

a resource for teachers and school administrators



# SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS

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for correspondence please contact

Associate Professor Sheryl Hemphill PhD phone: +61 3 9345 6953 email: [sheryl.hemphill@mcri.edu.au](mailto:sheryl.hemphill@mcri.edu.au)



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Managing student behaviour is often a trade off.

Of primary concern is the maintenance of a safe and healthy teaching and learning environment in the school.

This often results in the needs of individual students being sacrificed for the needs of the many.

But recourse to school suspensions or other exclusionary policies is rarely effective and often counter productive.

The negative impact of school suspensions is more far-reaching than may be anticipated, for both individual students and the entire school community.

Excluding students from school is a very common disciplinary practice.

In 2007, 12% of Year 10 students in Victorian secondary schools reported they had been suspended at least once within the last 12 months.

Among years 7 and 9 Victorian students, 11% of boys were suspended compared with 6% of girls.

Across Australia, years 6 and 8 students reported an average suspension rate of 5.9%.

The use of school suspensions fits within a zero tolerance framework. It seeks to reduce challenging behaviours primarily through deterrence, purporting to send a clear message to students that certain actions will not be tolerated and will incur serious consequences

But this get tough approach is likely to send mixed messages to both the individual and the school community.



School suspensions are not always reserved for the worst behaviours, but often used for non-violent or non-threatening conduct such as truancy, talking back to teachers, uniform violations or being late for school.

Factors unrelated to student behaviour can make the use of suspensions more likely

- teacher attitudes that students are not capable of handling problems
- a lack of fair, firm and consistent treatment of students across the campus
- a pre-existing high rate of administering suspensions in the school.

Students are more likely to be suspended if they are

- socially and economically disadvantaged
- in a cultural minority group
- male.

School suspensions reduce the chances of students completing their education.

School suspensions can also impair employment opportunities and negatively affect a student's future.

By excluding students from school, suspensions shift the problem from the school to the community. Unsupervised adolescents are free to engage in activities that can lead to

- property loss
- physical injury
- increased medical, police and juvenile justice costs.

A common misconception is that school suspensions benefit other students and staff.

However, research shows that in schools that make frequent use of suspensions, students and staff experience

- a lower sense of security
- a less positive school climate
- poorer academic results.



Suspensions give students who do not like going to school what they want – time off school.

Some students actively seek suspensions to participate in activities and events outside school, such as staying at home to play video games.

An individual may gain notoriety and the attention and admiration of peers by provoking a school suspension.

In these ways, the misbehaviour that gets a student into trouble is rewarded and is more likely to be repeated in the future.

Recent research in schools has uncovered some disturbing statistics about the impact of suspensions on students.

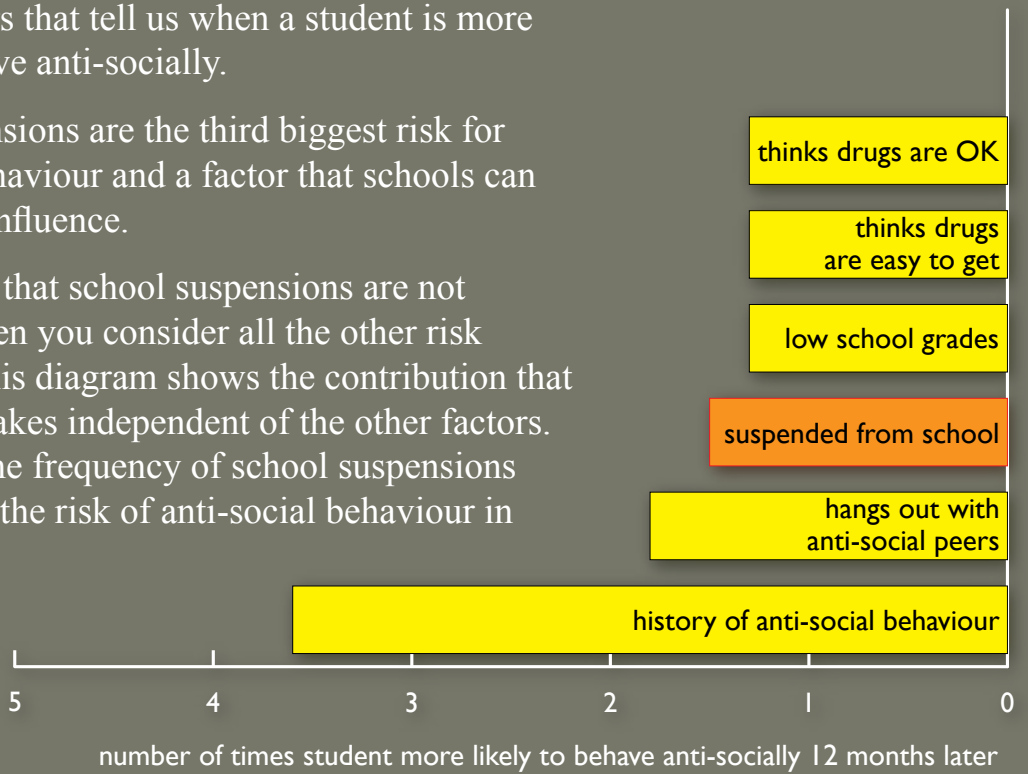
Within 12 months of being suspended from their schools, students are

