

Post Pandemic Possibilities for Inclusion in schools: research and recommendations

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Introduction

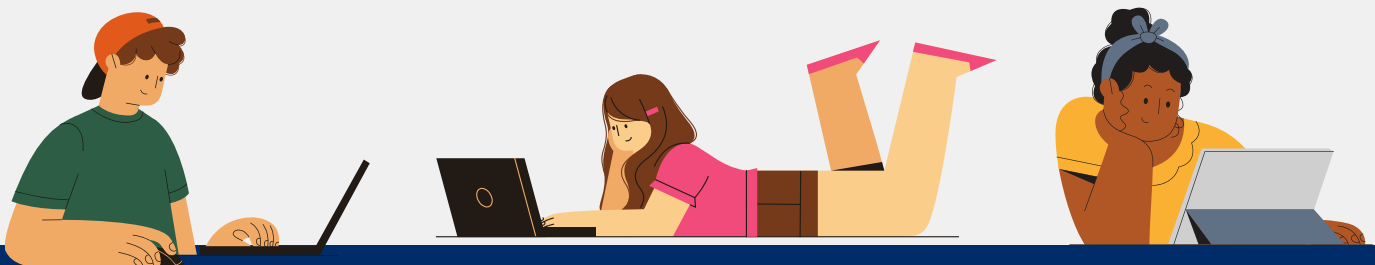
During the initial phase of lockdown due to Covid-19 in 2020, we were concerned about how families of children with special needs and disabilities were managing during the periods of limited school provision. Although some children with SEND were able to continue going to school, most were not, so we decided to contact parent/carers using a detailed survey to ask how they and their children were coping.

What did we want to find out?

We carried out two online surveys with parent/carers, the first during July and August 2020 and the second in February 2021 - both following on from periods of lockdown. We tested the questions with parent carers and we asked parents to consult with their children to inform their responses.

How did we do it?

We wanted to know whether children were at home or in school; how parents were managing with children at home; how the children were coping with learning from home; what support was being put in place by school and what was going well during the lockdown experience.





Who took part?



1st survey: 500 respondents

2nd survey: 328 respondents

Overall this sample was made up of:

- * 70% in mainstream education
- * 20% special education
- * 5% home schooled /other

- * 48% primary school
- * 37% secondary school
- * 5% college
- * 8% specialist unit/facility

- * Only 15% were attending school during the first lockdown but this increased to almost 60% in the second lockdown (Jan/Feb 2021)
- * 1 in 5 of this sample declared they were single parents
- * Just over 50% were working full time or part time

- * 64% of students had EHC plans
- * 71% of students were autistic
- * 38% of students had SpLDs (Specific learning difficulties)
- * 30% of students had SEMH (social emotional mental health needs)
 - * 20% of students had SCLN (speech language and communication needs)



KEY FINDINGS



1 There were already issues for children with SEND prior to lockdown

Themes of anxiety and mental health run consistently through both surveys but while the experience of lockdown exacerbated these issues for many children, parent/carers told us that their children with SEND were struggling even prior to the pandemic.

'Traumatic. She has had periods of severe school anxiety, resulting in a mental health crisis and no attendance at school due to anxiety for months before Covid'

'Horrendous. He was not attending school as they did not recognise his needs'

'Extremely anxious, not well supported, lonely, bullied, struggling'

2 Anxiety and mental health concerns during the lockdowns

Anxiety was clearly an issue for many of the children during Covid. Long periods out of school and disrupted routines led some children and young people to experience more acute anxiety and mental health issues.

'Change in routine, anxiety over corona, X was very anxious constantly talking about the end of the world, death, loved ones who had passed away'

'Lack of routine / structure, anxiety about getting behind and about returning to school being too difficult'



After the second period of lockdown (January /February 2021)

Some parents were so concerned about their children's mental health that they worried they would never be able to return to school. Below is a selection of comments from parent/carers about the impact on their children -

'My child is struggling to leave the house and is actually settled at home. We cannot even go for a walk without a meltdown. I think it is going to be really hard for him to suddenly go back to school full time with all the changes'

'We were in survival mode during most of lockdown'

'As a family, our mental health is really struggling and the family unit is breaking down'

'The impact as a family has been tiring, upsetting and hard. Having no support means my other two children have suffered terribly. And my son is all over the place.'

'We were experiencing very violent behaviour from him which we had not seen for over 5 years. This was very distressing for all the family. With no respite or the ability for my son to see anyone other than his parents was very distressing.'

