

# Written evidence submitted by Ambitious about Autism's submission

## **About Ambitious about Autism**

Ambitious about Autism is the national charity standing with autistic children and young people. We believe every autistic child and young person has the right to be themselves and realise their ambitions. We started as one school and have become a movement for change. We champion rights, campaign for change and create opportunities.

We are experts in autism education, and we run several education services across London providing specialist learning and support to hundreds of children and young people who have a primary diagnosis of autism and, in some cases, also have learning disabilities, additional learning difficulties or social, emotional, physical, and mental health needs.

For more information, visit our [website](#) and follow us on Twitter [@AmbitiousAutism](#)

## **About autism**

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability which is estimated to affect one in 100 people in the UK<sup>1</sup>. However, it is likely this figure is higher. A recent study of seven million young people found that around one in 57 children in England are autistic<sup>2</sup>. Autism affects the way a person communicates and how they experience the world around them.

It is described as a spectrum condition because while autistic people share certain characteristics, they will be highly individual in their interests, needs and preferences.

Some autistic people live independently, but others may need additional support because of a learning disability or other health needs such as mental health or epilepsy. Autistic children and young people face enormous challenges due to a lack of understanding of their needs. Early intervention and support are critical if autistic children and young people are to be themselves and realise their ambitions.

*The quotes in this report are taken from a survey of 1,867 autistic young people and parents and carers, conducted in summer 2022 by Ambitious about Autism.*

## **Autism and absence from school: the data**

Latest figures from the Department for Education show that 43,040 (30.1%) autistic pupils were persistent absentees<sup>3</sup> in 2020/2021 – that's nearly a third of all autistic pupils<sup>4</sup>. This compares with 12.1% of the overall school population who were recorded as being persistently absent in that year. Autistic pupils are nearly three times as likely to be persistently absent than their neurotypical peers.

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<sup>1</sup> The NHS Information Centre for health and social care. [Autism Spectrum Disorders in adults living in households throughout England. Report from the Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey. Published 2007](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Association of Race/Ethnicity and Social Disadvantage with Autism Prevalence in 7 Million School Children in England. JAMA Pediatr. Published 2021](#)

<sup>3</sup> 'Persistent absentees' are defined as missing at least 10% of their possible sessions at school.

<sup>4</sup> Department for Education. [Statistics: Pupil Absence. Published March 2022.](#)

This increased vulnerability to absenteeism pre-dates the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2018/2019, 18% of autistic pupils were persistent absentees, compared to 10.9% of the general school population<sup>5</sup>.

In fact, a UCL study conducted during the pandemic found that Covid-19 had only a limited impact on school attendance for autistic children and children with a learning disability<sup>6</sup>. The physical health risks posed by Covid-19 were cited as a barrier to attendance by a small proportion of the 1,200 parents surveyed. The most prevalent barrier to attendance (cited by 31% of parents) was 'unmet special educational needs'. Other barriers found to be significant were lack of flexibility, bullying, and mental health and well-being difficulties.

### **The factors causing persistent and severe absence among autistic pupils**

As the UCL data above shows, the factors causing school absence among autistic pupils include:

- Lack of support to meet special educational needs (this was found to be the single most significant factor)
- Lack of flexibility to enable access to school for autistic pupils (for example, staggered entry and exit times to ensure a calm arrival at school)
- Bullying
- Mental health and well-being difficulties

Comments from autistic young people in our own survey support this data.

*"In year 9 I stopped attending school completely because of anxiety and the school not looking after my needs."* (Autistic young person)

*"If teachers listened to me. If I had been believed. If bullying was taken seriously... Students don't skip school just because they're lazy. Being intelligent and good at academic skills was all I had really, so when that is taken away you really are left with nothing."* (Autistic young person)

Our survey found that 36% of autistic young people had been out of education when they would have liked to have been at school. A separate survey of over 4,000 parents, carers, autistic children and young people found that 74% feel that their child's school place does not fully meet their needs and only one in four parents are satisfied with the SEND support their child is receiving.<sup>7</sup>

The comments from parents and young people in our survey suggest the reasons behind this lack of support include gaps in the SEND workforce, resource pressures forcing families to 'fight' for support, and a culture in schools that leaves many autistic pupils feeling unwelcome.

