

Written evidence submitted by the University of Sussex

Education and Covid-19:
Perspectives from parent carers
of children with SEND

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Introduction

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on schools and education for all children not least through school closures and the shift to home learning. Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are already a vulnerable group in the education system, often requiring specialist teaching and support, and most only had limited access to this provision during the lockdown¹. For some children the removal of the pressures of performative expectations and social interactions may have been beneficial but for others the lack of routine, structure and peer interaction could have been very challenging. Understanding the experiences of parent carers of children with SEND during lockdown is key to informing priorities and preferences for this much anticipated and orchestrated academic year.

Aims and purpose of the study

The aim of this research was to explore the experiences of parent carers of children with SEND during the time of the Covid-19 limited school provision (23rd March - 1st July 2020) in order to inform schools about parent perspectives about the transition back to school and ongoing SEND provision. This brief report summarises these themes and recommendations and a more detailed analysis, as well as follow up research with some of these parents, will be reported on later this year, including parental recommendations for any future school closures or restrictions.

Data collection method and participant characteristics

Ethical approval was obtained at the University of Sussex ethics board in July 2020. The survey was developed through a collaborative process that included parent carers who have children with SEND.

- 502 parent carers responded to the survey from multiple local authorities, primarily from England, but across all regions of the UK.
- 69% of parent carers stated that their child attended mainstream education, 20% identified specialist provision and 10% identifying 'other' provision.
- 50 % of parent carers identified their child was in a primary setting, 38% in secondary, 6% in college and 6% identified 'other' with unique circumstances identified.
- 50% of the parent carers reported that their child has an education, health and care plan (EHCP) and 37% do not have an EHCP or were in the process of applying (13%).
- 17% identified their personal circumstance as single, whilst 61% were living with a partner and 22% cited 'other' unique situations or preferred not to say.

¹ Coronavirus and SEND Education Survey- <https://www.specialneedsjungle.com/coronavirus-send-education-survey/#DLreport>

- The range of SEND conditions was broad but with the biggest group identifying autism as a primary condition but almost all presented co-occurring conditions such as epilepsy, learning difficulties, ADHD, anxiety, sensory processing disorder, dyslexia and dyspraxia. Other conditions included Down Syndrome, sensory impairments, complex needs, specific learning difficulties, cerebral palsy, chronic medical and mental health conditions.

Key Findings

1. Prior to Covid-19, most parent carers identified that their child had some preferences for school and was making progress.

'We have had generally good relationships with school, they have some fantastically committed subject staff, she has valued her relationships with peers and this has been important for developing her confidence and independence.'

- 50% identified that their child had some preference for attending school with 17% who identified that their child 'always enjoyed school'.
- 27% reported that their child sometimes liked school.
- 17% 'never' liked attending school or 'disliked a great deal' (*'Uncertain, turbulent and unhappy'*).
- 70% of parent carers identified that their child was making progress at school prior to lockdown compared with 17% who were 'definitely' or 'probably not' making progress.

2. Children felt less stressed and anxious while at home during lockdown.

'The huge drop in anxiety by not being at school. He struggles with eating and weight gain but since stopping school has gained 3kg and looks amazing. He is not bullied or left feeling worthless anymore like he does at school.'

According to parent carers, most of the children in the survey felt less stressed and anxious while at home during lockdown, they particularly cited the following positive experiences:

- Being with family – parent carers and siblings (and sometimes extended family); having one to one time; being safe and happy at home 'in their happy place'; more flexibility; pursuing own interests.
- Being away from the social pressure of school – less anxiety, not having to deal with bullies and not being left out of friendship groups.
- Not having to wear school uniform, able to have breaks when needed.
- Learning new things: more physical exercise, gardening, cooking, crafts, play, art, housework; playing board games while some enjoyed independent and online learning and setting their own routines.

3. During lockdown, social interaction and communication were the areas where parent carers felt their children had fallen behind.

'I feel the main area that was affected by lockdown was how he is socially. As a child with ASD he already choosing to self-isolate a lot during class/playtime and school have worked very hard to encourage him to engage with others (in his own way) & had been successful however he is much more socially anxious now & has separation anxiety having not been in a classroom for so long.'

- The majority explained that social aspects of education (interactions and communication) were the most affected by the learning at home during lockdown. Multiple comments claimed that aspect such as turn taking, sharing, group activities, and diverse conversations were not possible at home.
- 42% explained that they did not engage in a standard time format for education. They explained that learning was sporadic and occurred on different days for different amounts of times.
- The majority of learning identified included independent/life skills such as toileting, making meals, cleaning and getting dressed.
- Maths and English were the most frequently cited academic areas that parent carers felt their children now had more difficulty. However, 25% stated that all academic areas were negatively affected by learning during lockdown.

4. Parent carers want a gradual and flexible return to school.

'A gradual return or flexi-schooling, time spent focused on adapting to change back to school routine rather than academics.'

