

Written evidence submitted by University of Leeds

Evidence for the COVID-19: Education inquiry

The Impact of Covid on Key Learning and Education (ICKLE) project.

Executive summary

- ❖ School disruption in 2020 resulted in variable school provision for children beginning their formal schooling.
- ❖ The capacity of families to engage in home learning was affected their circumstances, with parents' time being a key factor.
- ❖ In our sample of ~450 reception-aged children, 16% made no progress between spring and autumn 2020 in key curriculum areas. A further 45% made only some progress.
- ❖ Poorer progress was associated with known factors (special educational needs, household deprivation) but was also associated with fewer resources provided by school and less engagement in home learning.
- ❖ School disruptions have created new inequalities in young children's learning, redefining 'disadvantaged'.
- ❖ We recommend that, in the event of future school disruption, the DfE should support schools to facilitate home learning by suggesting a range of differentiated approaches and activities to develop specific learning objectives across the curriculum areas.

The ICKLE Project

ICKLE, a twelve-month project funded by the **Economic and Social Research Council**, began in September 2020. The project measures reception-aged children's progress in key curriculum areas and aims to determine the factors influencing pupils' learning trajectories.

Our team

The interdisciplinary team includes researchers based at the **University of Leeds** from Psychology (Dr Hannah Nash), Education (Dr Paula Clarke, Dr Matt Homer & Dr Rachel Mathieson) and Linguistics (Dr Catherine Davies). Combining professional expertise with personal insights (from parenting young children during the pandemic) we are investigating the impact of COVID-19 school disruption on reception-aged children who are learning important foundation skills, instrumental in later academic success.

Research site

The research involves 11 schools in Leeds, a large superdiverse city comparable to the national context. The schools vary in size and according to the percentages of children who have English as an Additional Language (EAL), have Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), and are eligible for Free School Meals (FSM).

	School size	% EAL	% SEND	% FSM
Above national average ▲	1	2	3	2
At national average	5	3	4	4
Below national average ▼	5	6	4	5

Research design

Using a longitudinal, retrospective research design, we have combined pupil data from March 2020, before the first period of disrupted schooling, when the children were in reception, with data collected in Autumn 2020 (time point 2) when the children had entered Year 1.

The next phase of our work will involve a further round of data collection in late Spring 2021 (time point 3) as the children approach the end of Year 1, allowing us to track the learning trajectories of this cohort through two periods of school disruption.

Our data

Remote learning provision

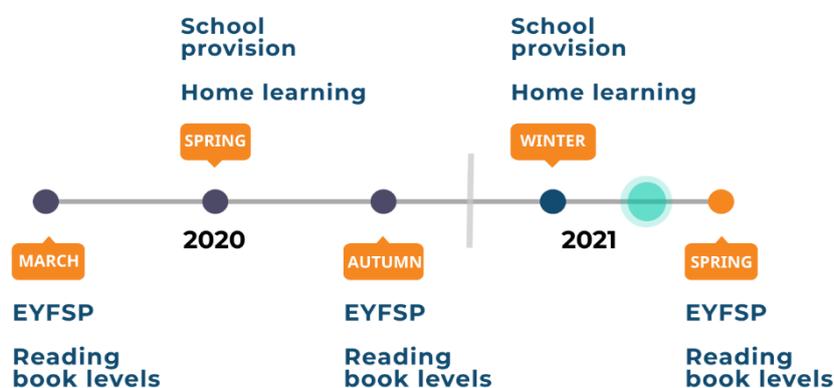
One teacher from each school provided contextual data, via online survey. This includes detailed information about the resources provided by schools, the types and frequency of support provided, and home-school communication.

Home learning experience

220 parents of children who were learning at home for all or part of the week during Spring 2020 provided detailed data, via online survey, on access to physical resources, learning routines, and availability of parental supervision.

Pupil achievement

Schools have provided achievement data from March 2020 and Autumn 2020 for 454 children. Teachers were asked to rate each pupil's achievement in relation to ten goals from four areas of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP): language & communication (3 goals), literacy (2 goals), mathematics (2 goals), and personal and social development (3 goals). The ratings are provided on a three-point scale 1 = emerging, 2 = expecting, 3 = exceeding. In addition, teachers provided pupils' progress in reading, measured using book band levels.

