NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission

Restrictive practice use in people with neurodevelopmental disorders



October 2026

Evidence Summary

This is a summary is of the Research Review — Restrictive Practice Use in People with Neurodevelopmental Disorders: A Systematic Review.

Why did we do the review?

Restrictive practices are being used in services supporting people with neurodevelopmental disorders (NDD).[1,2,3] A restrictive practice is any practice or intervention that restricts the rights or freedom of movement of a person with disability.[4]

These practices raise significant human rights, ethical, and safety concerns. They are subject to increasing regulation and scrutiny in Australia and internationally.[5,6,7,8,9]

Despite this, there has been limited synthesis of evidence describing how often providers of disability supports and services use restrictive practices. The aim of this systematic review was to explore the frequency of the use of restrictive practices internationally and identify factors associated with their use.

As the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission, one of our responsibilities is to monitor and regulate the use of restrictive practices in the NDIS, with the aim of safely reducing and eliminating their use. Ensuring regulated restrictive practices are used safely and only when absolutely necessary is one of our most important safeguarding responsibilities.

How did we do the review?

We used a systematic review approach to identify and synthesise published research that examines the use of restrictive practices among people with NDD.

Our researchers searched multiple academic databases and other online sources to identify relevant studies. We included research if it reported the prevalence of restrictive practice use on people with NDD.

We included any study or report published between 2004 and 12 December 2022, undertaken anywhere a person with NDD lived, worked, or received disability services.

Key concepts

Restrictive practices: any practice or intervention that infringes on the rights and freedom of movement of people with disability, including those with neurodevelopmental disorders (NDD).[4]

Behaviours of concern: typically defined as behaviours of such duration, intensity and frequency that an individual can put themselves or others at risk of harm.[9,10]

Our findings

Finding 1:
Restrictive practices are widely used

Restrictive practices are commonly reported across studies. Estimates of how frequently they are used varied greatly depending on the defined sample population and setting, and how data was collected and reported.

Chemical restraint was the most frequently reported form of restrictive practice in some institutional and hospital settings.

Finding 2:
Prevalence varies widely across studies

There are very large differences in reported rates of restrictive practices. Higher levels of restrictive practices use were associated with higher levels of behaviours of concern and participants reporting having mental illness. Differences in reporting methods (e.g. daily use, monthly use, or lifetime exposure) made it difficult to compare studies directly. These differences show the lack of consistent, standardised approaches to measuring and reporting restrictive practices.

Finding 3:
Certain factors are consistently associated with higher use of restrictive practices

Higher rates of restrictive practice use were found in people who reside in hospital and acute care settings. Our review indicates that people residing in these settings are more likely to behave aggressively, resulting in more frequent use of restrictive practices.

What do the findings mean?

The review provides evidence that restrictive practices, particularly chemical restraint, remain highly common in services supporting people with NDD.

The lack of standardised reporting means that it is difficult to identify factors associated with the use of restrictive practices. It also means it is difficult to compare the effectiveness of different policies and interventions that aim to reduce or eliminate restrictive practices between jurisdictions.

Our findings highlight the importance of clear and consistent definitions of restrictive practices. They also show the importance of routine and transparent data collection and reporting. These are all important to accurately monitor progress in the reduction of restrictive practices.

References

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