- An equal number of parent carers felt that their child was eager to return to school whilst others did not feel their child was looking forward to returning to school.
 - Friends and social interactions (48%) were the most commonly noted positive aspect about going to school. Parent carers also emphasised routines or structure and class teachers/staff as important aspects. It is important to note that a wide range of parent carers identified that many children were looking forward to 'nothing'.
 - Concerns about going to school included change of circumstance to social interactions, expectations, social distancing, being away from home, anxiety, change in expectation, transition, noise, learning all day, academic work, transport arrangements and 'boring' components of school. A wide range of parent carers identified that their child was concerned with 'all' aspects of returning to school.
- Parent carers made it clear that going to school in September should be a gradual process instead of an abrupt change. They emphasised a settling in

period and used language in their responses that included: easing, gentle, building, gradually, steady, slow, and paced.

- Parent carers felt that the use of technology, phased returns, 1 to 1 support and small group work would be helpful to support children to transition back to full time education. Preference was also given to social stories, checklist and visual supports. Consistent and clear communication was prevalent across the results.

5. A focus on relationships, wellbeing and routine are vital components for the return to school.

'Wellbeing and helping children to feel safe and secure and providing fun learning opportunities that all children can access irrespective of their lock-down experience.'

- Parent carers reported that a focus on mental health and wellbeing as a top priority for the first term of education. Some parent carers acknowledged the importance of considering the lived experiences of the child across the Covid-19 pandemic. There was also an emphasis on the wider curriculum, child led, fun, safe and nurturing learning environment to support wellbeing.
- Building and re-establishing relationships was suggested as a priority to support the needs of children. This included those moving into new school and new classrooms but also identified the importance of nurturing previously established relationships which might change or alter due to Covid-19 experiences.
- Routines were consistently identified as a focus for the first term. Parent carers stressed the importance of setting the routines early, but also encouraged a focus on these routines across the term to continually reinforce expectations and procedures.
- Parent carers reported a preference for ensuring the current needs of children are assessed. Comments suggested that their child might be at a very different level socially, emotionally and academically than pre-lockdown.
- Overwhelmingly, parent carers suggested the focus during the first half term should emphasise wellbeing, relationships and routines though a strong understanding of the child's needs.

6. Parent carers had varied and diverse experiences during lockdown.

'Loved it. Spent a huge amount of quality time with my child. Wish we could do it more often!'

'It has devastated our family, relationships and has had a horrifically damaging impact on our non-SEND child. I became unemployed. Our house move stopped... It has caused me mental health problems and extreme exhaustion.'

- Some parent carers found schools incredibly supportive and felt that their child had thrived without the pressures of school. Regular phone calls from school, support from SENCOs and resources for home learning were all cited as really useful by some parent carers.
- For others, lockdown had been an incredibly difficult time with families experiencing loneliness, isolation, little or no support from school or other agencies and there had been a huge strain on family relationships.
- Some parent carers felt that children with SEND had been overlooked and forgotten with some not understanding why their children with EHC plans could not attend school and why 1:1 support could not be continued.
- Many were worried about the longer-term impacts of the lockdown on their children's mental health as well as their social and academic progress.
- Many parent carers are anxious about the impact of the return to school when their child has been happy and more relaxed at home. For others, the return to routine was seen as helpful because of the increasing challenging verbal and physical behaviours shown at home.

Key Recommendations

1. The return to full time education should be a slow and gradual approach that supports the individual needs of children with SEND and their families.
2. Teachers, teaching assistants and SENCOs should take time listen to parent carers and children with SEND as they have had unique experiences that can be used to revitalize and improve education.
3. Priority should be given to routines, wellbeing and social aspects of education ahead of academic pressure.

Recommendations for the first few days and weeks of school:

The first few days of education should be a gradual and flexible process that reflect the experiences, preferences and concerns of children with SEND.

- Ensure frequent contact with parent carers to listen to their experience of lockdown for their family.
- Communicate with the children directly to identify unique concerns that need to be addressed.
- Take into account that children have had diverse experiences across lockdown and this will impact their feelings towards returning to school and could affect their engagement and attitude upon arrival.
- Plan highly structured activities across the first few days to begin to establish and re-establish class routines.
- Designate time to provide students with opportunities to engage with friendships groups.

- Provide support for those children that are not looking forward to, or anxious about, the return to full time education.
- Ensure all aspects of school emphasise a steady, gentle and gradual approach that avoids abrupt changes.

Recommendations for the first term back at school

Teachers and schools should focus on mental health, wellbeing, routines and relationships across the first term of full-time education.

- Time should be given to reflect on the Covid-19 pandemic and the experience of it for individuals and their families.
- Re-assessing the current and developing social, emotional, academic needs of children should be a priority.
- Core subjects need focus but social communication and interaction need fostering across the period of social distancing.
- Technology, phased returns, 1 to 1 support, small group work, social stories, checklist and visual supports are all preferences identified to support children to transition back to full time education.
- Use the home learning preferences and anxieties identified by parent carers and children to redevelop and enhance learning at school.

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