'Happier in his own clothes':
Post-pandemic Possibilities for Education for Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilites
Perspectives from parent carers

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Executive Summary

This research examined the perspectives of parent carers of children with SEND and their experiences of their children returning to school in September 2020 and undertaking home-learning during the January/February 2021 lockdown.

While celebrating the achievements of schools in supporting children with SEND back into school last September and improving the quality and provision of home learning during the second lockdown, the report also exposes some of the significant limitations in the education system - not least in meeting the fundamental needs of children with SEND, but also in enabling them to flourish and achieve.

Some children did thrive during lockdown without the stress and anxiety of school and the pressure of social interaction but many did not. 'Happier in his own clothes' was a comment made by a parent about one of the positives of lockdown in not having to wear school uniform, but we also use it as a metaphor here for how school could be for children with SEND - and indeed all children if we can seize this opportunity to learn from lockdown. We make recommendations, based on the learning from the positive and negative experiences of the last year, for a more reflexive and recalibrated school system which works better for all children – especially those with SEND.

Key Findings

1. What worked for children with SEND on their return to school/college in September 2020?

- More than half of respondents were positive about how their SEND child was supported emotionally, socially and academically.
- Most schools/colleges took measures to ease the transition back to full-time education in September 2020 - 79% in advance, 85% on the return.
- The most effective advance preparations were in the form of visual supports, visits to school and one-to-one meetings with a member of staff.
- Once back at school, clarity of information in terms of clear communication about the new rules and clear signage were most important. Smaller classes and 'bubbles' were also particularly helpful.
- More than a third of parent carers reported that schools had paid greater attention to emotional wellbeing.
- Schools were reported to be more understanding and supportive of the social, emotional and academic needs of the children

2. What went well during the January/February lockdown for children with SEND?

- Overall, home learning was rated more positively than in the 2020 lockdown, with better organisation, more 'live' teaching, better quality online learning and improved access to learning.
- 76% of parents carers said their children had been engaged in home learning during the second period of lockdown and just over 50% described it as a positive experience.
- Some parent carers reported their children being better motivated and engaged and responding well to working flexibly and independently.

3. What have been the challenges of the second lockdown for parents and children?

- 54% of parent carers felt their child would be further behind their non-SEND peers after lockdown; those with a child in specialist provision were particularly concerned.
- 23% of parent carers said that as the online provision improved, so the academic demands increased.
- 1 in 5 parent carers thought the provision for personalised learning or differentiated work had got worse during the second lockdown.
- 3 in 5 parent carers said that their children missed family, friends and peers.
- 70% of parent carers were concerned about their children having too much screen time.
- Some parents commented on the loss of support for their children including access to respite, therapies or teaching assistant support.
- Parent carers of children with SEND in mainstream school were more likely to comment on increased anxiety.

4. The challenges of returning to school after lockdown and what helps

- The main challenges for children when they returned to school in September 2020 were social interaction, new routines, social distancing, academic work and staff changes.
- Many parent carers (58%) would like to see a greater focus on the management of emotions when returning to school.
- They also wanted better preparation for the return to school, including advance notice of timetables, one-to-ones with a member of staff, advance notice of who is in their 'bubble' and a checklist of how to prepare.

5. The positive outcomes of a year of disruption and lessons that can be taken forward

- 50% of parent carers said their child was less stressed during lockdown because they had not been at school.
- Others said their child enjoyed having less social interaction and spending more time with their parents.
- Some parent carers commented on how the school got to know their child better and become more child-led.
- Others were happy that greater attention was being paid to mental health.
- Some parent carers hoped for a more flexible approach to education moving on from here, including both home learning, online learning and time in class.
- Some children are not 'behind' and have learned a wider range of skills beyond the traditional curriculum - there should be a focus on what they have gained as well as lost.
- Some children have thrived at home

6. Recommendations

1. The findings from this report suggest there are opportunities, post-Covid, to create a more flexible and individually responsive school system - for ALL children not just for those with SEND - to learn and indeed to thrive.
2. On the return to school, time should be given to focus on the shared experiences of children (and indeed staff) during the period of the pandemic and this should be a starting point for attending to the social, emotional and academic needs for all children.
3. Continue to prioritise and give time to social, emotional and mental health as there was increased anxiety for many on the return to school in the autumn as well as during periods of lockdown.
4. Build on the advantages that technology brings – new ways to keep in touch, to deliver learning, to re-imagine therapies and to build stronger relationships with parents and families.
5. Identify, evidence and harness the strengths and abilities that children have developed during lockdown including greater creativity, improved technological and fine motor skills, improved independent learning and time management.
6. Reassess where children with SEND are academically, socially and emotionally and recalibrate child-centred targets from those starting points.
7. Develop more explicit teaching around social communication and interaction for children with SEND, but to support all children, in the post-pandemic period and develop stronger peer learning approaches in all areas.
8. Improve understanding of why children with SEND can become so anxious in school and how the school environment, processes, community, interactions and teaching can flex and adapt to change this.
9. All children with SEND should be offered school places during any period of lockdown.