*"I feel like I'm failing and not good enough. I'm a slow worker and takes double the effort just to do an average job."* (Autistic young person)

As well as issues around lack of SEND support, we know that too many autistic pupils face isolation and bullying. Autistic young people tell us that school is often a hostile and anxiety provoking place. Sadly, we know that bullying is a fact of life for many autistic pupils, and as a result, many experience mental health issues. We know that 82% of children with learning disabilities are bullied at school,

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<sup>5</sup> Department for Education. [Statistics: Pupil Absence](#). Published March 2020

<sup>6</sup> Learning Disability Today. [Growing number of children with a learning disability deregistering from school](#). Published October 2022.

<sup>7</sup> National Autistic Society. [School Report 2021](#). Published November 2021.

twice as high as other children.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile four out of five autistic young people report experiencing mental health issues, but only 10% feel comfortable disclosing it to professionals.<sup>9</sup>

Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) also report feeling lonely at school, with 43% of disabled children saying that they don't have any friends who they feel close enough to that they could call on them for help.<sup>10</sup> Less than one in 12 (8%) autistic children and young people think other pupils and students know enough about autism.

Autistic young people tell us they just want to be able to go to school, to learn while they are there, to not get excluded and to feel okay. Sadly, this does not happen for many pupils. Research has shown that less than half of autistic children and young people say they are happy in school<sup>11</sup>. Common sense suggests there is some link between autistic children feeling unhappy and like they are 'a problem' for their school, and the fact that they are three times more likely to be persistently absent.

School is simply not working for many autistic pupils. A further indication of this is that exclusions of autistic children have more than doubled in the last ten years, from 2,282 in 2010 to 5,988 in 2021.<sup>12</sup>

The SEND review and its forthcoming Implementation plan are an opportunity to change this.

### **How schools and families can be better supported to improve attendance for autistic young people?**

To date, attendance guidance has focussed on measures aimed at changing parents' attitudes and approaches to school attendance. The experiences of parents of autistic children illustrate how ineffectual – and counter-productive - this has been.

*“Her needs aren't being met otherwise she would be more able to attend but no one seems to be able to advise how to help or deal with it. All I get told is that she needs to be in school, like I've not tried everything to get her there, and the famous question 'How will she cope when she leaves school and has to start work?' Exactly. That's why these kids need recognition now!”* (Parent)

*“He was unable to cope with the school environment, lack of appropriate support etc. and couldn't attend. We were targeted by our local council due to 'poor attendance', sent to the Reporters Service and eventually court. We had to defend ourselves with legal representation and were thankfully totally vindicated. This happened twice. We have been left suffering from trauma due to this.”* (Parent)

A partnership approach with families is key to understanding the root cause of the persistent absence, and jointly planning ways to make school attendance possible. The responsibility needs to shift onto schools to create an inclusive environment, and away from penalising parents. Attendance guidance should focus on ways schools can support all pupils to attend school and have their needs met there.

<sup>8</sup> Mencap. [Bullying wrecks lives](#). Published 2007

<sup>9</sup> Ambitious about Autism. Know Your Normal Research Findings. Published June 2017

<sup>10</sup> Disabled Children's Partnership. [Then There Was Silence](#). Published September 2021

<sup>11</sup> National Autistic Society. [School Report 2021](#). Published November 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Department for Education. [SEN absences and exclusions](#). Published July 2022

With early intervention and the right support, schools can take an approach which proactively supports attendance rather than punishing absence. This preventative approach would be far more successful at driving down absence rates among pupils with SEND.

But this must be seen, not as ‘attendance policy’, but as a shift towards making schools places that autistic pupils and others with SEND feel like they *belong*. The SEND review is a critical opportunity to make this happen.