- 50% more likely to engage in anti-social behaviour
- 70% more likely to engage in violent behaviour.

Six risk factors that tell us when a student is more likely to behave anti-socially.

School suspensions are the third biggest risk for anti-social behaviour and a factor that schools can most readily influence.

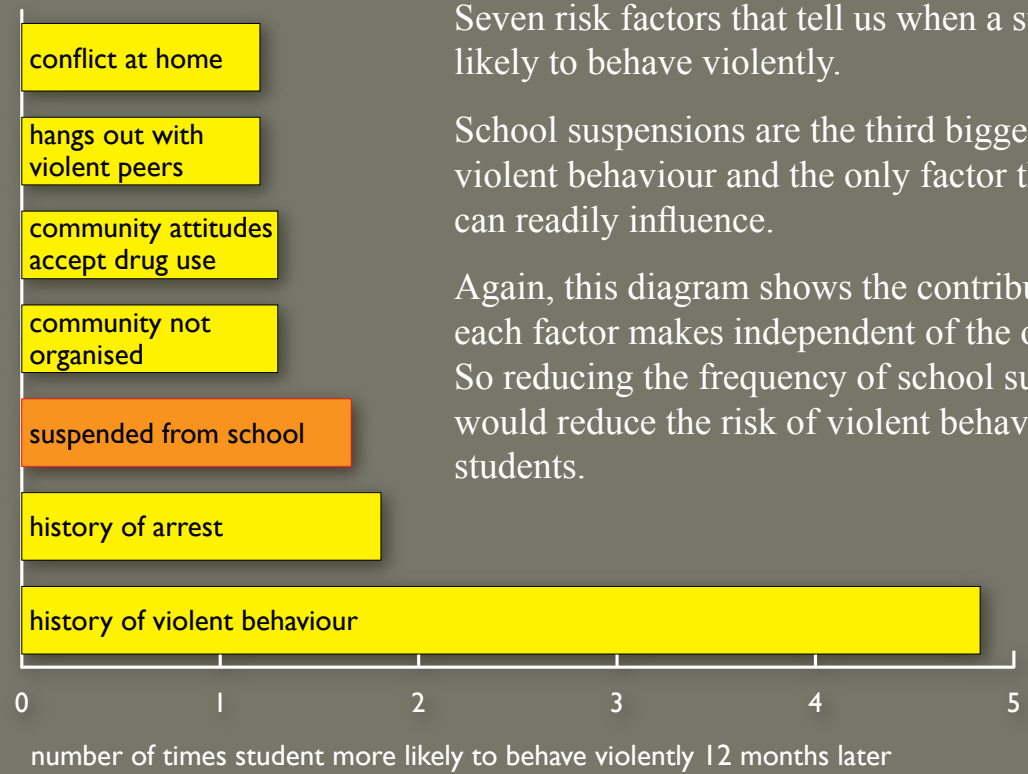
It might seem that school suspensions are not surprising when you consider all the other risk factors. But this diagram shows the contribution that each factor makes independent of the other factors. So reducing the frequency of school suspensions would reduce the risk of anti-social behaviour in students.