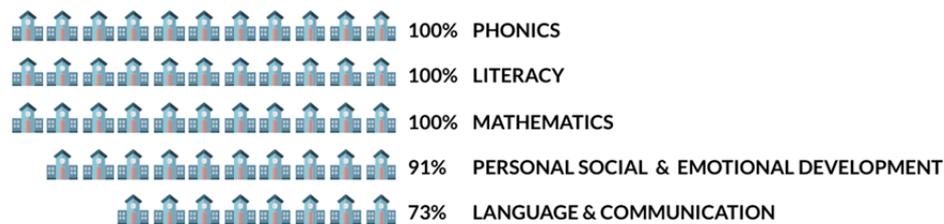


Our evidence

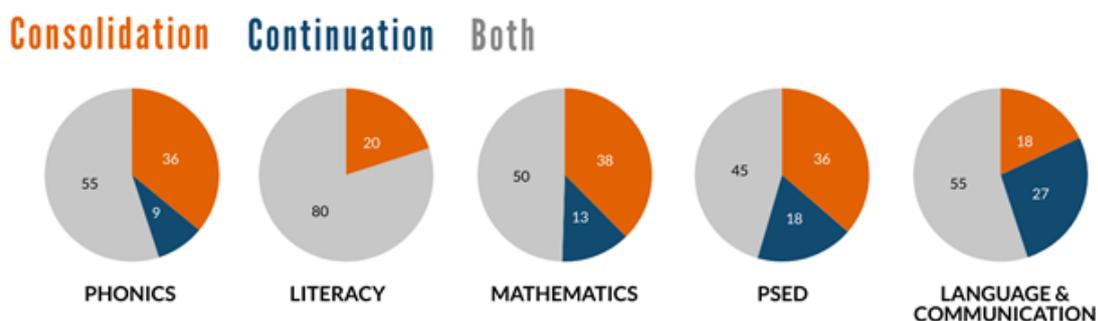
Our findings speak to all three questions highlighted in the call for evidence. We provide data on how schools managed the move to home learning, whether families felt pupils were effectively supported, and the impact on children's academic progress. We will begin by presenting data from schools and parents before providing an overview of children's academic progress.

Remote learning provision and home learning experiences

Did schools provide home learning resources?



All schools provided resources for phonics, literacy, and maths. Most provided them for PSED but only 73% for language and communication. Some schools focused on consolidating existing learning, but most provided a mixture of resources to consolidate and continue the curriculum. Few focused solely on continued learning.



The time spent on consolidating existing learning is reflected in our finding that, on average, the schools reported that they only covered 60% of the curriculum in 2019/2020.

How much were families able to do?

90% of families did some home learning during the lockdown period, with 58% having a learning routine vs. 42% taking each day as it came. Structure was important for some families:

"I felt supported by school as they provided a timetable to follow."

Others favoured flexibility:

"some days we did lots of 'work' but on other days we might have... just played."

"maintaining a regular daily schedule was impossible."

Some families struggled to complete all the tasks set by the school, often feeling guilty over this. Many families prioritised mental wellbeing over completing tasks that school sent home:

"We did crafts... lots of walks and takking [sic] about what we saw. She is read to every day. I felt this was more productive than formal teaching esp in these stressful times. Her mental health took priority."

“our main priorities were ensuring her emotional and physical wellbeing rather than her academic progress.”

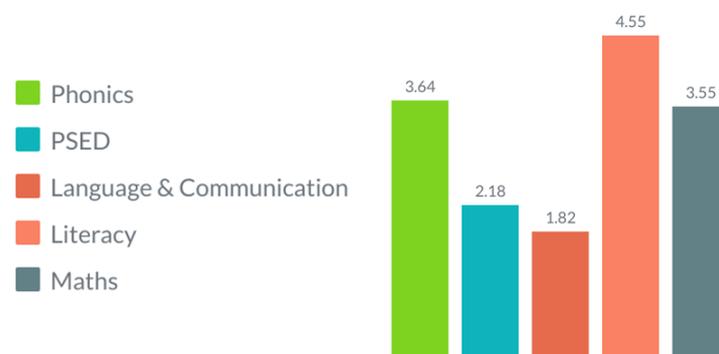
The importance of adult supervision of learning in such young children is summed up by one parent:

“There is realistically very little home learning a five-year-old can do independently.”

In 78% of families, an adult was available to supervise, with 21% reporting part-time availability. A mix of family members took on this role: 95% of respondents reported it being the mother, 44% the father, 14% older siblings, and 5% grandparents. Many families referred to ‘we’ in the open comments, indicating shared responsibility, often tag-teaming as one then the other parent worked.

