

Written evidence submitted by [member of the public]

[Note: This evidence has been redacted by the Committee. Text in square brackets has been inserted where text has been redacted.]

Dear Education Select Committee,

I am submitting evidence for the home education inquiry at this late stage as Robert Halfon indicated in an interview on radio 4 that he would accept further evidence beyond the deadline. I have chosen to submit evidence at this stage because during the inquiry hearing there was discussion of requiring more formality in the definition of a suitable education and I believe that this would be especially detrimental to some children.

As a father of a child with SEND needs I would ask that you please do not change the definition of a suitable education as this may result in making education inaccessible for my son. I will attempt to explain why below.

My son is [age] ([school year] equivalent). He has never been to school as it was very clear to my wife and I that he would struggle in the school environment for multiple reasons. He is twice exceptional, gifted with PDA (pathological demand avoidance profile of autism). He has been under the pediatrician since he was [age] and is still awaiting ADOS assessment due to demands on the NHS, but in the meantime we have discovered for ourselves the best way to educate him and meet his needs.

My wife is a teacher and naturally began home education in a formal school like manner, attempting to teach our son to read, write and do maths at reception age. At this stage we were unaware of his PDA and the recommended approaches. Our son could not access learning in this way despite his high ability and it caused him extreme anxiety. I remember being on holiday that year and he ran away from a treasure hunt activity in tears because there were letters involved.

PDA can best be described as an anxiety driven need to remain in control at all times. Children with PDA will avoid simple everyday demands, even when they are things that they want to do. For example my son will ask to go to the park and then avoid putting his shoes on to go as he perceives this requirement as a demand. Depending on his level of anxiety at the time he may be more or less able to comply with a demand. The reason for this behaviour is that when a child with PDA perceives a demand put on him it

triggers a fight/flight/freeze response. His highly sensitive nervous system interprets everyday demands as a threat and produces an adrenaline response. It is not possible for him to learn and access education at this point and this is what we saw repeatedly when we tried to teach him. We tried many approaches, reading schemes, different syllabus, but it made no difference. The demand to do a pre-planned adult directed activity made it completely inaccessible to him.

It took us a while to find alternative ways for our son to learn but we have succeeded and now he is thriving. We compared what we were seeing when we tried to teach him with our experience of our son in his pre-school years. Shortly before he turned [age] he got very interested in a nursing anatomy book he found at his Grandmother's house. He insisted we explain the diagrams to him and at [age] could name all the bones in his body and explain how digestion worked. We got him a children's body book because of this and he got interested in the circulatory system. This led to him asking about the immune system, white blood cells, virus' and bacteria. When he was [age] he asked for violin lessons. When we weren't formally teaching him in maths we found that if he chose the activity he could learn quickly and easily. In his [school year] year we booked a stall for him to run at a children's Christmas faire that our home ed group was running. He made and priced magnets at 5p and my wife showed him the 5x table and tally charts so he could run the stall. he learned this in under 5 minutes because he was so excited about it. All attempts to replicate this kind of learning with artificial activities however failed. He either needs the activity to be part of real life or his own chosen interest. He would discover a concept like angles and spend hours drawing them on his own, but could not access an organised activity about them. We would need to very carefully expose him to new bits of information and leave resources around for him to access in his own time rather than try to teach.

This approach has been so successful that he is now working years ahead of the national curriculum in some areas of maths. He is gifted in science and learns through experiments, asking questions and by watching documentaries. He loves history and has many interests such as baking and drawing. He has become very creative and loves to understand how things work. He even asked for a math syllabus a couple of weeks ago and now does a few written questions most days from that. We have also found that this approach works well to cater for his gifted needs. When he is interested he will pursue a topic to GCSE level and beyond.

We have found that when he is in control of his learning, following his interests and self-directed he excels and can access an education suitable to his age, ability, aptitude and SEND needs. This however would be impossible with a formal approach. Our role has become one of facilitators, finding resources

to assist him in learning about his interests, supporting him to find things out for himself, taking him on visits and exposing him to new experiences to spark new interests. Being present with him as he learns and gently guiding. Providing a range of social groups for him to attend and building his awareness of his own needs, with regard to PDA, so he can learn to manage them himself.

The current definition of suitable education allows for this approach and does not require testing and assessment measures that would not only put a huge demand on him and therefore be inaccessible, but would also cause long term demands for the areas tested. One of the results of our early attempts to teach him was that in all these areas he developed a perceived demand that still makes them difficult to access today. He is overcoming this with time and we are seeing progress in all areas now, but this could be very easily undone. A definition of a suitable education which mirrors school would limit him so much and cause high levels of anxiety. Instead we have the long term goals in sight and hope that with careful preparation he may be guided to choose relevant qualifications for whatever path he wishes to take, such as carefully chosen GCSEs that he can access because he wants and needs to do them. **It is worth noting that with our current approach and learning environment our son is thriving and it is not immediately obvious that he has SEND needs. These only become problems when we try to formalise his learning.**

About [time] ago we became aware of the PDA profile of autism and found that it explained everything we had been observing in our son. We spoke with the nurse who will complete his ADOS assessment and she agreed that it sounded like PDA. We found that by responding to his needs we were already using many of the recommended strategies for a child with PDA, including our approach to learning. I made contact with other parents of children with PDA through Facebook support groups and discovered that many of their children learn in similar ways and had similar difficulties with a formal, taught approach. While formal instruction may work for the majority of children there are others for whom it does not work. Some of these may be able to access learning with support in school, but for those who cannot a flexible approach to home education is the only remaining option. To try to make home education more like school in the name of equal opportunities would actually exclude this minority from the only option they have. Schools have to cater to the majority but the benefit of flexibility in home education is that you can find the individualised approach which allows any child to thrive. I have found that this can actually be a very positive approach and children can really meet their potential when their individual needs are catered for. I know the committee cares about the education and well being of all

children, but fear that they may be unaware of the challenges some individuals face. My evidence then is aimed at highlighting how one set of children benefit from this flexibility.

I would like to add that even though an education is informal, it can still be highly academic and does not preclude a child from attending higher education and following any career path. In fact I hope my son can take this route if he chooses, as he is certainly able enough. We find that our son chooses activities such as making pictures of atoms or watching documentaries about ancient Egypt. He asks question such as 'why the letter Z is not often used in the English language?' Whenever he asks a question like this we have an opening to explore together. This particular one led to learning about word origins, language roots and the story of Beowulf. I also have a [age] year old son being educated in a similar way. He loves to draw and writes all over his drawings daily. He is actively figuring out phonics and simple words and asks us to write him sums regularly. Children who self-direct their education can be very high achievers who ultimately thrive at university because they are used to being independent and self motivated. I have met other families in our home educating community who also fit this category, and know formerly home educated adults doing post doctoral work.

To summarise, our children are thriving under the current flexibility. Please do not take that away by requiring formal, taught education and assessment. These seem like small adjustments in wording or straight forward requirements, and for many children they may be, but for a few they are the difference between an accessible education and high anxiety which limits learning.

Thank you for accepting this evidence.

[age, academic qualifications, contact details]

November 2020