That’s why we’re recommending the review introduces a **national inclusion standard**: a totemic signal from government that every school is a SEND school, and an expectation that from now on they will be inspected as such. This would include a summary of the legal requirements (for example, in the Equality Act) and an outline of the sorts of support that should be ‘ordinarily available’ in schools. It could also link to resources such as Whole School SEND, where good practice to improve the experience and achievements of children with SEND is shared.

To deliver this we recommend the government publishes a **long-term SEND workforce strategy**, so that schools will have the skilled staff and leadership culture shift to make this possible. We recognise those schools that already deliver good support for their autistic pupils, but we hear from them how difficult that is to maintain in the current staffing and funding climate.

To hold schools accountable, we recommend **Ofsted inspects schools against the national inclusion standard**. In practice, this might mean incorporating the standard into the next update to the Education Inspection Framework. We recognise the positive progress Ofsted has made in recent years to prioritise children with SEND and draw attention to the poorer experience and outcomes they face, and are keen to support the next step on this journey, to have real impact for these children.

Finally, the SEND review must maintain children’s rights to get individual assessments of their needs, and the provision to meet those needs, as set out in the Children and Families Act. It must ensure the funding is available for local authorities and providers to deliver on those duties. Early intervention is the realistic way to better manage SEND budgets.

### **The impact of the Department’s proposed reforms to improve attendance**

The government’s recent ‘working together to improve school attendance’ guidance is a move in the right direction, particularly acknowledging the need to remove the in-school barriers pupils face. For example, considering support or reasonable adjustments for uniform, transport, routines, access to support in school and lunchtime arrangements.

But it does not go far enough towards recognising and addressing the barriers autistic pupils face – particularly those who may not yet have a diagnosis or access to support.

It should include specific guidance for supporting children and young people with SEND who are struggling with attendance. For example, the guidance should say that a young person and their family should be offered a conversation with a SENCO if attendance becomes an issue. Where a young person is a persistent absentee, schools should ensure they hold a discussion with them about their support needs so they can be sure they are making it possible for them to attend school and engage with learning. The guidance could helpfully reference the SEND Code of Practice, and the steps all schools must take to support children with SEND.

In some cases, it may be that underlying unidentified SEND are a reason for a pupil's absence and, in these instances, an assessment should be offered. This needs to be explicitly included in the guidance so that pupils are not being unfairly penalised and to ensure they get the support they need as early as possible.

Schools should also be encouraged to look for patterns of absenteeism so they can identify if children with particular needs are struggling and think about how to support them. The guidance should promote a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing, with the aim of ensuring that schools can support the inclusion and participation of all learners.

But amending the attendance guidance alone will not change the culture in schools that leaves autistic pupils facing three times the persistent absence rate. Much more significant are the impact of the Department's headline education policies, and the impact of the SEND and AP review and implementation plan, as set out above. The implementation of the all age Autism Strategy could also play an important role, as it sets out aims to ensure an autism-skilled school workforce, to better support autistic pupils to attend and achieve at school.

### **Recommendations**

- The government's SEND reforms should:
  - Protect the rights and funding that autistic young people and their families depend on to get the support they need to attend school
  - Adapt the national standards to become 'national inclusion standards' which reinforce the need for an inclusive culture, SEND training for school leaders and exemplify whole school approaches to SEND
  - Ask Ofsted to raise the priority of SEND in education inspections, to hold schools to account for the quality of their SEND support
  - Include the publication of a long-term SEND workforce strategy, to plug the gaps in the SEND workforce that currently create barriers to autistic pupils getting the support they need to attend school.
- The government's attendance reforms should:
  - Ensure school attendance policies focus on providing the right support to pupils with SEND, to enable them to attend school
  - Shift the emphasis towards working with persistent absentees to understand the reasons for poor attendance, so it can be supportively addressed
  - Include offering supportive assessments of SEND for children who may have unidentified SEND or undiagnosed autism, to identify the underlying cause of absences

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