather than with the use of language such as "violence" to describe the manifestation of distress in disabled children.