Did schools provide the right amount and balance of resources?

Schools provided more resources for phonics, literacy, and maths than for language & communication and PSED.



Average number of different resource types provided

Most families spent 15 to 30 minutes per day on each key curriculum area, with the highest average time spent on language and the lowest on writing. Many families reported being unable to engage in home learning as much as they would have liked, due to challenging family circumstances, such as having to balance home learning with work, study, and caring simultaneously for children of different ages, including babies. None of the comments suggested that parents were unhappy with the balance of key areas.

There was a wide variety of views about resources from parents. Clearly one size did not fit all. For example, resources from the same school were praised by one parent but criticised by another for being difficult to engage with. Another school was commended for *“being proactive with setting work”* by one parent but criticised by two others for giving *“little guidance with tasks”* and, in another comment, *“not very much was provided by the school at all.”*

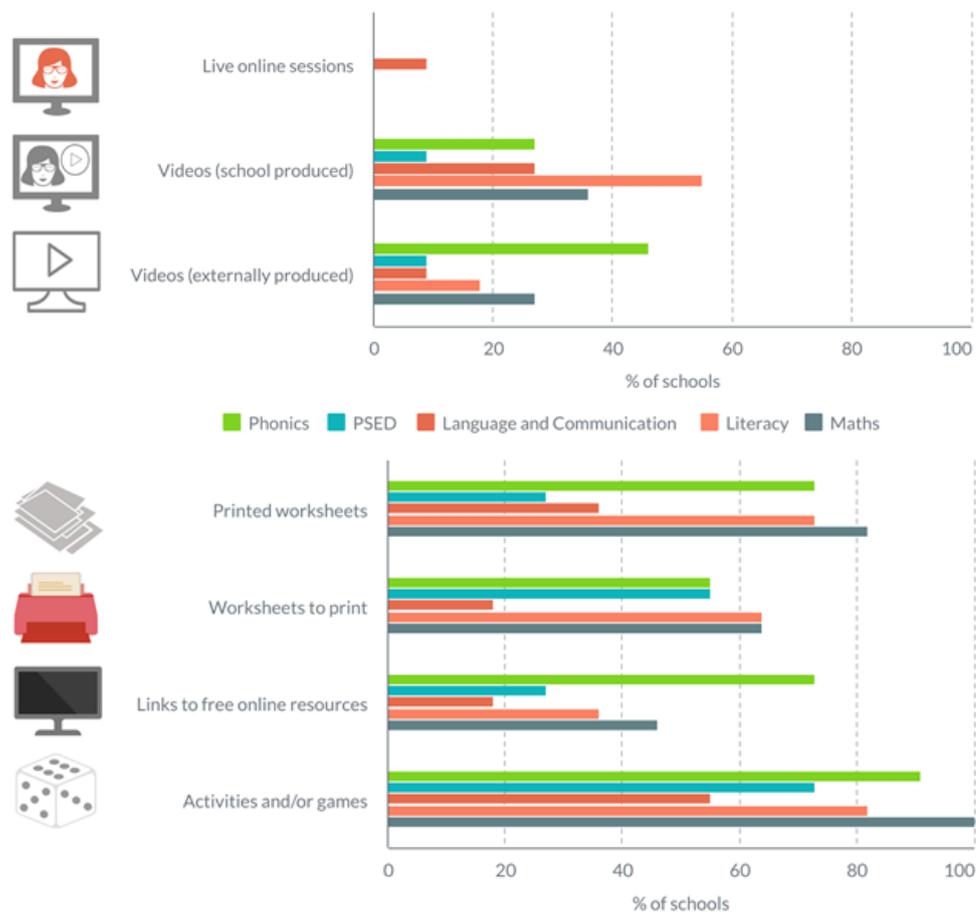
What feels supportive to one family may be inadequate for another. Provision rated highly by one parent (*“teachers were great in setting work”*) was criticised by another for requiring too much preparation time:

“I simply didn’t have time to do the ‘prep’ with a newborn and a toddler. Instead I did my own thing.”

Some parents found the provision too generic and not useful for their own child.

What type of resources did schools provide and what did parents prefer?

Schools provided a range of resources.



The proportion of live or recorded lessons provided was low, across schools and curriculum areas. One parent remarked that she would have liked more live lessons. These may have mitigated concerns expressed about the social consequences of lockdown, and about children missing social interaction with their peers.