I think it'll take years to try to get my daughter back into school full time. The damage done by lack of understanding and lack of accommodation of her additional needs has left her not trusting staff and not feeling safe at school

③ Loss of more than school for children with SEND

Most children lost out on regular attendance, daily timetables and in-person classroom teaching but for children with SEND, this was compounded by the loss of many other supports that were typically part of their daily lives: teaching assistant support

➔ Impact on social communication and interaction –

'I worry about his social interaction skills which were already so limited and inappropriate at times and have decreased.'

'His social communication skills have declined noticeably from not being able to interact and engage directly with peers'

'His social expressive language has shut down without access to his social opportunities group'

➔ Loss of therapies, interventions, TAs, social groups, respite etc

'Without school, he has had no access to any therapy or paediatrician or psychological assessments. It's likely the window for speech and language development is now over and he will never improve beyond speaking age of less than 18 months and require full time care for the rest of his life'

'The extra pressure on already stretched CAMHS services is utterly diabolical. CBT was prescribed for her 9 months ago and we STILL don't have a start date.'

'Children with special needs have been forgotten and their individual needs have been forgotten about'

➔ Lack of access to teaching assistants

'Because he cannot access the practical support of a TA in the same way, he has struggled to keep up and work is unorganised and not in the same presentable standard it is as in school.'

'Not having regular contact with SENCO at school, not understanding work set without usual extra support from school'

➔ Out of school activities

'Not able to do calming activities (horse riding, climbing & martial arts).'

'Missing things he likes such as soft play, parks, days out, family gatherings, drum lessons'

4 Children with SEND falling further behind academically

Academically, parent/carers expressed concern that their child was likely to be very behind after the cumulative impact of the two lockdowns. There was a perception among some parents that academic expectations were much higher during the second lockdown and that lessons were much more comprehensively organised - this caused them to worry that their children would be even further behind.

'This [second] lockdown the provision for home learning has been much more comprehensive and there has been higher expectations for participation. He has refused to do any home learning. I fear this will put him behind his peers more so than after the first lockdown''

'I now worry my son will struggle to ever catch up academically'

'His social communication skills have declined noticeably from not being able to interact and engage directly with peers'

'She'll be even more behind in terms of academic achievement. Devastating loss of essentially a year'

5 Mainstream schools cannot meet needs -

Concern about experiences in mainstream settings was expressed by many parent/carers. Many parents felt that mainstream schools were too rigid and could not meet the needs of their children (even prior to lockdown) and this has been further exposed by the experiences during the pandemic.

'Having spoken to other SEND parents it has become clear to those of us with SEN children in mainstream primary how badly the schools fail our children emotionally and how damaging they are to our children's mental health'

'School unable to meet needs. It is not their fault. There is too much to deliver in a mainstream setting'

Confirms my opinion that mainstream approach is too rigid for many children and increases their distress which impedes their learning'

6 What were the positives of not being in school?

Some children with SEND thrived during the periods of lockdown, they enjoyed managing their own time, working on line, learning new skills, having fewer social demands and becoming more independent learners.

➔ Positives of homebased learning

'Safe feeling of being at home. Consistency. Control over their day and reduced social demands'

'The huge drop in anxiety by not being at school.'

'Wellbeing improved - started to want to learn and want to be around people'

'Has developed independent study skills and is more proactive in seeking advice from staff at college.'

'Being able to be at home, more time for learning at his own pace and being able to be more self-directed using his special interests to guide his learning. Much less sensory "noise"'

➔ Relief at not having to wear school uniform:

Reduced demands, stress, needing to be places, wearing comfy clothes'

'Not having to wear school uniform.'

That he is happier in his own clothes. Smaller groups with little academic work is better'



Learning new skills:

'New skills have been learned by our children...Remote working, problem solving technology, communicating differently - this is all valuable, and far more useful for their future employment than they are being told'

'Learnt new things he wouldn't have at school.. Planting seeds in the spring as a project. Watching a pair of blue tits nest in our bird box and follow the progress of the chicks. Learnt so much more Makaton. Definitely increased spoken language'

'My child has developed/progressed in other ways - speech and language, imaginative play, motor skills, independence, learning new skills - brushing his own teeth, toileting etc.'

7 What did schools do well?

Parent/carers also identified what schools or teachers had done well during lockdown and on the return to school. This included teachers getting to know children better, supporting the transition back into school, identifying new ways of supporting children with SEND and paying greater attention to mental health and wellbeing.

