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Every child has the right to learn, play and thrive

The current strategy and recent calls for schools to be considered a key safeguarding partner serves only to highlight how far statutory and governmental bodies have moved away from the multi-agency approach to keeping children safe,

At VCF, we are gravely concerned that the emerging structure and policies for schools has led to the forced exodus of some children towards alternative forms of education.

Traditionally, a place where children could learn, play and thrive, an increasing focus on 'safeguarding' (not to be conflated with protection) is causing tensions, leading to concerns that the school structure is no longer fit for purpose, nor is it safe for every child.

Yet media reporting of Ofsted's call to help get children back in school, may give some insight into why families may be opting for, or encouraged towards, alternative education options.

Parents are being urged to "support their children to attend and behave at school" by the director of Ofsted in south-east England.

And therein lies the problem.

Ofsted's tone is condescending and the inherent message a threat, alongside zero tolerance behaviour policies that lead to children being permanently excluded, seemingly based on selective criteria as to who stays and who goes.

Attendance and behaviour have become inextricably linked in the increasingly hostile school environment, and a world away from the ethos that every child matters.

Just one week after school convened a meeting with children's social care, to agree additional and long requested support, a young person is facing permanent exclusion. In fairness, the school had tried to prevent this course of action but the late intervention and lack of agreed de-escalation measures were certainly a contributing factor.

The number of children being removed from school registers is staggering, as is the loss of funding when directly linked to a child. Clearly, this could lead to disastrous consequences for children and families, and actions that we can barely comprehend.

Conversely however, whilst the favoured narrative is that the pandemic led to a decline in children attending school - and indeed it did - we must ask why children were so reticent to return, and why so many parents are listening and acting on their concerns.

We have seen first-hand the positive impact on children that previously struggled to cope or be heard at school, the challenges and barriers for parents who now feel sufficiently empowered to make appropriate decisions for their child - at a time when the whole country is asking for help, to be able to support their families.

And for the excluded children, being supported within the community, we must double down on our efforts to call out discriminatory practice to ensure their rights are upheld, to prevent them spiralling out of control and into the hands of those that may be inclined to mistreat, harm or exploit them.