Schools were more likely to provide worksheets (printed or to print at home) for phonics, literacy, and maths than for language & communication or PSED. Some comments mentioned the challenge of printing out resources sent by the school:

“Most work was posted digitally on Class Dojo, and without access to a printer we couldn't access these.”

38% of our sample had no access to a printer. Home deliveries were appreciated:

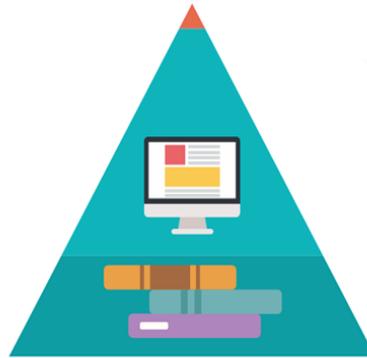
“We managed to complete a few printed worksheets that School delivered to our door.”

Links to free online resources were provided more often for phonics and mathematics than the other curriculum areas. 96% of children had full or shared access to an electronic device/devices that could be used for learning. Although only 4% reported no access to devices, shared access was a common source of frustration.

Suggestions for games or activities (using items in the home or environment) were common across the curriculum areas, reflecting the young age of the children and the focus on learning through play. Games and activities were well liked:

“We totally embraced the opportunity for the children to have lots of open-ended play opportunities and outdoor play and understood the value of this.”

Did schools provide access to reading books?



■ Yes - Hard copy (28.57%) ■ Yes - Electronic (64.29%) ■ No (7.14%)

Most schools provided access to online reading books. One provided only hard copies of books and one school provided neither hard-copy or e-versions of books. Parents commented on the move to online books:

“We struggled to get him to read a book online for a little while. He liked to read an actual book.”

“it would have been helpful if more reading books were sent home (we had one), there was access online but he wouldn't engage with that.”

“I was concerned about the lack of reading materials available for my child. I was worried he would fall behind due to a lack of access to books.”

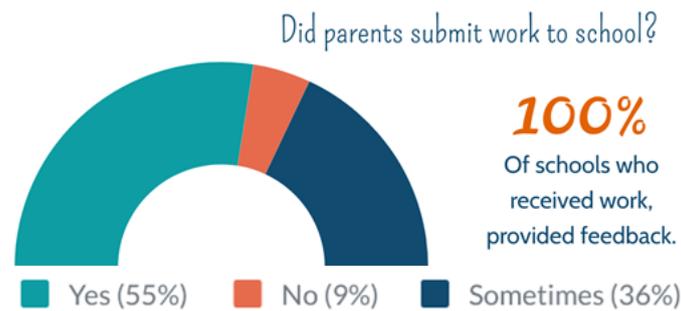
How often did schools provide new resources? Was feedback provided on children's work?

How often were learning activities sent home?



■ Daily (55%) ■ 2-4 times per week (27%)
 ■ Weekly (9%) ■ One off pack (9%)

Most schools provided new home learning activities daily or a few times per week. 10/11 asked that work be submitted and provided feedback on it.

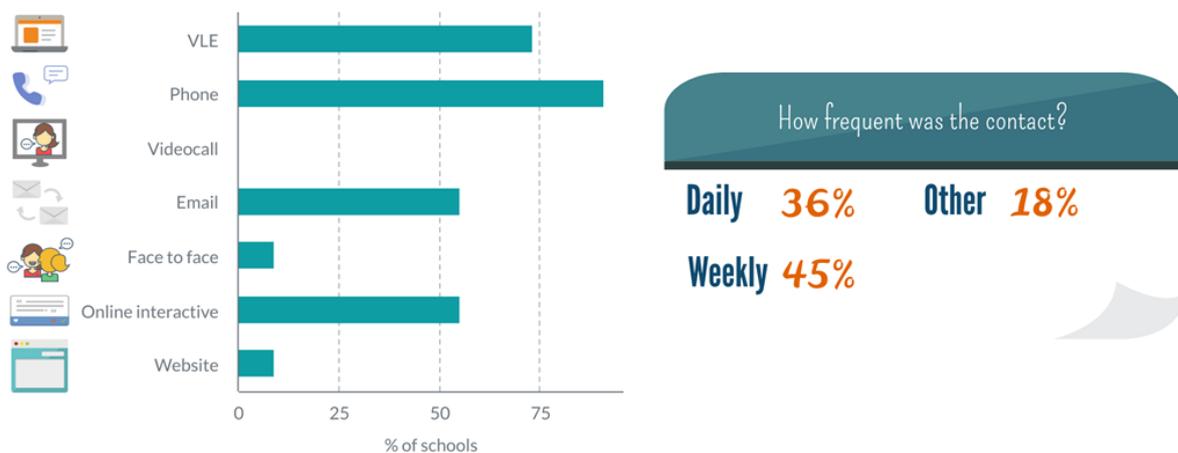


Feedback from a child's teacher was received positively for its motivating effect:

"Feedback was really important to spur her on to do more work the following week."