'Yes, I think teachers are beginning to appreciate the importance of good mental health. Everyone has been stretched and can feel the strains of their limitations. This is good because they can begin to truly empathise with what our children live with every day!'

'They are also recognising different strengths in our young people when learning online I think they have learned that remote learning can work for children who can't attend school.'

'Some of his teachers understand a little better that they need to differentiate more for him'



Recommendations

1 Acknowledge, understand and support the anxieties related to the experience of being out of school at different times over the last two years and the impact on ongoing transitions.

- Understand the causes of anxiety and work on transitions
- Explicitly clear routines and checklists to prepare for the first days
 - Social stories
- Reduce sensory stimulation in the environment where possible

- Nurture groups, buddy systems, transition books
- Clear information about any changes that have taken place over the summer
 - Therapy animals in school and lots of reassurance wherever possible going into school before the first day of term to locate a new classroom

“ Teachers need a lot more training on how to give short, clear, simple instructions for ASD children and how to adequately differentiate their teaching for these ”

2 Identify where we can offer a more flexible and responsive approach to children with SEND and their families through the relaxing of some standardized approaches to learning and the curriculum.

Relaxing the demands of school uniform

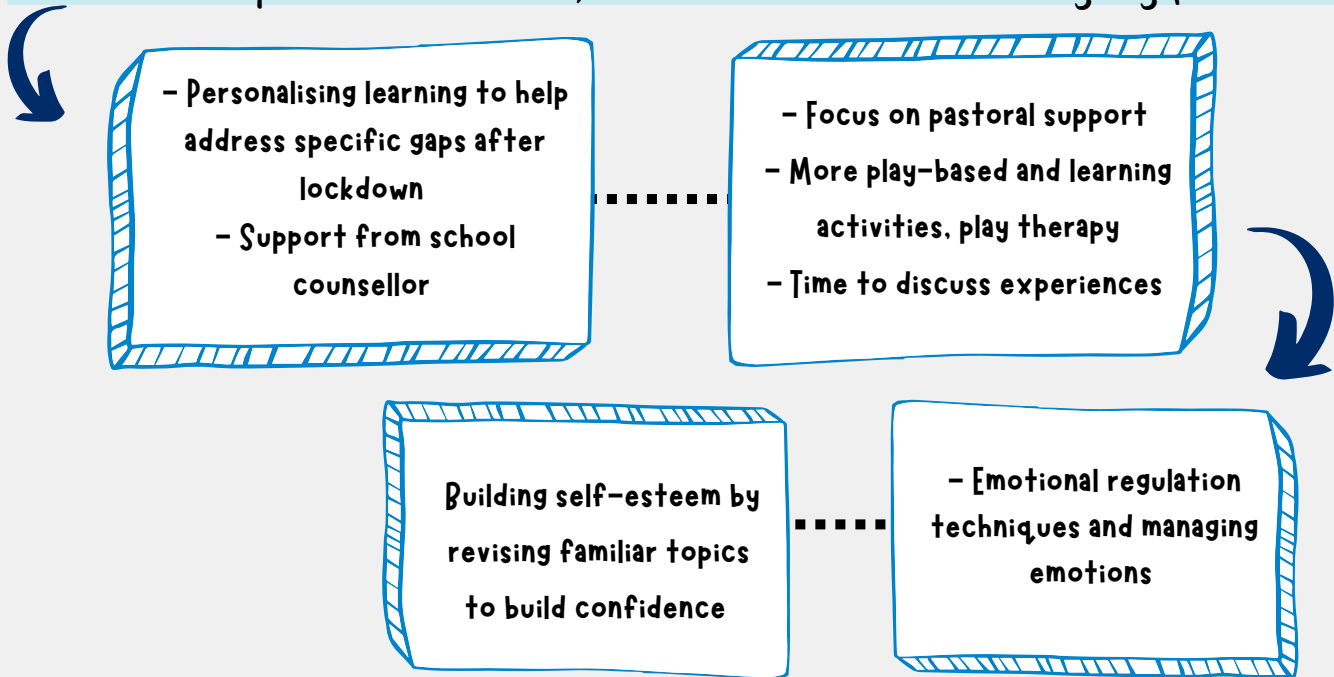
Staggered starts, flexible or reduced timetable

“ Going forward a mix of home-school and in school learning would work really well as a long term solution but this doesn't fit with government policy of everyone in everyday. ”

- Curriculum variations:
- Outdoor learning,
 - Learning with family members in class,
 - Project-based learning etc.