Seven risk factors that tell us when a student is more likely to behave violently.

School suspensions are the third biggest risk for violent behaviour and the only factor that schools can readily influence.

Again, this diagram shows the contribution that each factor makes independent of the other factors. So reducing the frequency of school suspensions would reduce the risk of violent behaviour in students.



Adolescence is a very special time, but for many teenagers it can be an arduous journey.

Difficulty at school or in a student's wider life often underlies the misbehaviour that leads to a suspension.

It really helps if they can talk things out with a trusted friend, teacher or other significant adult.

School can be a safe dependable refuge in times of challenge, change and uncertainty.

keeping going at school can help ensure positive health and wellbeing outcomes

connecting with school gives access to a support base, mentors, friends, learning and lots of constructive activities

students who complete school improve employment opportunities and life choices, with short and long term benefits

promote reflective practice and generate a forum that encourages staff to regularly discuss issues and solutions

link families with community agencies if there are problems at home

arrange assistance for literacy, numeracy or other learning difficulties if indicated

provide access to relevant professional development for all staff

Nothing is as effective as the personal touch.

Try to find out what underlies a student's challenging behaviour and provide constructive responses to address the issues.

Student management is most effective if applied when and where the trouble occurs.

School administrators can support their staff by nurturing classroom and playground management skills.

It is important to assess each case of student misbehaviour individually and tailor the response accordingly.

If there is no alternative, there are ways to offset some of the negative consequences of suspending students and ensure more positive outcomes.

But school suspensions should only be considered as a last resort for the most serious behavioural transgressions.

use internal suspensions, where students are supervised in separate areas such as another campus or near admin offices

if a student is excluded from school, liaise with parents to ensure continuity of adult supervision

restorative practices that bring together all parties affected by a student's actions in a shared problem-solving process

approaches that promote the health and wellbeing of the school community and engage students with learning

set personalised and purposeful activities to help students keep up academically

afterwards make sure the student is monitored and assisted to reintegrate into normal school routine

programs that teach students social, interpersonal, anger management and conflict resolution skills

strategies that incorporate regular monitoring, evaluation and review

Preventing behavioural issues from developing is crucially important in reducing the need for schools to use suspensions.

The most effective preventative approaches are those implemented at the level of the whole school.

Numerous programs and innovative practices are already being used by many schools to maintain their students' engagement and address challenging behaviour.

The current education policy environment seeks to promote student engagement and social inclusion.

This provides an ideal opportunity for schools to continue to make positive and proactive changes in ways of working with students.



Information about the *International Youth Development Study* and electronic copies of this booklet are available online at the CAH website – [www.rch.org.au/cah](http://www.rch.org.au/cah)

*Equity Project*; evidence-based information for schools' issues – <http://ceep.indiana.edu/equity>

*Friendly Schools and Families*; social skills program – [www.friendlyschools.com.au](http://www.friendlyschools.com.au)

*Gatehouse Project*; promotes emotional wellbeing in schools – [www.gatehouseproject.com](http://www.gatehouseproject.com)

*Response ability*; supports the social and emotional development and wellbeing of children and young people – [www.responseability.org](http://www.responseability.org)

*What Works The Work Program* booklet *Core Issues 2: Reducing Suspensions* (in publications section) – [www.whatworks.edu.au](http://www.whatworks.edu.au)

*What Works Clearinghouse*; scientific evidence for what works in education – <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc>

*The National Strategies*; a practical guide for leaders in primary and secondary schools – <http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk>

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**Sheryl Hemphill**

is a senior researcher  
at the Centre for  
Adolescent Health,  
Royal Children's Hospital,  
Department of Paediatrics,  
The University of Melbourne  
and Murdoch Childrens  
Research Institute



**John Hargreaves**

is a freelance writer  
and desktop publisher.  
He worked on the  
Gatehouse Project  
and health promotion  
in schools  
for many years

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