INTRODUCTION

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on schools and colleges for all children and young people, not least through closures and the shift to home learning. Those with SEND are already a vulnerable group in the education system, often requiring specialist teaching and support. It was therefore considered important to explore the educational experiences of SEND children and young people throughout lockdown and on their return to school/college. An initial online survey was conducted in July 2020 with 480 parent carers with children with SEND on their experiences of the first lockdown in the spring/summer of 2020 and the report was shared widely. This second study follows up with the same parents, 75% of whom were happy to complete the second survey and the focus was to explore the educational experiences of SEND children and young people throughout lockdown and on their return to school/college.

AIMS AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study was to explore the educational experiences of children and young people with SEND during the Covid-19 crisis of 2020/21. The focus of this tranche of the study was to:

- Examine the experiences of children with SEND on their return to school during the autumn term 2020
- Understand experiences of the second lockdown in January and February 2021
- Explore the implications for teaching and learning for children with SEND poast-pandemic and as they return to school.

This brief report summarises what worked for children with SEND when they returned to school last September, what worked well during the limited school provision period of January/February 2021 and what the challenges were for children and families during this time. The recommendations focus on the learning from lockdown to inform future practice, including and beyond the initial return to school.

DATA COLLECTION METHOD AND PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

Ethical approval was obtained at the University of Sussex ethics board in June 2020. The survey was developed through a collaborative process that included parent carers who have children with SEND. Respondents for the initial survey were gathered via parent-carer forums, schools, Facebook posts and via social media.

At the first online survey in July 2020, 443 parent carers agreed to be recontacted for another survey later in the year. Among this group, 328 parent carers responded to the follow-up survey between 26 January and 14 February 2021. They were from multiple local authority areas in the UK but primarily from England.

- 68% of parent carers stated that their child attended mainstream education, 21% identified specialist provision, 2% home-education and 9% 'other' provision.
- 39% of parent carers stated that their child was in a primary setting, 44% in secondary, 6% in college.
- 36% of parent carers identified their child as aged 5-10 years, 57% 11-16 years, 5% 17-18 years and 3% 19 years or over.
- 64% of parent carers reported that their child has an education, health and care plan (EHCP).
- The range of participants' SEND was broad, with the biggest group identifying autism (71%). In addition, 38% mentioned specific learning difficulties (SpLD), 30% social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) and 20% speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). Other conditions included learning difficulties, physical difficulties and Down's Syndrome.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

1. What worked for children with SEND on the return to school last September?

Parent carers were asked to describe their child's initial experience of the return to school in September 2020 and then their experience by the end of term in December 2020. More than half were positive about how their child was supported emotionally, socially and academically. Overall, they were most positive about how their child coped emotionally, both initially and by the end of the term. Respondents also reported on what their child found helpful on their return to school in September 2020. One in five identified that not being at home was helpful for their child (22%), smaller classes and 'bubbles' (both 21%) and social interaction with peers (20%). Slightly fewer cited social distancing (18%), new routines (16%), hand sanitizing (16%), academic work (13%) and keeping to the new rules (12%).

One parent carer described the new rules as a positive because 'New rules meant bullies were less able to be an issue!'. Another focused on the school's support and under-standing:

"We were very grateful for the support and understanding from school and that there was no pressure or judgement when she was unable to get to or stay in school."

Most schools/colleges took measures to ease the transition back to full-time education in September 2020
The parent carers who participated in the first online survey in July 2020 recognised the significance to their children of how the return to school/college in September 2020 was going to be managed. This survey reports on how this transition was perceived to have unfolded.
Most (79%) reported that their child's school/college had taken measures in advance of the return in September 2020, leaving 21% that did nothing in advance to ease the transition. The measures cited most often by parent carers were as follows:

- Visual supports, eg. photos/videos (34%)
- A visit to the school/college before the start of term (25%)
- A one-to-one with a teacher, SENCo or teaching assistant (TA) (22%)
- Checklist of how to prepare for return to school (21%
- Advance notice of timetable (21%)
- Virtual tour of school to see how it looks (19%)
- Advance notice of who was in their 'bubble' (19%)
- Social stories about the return to school (17%).

Schools/colleges were more likely to have taken measures to ease the transition once children and young people had actually returned to school/college (85%), leaving 15% that did nothing. The measures reported most often related to clarity of information: clear communication about the new rules (63%) and clear signage (46%). More than a third of parent carers (34%) said that schools/colleges had paid greater attention to the management of emotions and 28% cited adjusted academic expectations. Fewer than one in five mentioned being in a small group to start with (18%) and social stories about being back at school (14%).

Some parent carers also wrote about how schools became generally more understanding and flexible, allowing their children to 'come home when she was emotionally spent' and 'work from home when anxiety was high and friends were isolating'. They also explained that there was a general focus on emotions for all children and young people in the first few weeks of term and greater 'emphasis placed on mental health rather than grades'; a few mentioned 'Zones of Regulation'. Some respondents also wrote about how schools had supported their children socially, allowing them to choose when and with whom they wanted to interact and ensuring that they could be with friends:

"Supported her friendship - ensured she was sitting with her friend and when it was initially planned for Scottish schools to go back part-time ensured she was in the same bubble as her friend."