"We had much more feedback from teachers than I ordinarily would have... They were so encouraging."

Were schools in frequent contact with families?



The medium and frequency of contact with families varied. Comments from parents reveal the importance of a member of school staff, preferably the child's own teacher, making individual contact with the child at home, e.g., via phone or virtual letter. Children loved this, and parents felt it kept the connection going:

"We were really pleased with school communication with parents: it was sensible and regular."

One parent who only received one phone call from the school during the period linked their feeling of being "very alone" with the lack of school contact. Another stated:

"Communications from School were very patchy during this time."

Were they any child level characteristics that impacted home learning?

Families commented on the difficulty of motivating children to do schoolwork:

"Was difficult to put enough time into home schooling around work and... to motivate XX to want to do schoolwork at home when he would rather watch TV."

“Some days were easier than others in terms of XX’s enthusiasm for learning.”

Although the % of EAL pupils was at or above the national average in 5/11 schools, only one school translated materials into home language and this was only done for instructions to access resources.

One participant mentioned the SEND needs of their child, saying that they felt unsupported:

“We had to work up to around 45 minutes per day on formal educational activities, plus tablet use and informal learning (i.e. discussions during walks). At the beginning we could not manage more than 2 minutes at a time due to constant meltdowns/anxiety regarding the huge, sudden change of routine. We had no help or support regarding this from school, paediatrician, health visitor or any other outside agency and felt completely alone.”

Achievement data and children’s progress

Some parents felt their children had made good progress whilst at home:

“XX progressed more during home learning than I felt he had in the preceding six months of reception... It was a magical time in many ways and a real boost to his early years education.”

Others recognised that not all children would have made such good progress:

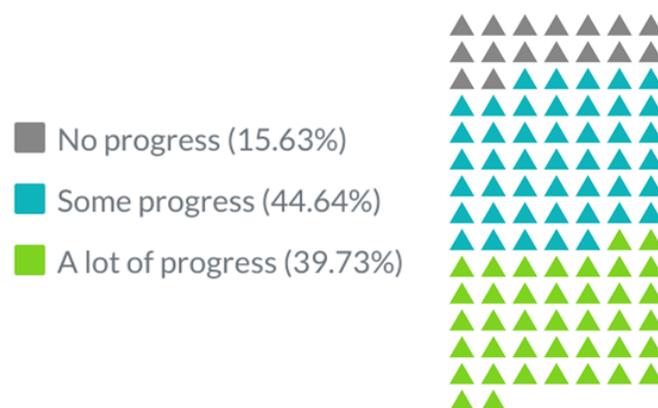
“luckily enough my daughter progressed rather than go backwards like some of the other children.”

Some worried that their child had not progressed as much as they should have:

“we did as much as we could and tried to implement learning through play most of the time. I do hope this doesn’t have a massive impact on my daughter. I am hopeful that lost time will be made up (some how).”

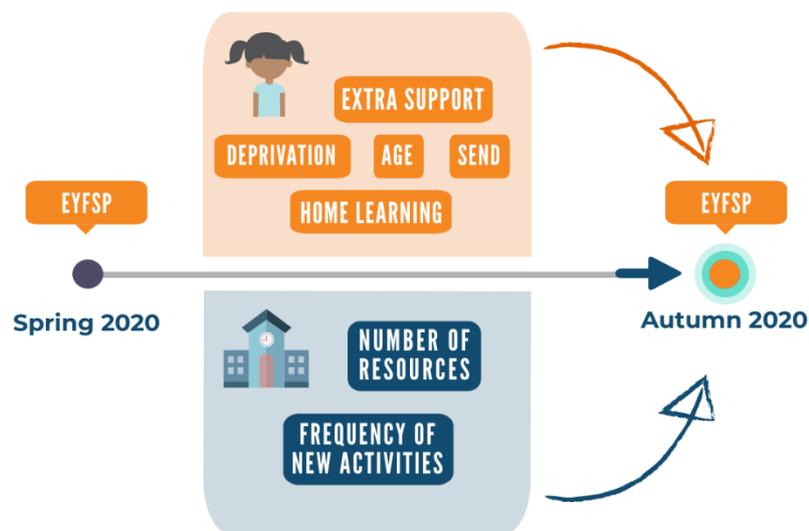
We have run preliminary analyses of the total EYFSP scores across the four areas (literacy, mathematics, language & communication and PSED) based on complete data from 448 children. First, we explored how much progress children had made, then we looked at predictors of progress.