3

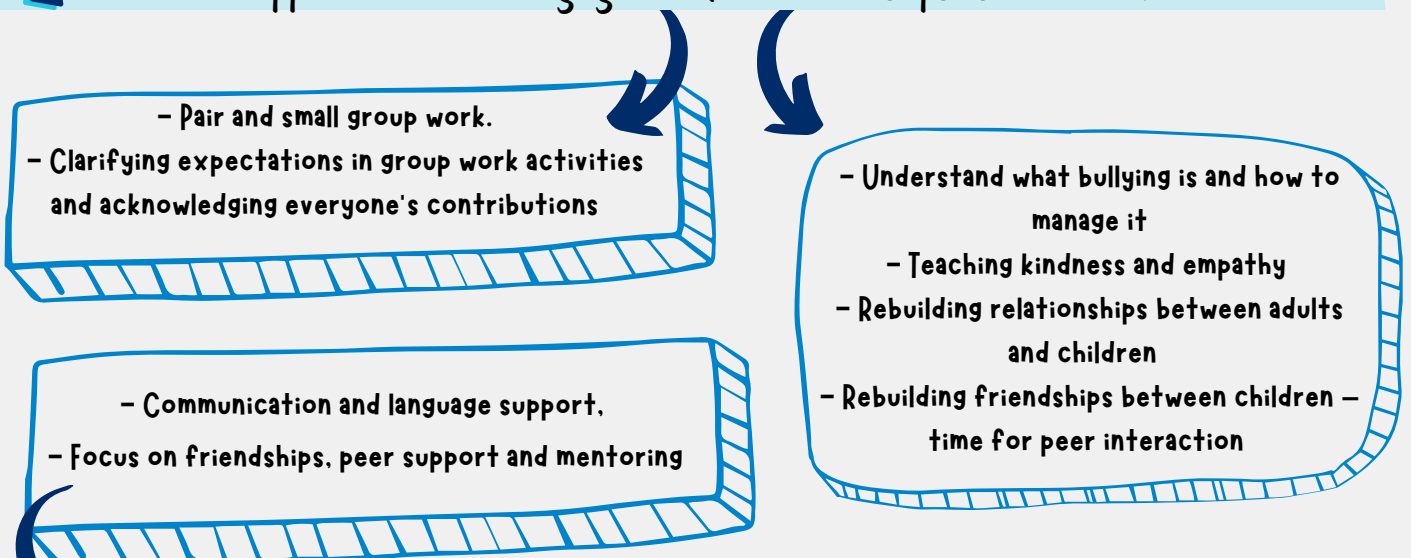
Build on the shared experiences of the Covid with children and families to explore the impact on mental health, to understand and acknowledge the impact on academic learning and to identify gaps in understanding – this will help to develop more robust social, emotional and mental health going forward.



“ Group talk therapy sessions to allow them to talk through concerns openly in an environment where they aren't the only ones having the same worries, letting them have a “team” experience working out how they're feeling, understanding it's ok to feel that at & how to manage it going forward ”

4

Develop more explicit teaching of social communication and interaction for all children in order to practise those skills that children did not have opportunities to engage with across multiple lockdowns.



“ How to deal with bullying, who does he turn to and who does he turn to when nobody wants to play with him. ”

5 Identify + harness the skills and abilities that children have learned during this time through an acknowledgement that some children are not 'behind'.

They have actually learned a wider range of skills beyond the traditional curriculum. Some of these might include:

- greater creativity, improved technological skills, enhanced ability to work independently, and improved fine motor skills or personal care.

Parent/carers suggested:

- Recognition/sharing in class of learning beyond the core curriculum
- Collecting evidenced in personal profiles

- Conversations about activities have engaged with at home acknowledged
- Something else...

“ My son has learnt practical skills, building and constructing, problem solving and learning from his errors rather than panicking about letting someone down ”

6

Reap the advantages that technology has brought over the last two years offering us new ways to keep in touch, to deliver learning, to re-imagine therapies and to build stronger relationships with parents and families.

Parent/carers suggested:

- New ways of delivering therapy sessions via CAMHS or school counsellors
- Online sessions on mental health and wellbeing

- Make use of new online materials now available if child cannot get into school

- Reaching more (or different) parents through online parents' evenings
- Benefits of online learning for some children to remove social pressure

“ All young people should have direct access to self-service learning (including mental health and SEND) that they can tailor to their situation and preferences, together with mentoring and fast access to specialist staff where needed ”

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