

The use of tents or other confined spaces in schools

Related CAPBS information sheets:

1. The use of time out and seclusion in schools
2. The use of physical restraint in schools

An increasing number of special schools have specially constructed PVC tents set up in classrooms.

If schools are using tents or other confined spaces for any purpose there should be **very clear** guidelines for their use to prevent intentional or unintentional misuse.

Some tents can be zipped up from the outside to prevent the student from leaving. If a student is inside the tent and the zip is done up or their exit is blocked in other ways and *they cannot leave if they wished to*, this would meet the Department of Health (2014) definition of **seclusion**.

Seclusion is a **restrictive practice** and potentially a **deprivation of liberty** and is likely to compromise a student's human rights. The use of seclusion '*can have particularly adverse implications for the emotional development of a child or young person.*' (Department of Health, 2015)

Tents should never be used or threatened as a penalty.

Despite there being little supporting evidence tents are seemingly used for three main purposes in a classroom:

1. As a sensory area
2. As a safe area
3. As a teaching area

Meeting the sensory needs of students

Recent clinical guidance published by NICE (2015) recommends that use of sensory rooms should be informed by a sensory assessment that identifies the specific sensory needs of the individual. A blanket approach to using sensory areas and sensory equipment may not be helpful to the student and may even increase behaviours of concern.

Sensory interventions should always be prescribed, implemented and supervised by people with appropriate qualifications and experience, such as an Occupational Therapist, and based on a functional assessment, for example (e.g., O'Neill et al, 1997), supplemented by an assessment of the student's sensory profile using an approved protocol such as *The Sensory Profile* (Dunn 1999).

It would not be therapeutic for a student to be physically restrained or directed into an environment for sensory purposes, and kept in there.

Students who have sensory needs are likely to seek out or move away from sensory stimulation if they are able to. Classrooms and communal areas are sometimes busy and noisy so students who may become overwhelmed should have free access to specially identified quieter areas. Classrooms and other areas should be designed with the sensory needs of the individual students in mind and students should be able to access quieter areas and also leave them of their own free will.

Rather than using tents, it is more helpful to identify other quieter areas, programme in regular breaks, and support the student to develop strategies that they can also utilise in other environments.

If a student is regularly overwhelmed and this is having an impact on them and others, assessments as described above should be undertaken to identify how the student's needs are best met and what kind of school environment should be available to them. It is likely to mean the current environment is **not** suitable for them and needs adjustment.

Meeting the behavioural needs of students

Any student who sometimes shows behaviours of concern or behaviours that challenge will need an agreed individual behaviour support plan in place. The strategies in the behaviour support plan should be informed by a functional assessment that has been carried out by an appropriately trained person.

Behavioural interventions that are not informed by an understanding of the function of the behaviour are likely to be ineffective or even increase the behaviour of concern.

The behaviour support plan should have *preventative* and *proactive* strategies that either reduce the likelihood of the behaviour happening, or teach the student alternative ways to get their needs met or cope with difficult experiences. The plan may also have some *reactive* strategies, for example, strategies to help the student calm if they are upset, or strategies to keep them and others safe if needed.

Most of the plan should be *proactive*. It should also explain in the plan how these strategies are monitored and how the student is developing skills for themselves.

Least restrictive option

Any proactive or reactive strategy should be the least restrictive option. **It is extremely unlikely that the use of a tent as a strategy would be the least restrictive option.**

Any need to use such a restrictive practice is an indication that the current environment is not meeting the needs of the individual student.

Questions to ask if a tent is present within a classroom setting

- What is the intended use of the tent?
- Does the use of the tent ever meet the definition of seclusion? Is the student unable to leave of their own free will?
- Is any use of the tent as a sensory area based on an individual assessment and sensory profile conducted by an appropriately trained professional?
- If a tent has been used as a safe area, has a review taken place and have changes taken place as a result of the review to avoid its use again?
- If any students sometimes show behaviours of concern, has an assessment been done by an appropriately trained person to ascertain the behaviour's function and are all interventions or strategies based on the result of the assessment?
- Does the behaviour support plan have proactive strategies that are being used to support the development of coping or alternative skills for students, and how is the environment being altered so it is less stressful for them and meets their needs more appropriately?
- Does the use of the tent as a teaching area comply with school safeguarding policy, and is it appropriate for the needs of the individual students?
- What other quiet areas are there that students can freely access?

References

Dunn (1999), *The Sensory Profile*

Department of Health (2015), *Mental Health Act Code of Practice*

National Centre for Clinical Excellence (2015), *Challenging behaviour and learning disabilities: prevention and interventions for people with learning disabilities whose behaviour challenges*

O'Neill, R. E., Horner, R. H., Albin, R. W., Sprague, J. R., Storey, K., & Newton, J. S. (1997), *Functional assessment and program development for problem behavior: A practical handbook* (2nd ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

November 2015

Centre for the Advancement of Positive Behaviour Support

BILD

Birmingham Research Park

97 Vincent Drive

Edgbaston

Birmingham B15 2SQ

0121 415 6960

capbs@bild.org.uk

www.bild.org.uk/capbs