Progress in total EYFSP scores



- **No progress** was defined as an increase of zero or a decrease in total EYFSP score
- **Some progress** was defined as an increase of 1-9 points
- **A lot of progress** was defined as an increase of 10 points or more

Factors affecting progress



Several child level characteristics were linked to variation in progress:

- Children who would normally receive additional classroom support made less progress
- Children who were not able to engage as fully with home learning made less progress
- Children who were doing less well before the spring lockdown made less progress
- Younger children made less progress
- Children with special educational needs or disabilities made less progress
- Children from more deprived households made less progress

Two school factors were linked to variation in progress:

- When schools provided fewer resources overall, less progress was made
- When new activities were provided too frequently (eg daily), less progress was made

Three factors were not associated with progress, once the above factors had been accounted for:

- Attendance at school (during lockdown or from June 2020)
- The frequency of school contact with parents
- Whether children have EAL (this overlaps with deprivation, since the majority of children with EAL live in more deprived areas)

Next steps for the ICKLE project

We will continue to analyse the data from 2020 to explore progress in different curriculum areas, examine interactions between variables, and explore progress in the book-band reading data. A second round of data will be collected this spring (2021).

Answers to key questions

Did the DfE effectively support schools and pupils?

Our evidence cannot speak directly to the question of whether the DfE effectively supported schools. However, our data show high variability in school provision, home learning and pupil progress. Some children made less progress than others. This was linked to child-level factors known

to affect academic progress (age, special educational needs, socio-economic disadvantage). However, importantly, our data provide evidence for newly created differences between schools (number of home learning resources and how frequently new work was set) and families (capacity to engage with home learning) during home learning that affected children's progress.

Did the DfE effectively manage the move to home learning?

The ICKLE project schools worked hard to provide a variety of resources across different curriculum areas. Children in schools providing more resources made more progress. However, providing new activities too often was associated with poorer progress. This may reflect a lack of structure at school level, or families not 'keeping up'. Overall, teachers' ratings of how well families engaged with remote learning (based on their records) were associated with progress; children made more progress when families engaged with the provision.

Roughly half the parents of the children in the project completed our home learning survey. In these families, most children were supervised daily, to learn across the curriculum. However, this may not be true of families who did not provide information. Equally, access to IT equipment was not a barrier to engagement in our sample (except for access to a printer), but it may have been problematic for families who did not complete the survey.

Parents' responses suggest a range of family factors influencing how well they were able to engage with home learning. These included the time parents had to prepare for and supervise learning. Many parents were simultaneously working or caring for other children. Parents are a key resource, but they vary in what they can provide. This affects home learning, which in turn creates new inequalities impacting children's progress. The parents were appreciative of schools' and teachers' efforts, but their open-ended comments alluded to the period as *"very tough"*, *"frustrating"*, *"stressful"*, *"a struggle"*.

We know from published research that PSED is essential for effective learning. It is clear from our data that many parents prioritised their children's wellbeing and happiness.

"My focus throughout lockdown was keeping the children happy."

"our main priorities were ensuring [child's] emotional and physical wellbeing rather than her academic progress."

Home learning cannot take place if the broader environment is not conducive to learning.

Did the DfE effectively support vulnerable and disadvantaged children?

Our data show that vulnerable and disadvantaged children (those from more deprived backgrounds, and those with SEND or receiving additional support) made less progress during this period of disruption to schooling. In addition, the capacity of families to engage with home learning may have created new inequalities, redefining 'disadvantage'.

Recommendations

To reduce variation and inequalities

Support parents to help their children learn at home.

Families need knowledge and skills to support their children's learning. They need regular support and mentoring. Parents would benefit from knowing why a child is being asked to complete an activity and what they are intended to learn from doing it.

Individualise home learning provision.

Increase the use of differentiated learning objectives and resources. Individually tailor guidance for parents to enable them to provide home learning activities to meet the specific learning profiles of their children.

March 2021