In terms of what schools did to support children and young people academically, some parent carers wrote about catch-up lessons and less homework, as well as greater understanding:

"Staff communicated to children that they understood everyone would be at different points and that they would all catch-up."

2. What went well during the January/February lockdown for children with SEND?

Over half of parent carers (53%) said that their child had been offered schooling everyday during the current, January/February 2021, lockdown. The remainder attended less often or were not offered any schooling (15%), as the chart below illustrates:
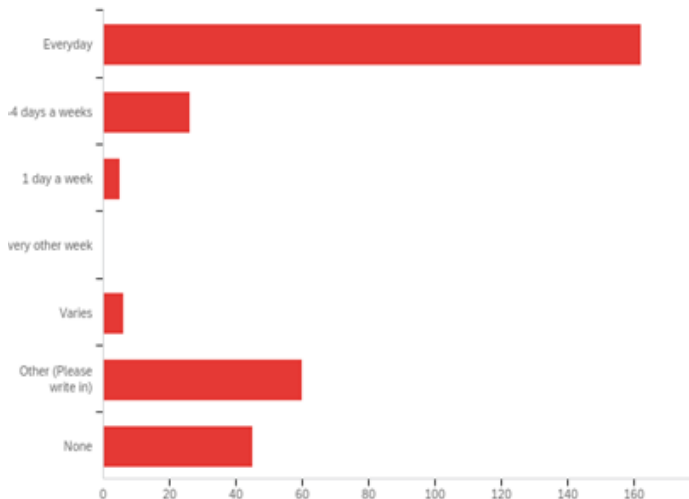
Among the 258 parent carers who stated that their child was offered schooling, half (50%) said that they had attended all of what was offered, while 24% attended some of it and 26% attended none. The following reasons were given for not attending all of what was offered:

- Child did not want to go back (33%)
- Prefer to keep her/him at home during COVID (30%
- Member of household is clinically vulnerable (18%)
- Don't feel school/college is safe (18%)
- Child is clinically vulnerable (10%)

Some parent carers could see that their child has benefitted from being at home during lockdown and being able to work more flexibly. They wrote about their child's increased motivation when working with their parents, making better academic progress at home, becoming more of an independent learner and learning new skills. One parent called for the lessons learnt during lockdown to be a 'catalyst for change' in education:

"By working at home, he is learning in a more personalised way. I think he will find it difficult to learn in a full school way again."

"Lockdown has suited him and he has progressed quite a lot compared with when at school - due to less fear and sensory overload and more 1-2-1."

".. has developed independent study skills and is more pro-active in seeking advice from staff at college. [--] has had the freedom to learn from experience (regarding time management), rather than resenting being told and ignoring advice. Reduction in direct demands has been helpful with motivation."

Home-learning is rated more positively than in the previous lockdown, but there are still areas for improvement:

Three-quarters of parent carers (76%) said that their child has been doing home-learning during the current lockdown in January/February 2021. Just over half described this as a positive experience (15% very positive and 40% fairly positive), while nearly three in ten rated it negatively (7% very negative and 21% fairly negative). Findings are slightly more negative among those whose children do not have an EHCP.
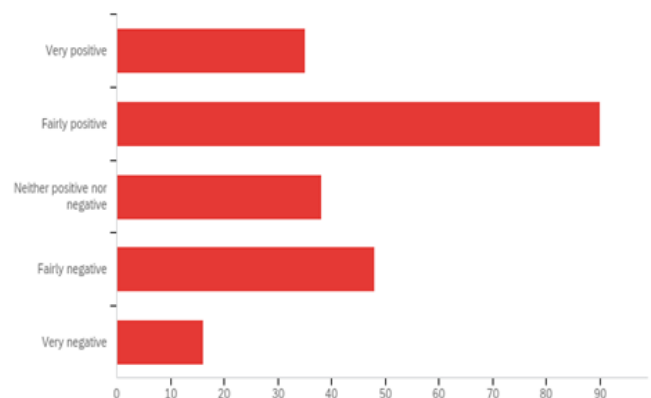
When respondents were asked to rate several aspects of their child's experience of home learning during the January/February 2021 lockdown compared with the first lockdown in spring/summer 2020, there was an overall picture of improvement in many areas. The aspects of home learning that received the most positive ratings in comparison with the previous closure of schools are: school/colleges' organisation of home learning (69% better), amount of 'live' online teaching (64%), quality of online learning (63% better), access to learning (59% better), amount of online learning (55% better), amount of work provided (53% better) and amount of work set (45%).

Some respondents suggested that their child was more engaged with online learning during the current lockdown:

"He seems more amenable to learning from home, which is helpful. Last year he point blank refused to do any."

3. What have been the challenges of the second lockdown for parents and children?

Over half (54%) of parent carers thought their child had fallen more behind than her/his peers who do not have SEND; 15% said they may have fallen further behind and 24% said they have not. Those with a child in specialist provision were particularly concerned about their child falling more 'behind'.

Areas that were rated as being worse than in the first lockdown and require particular attention are: amount of academic pressure from school/college (23% worse), personalisation/differentiation of work (20% worse), contact with parents (18% worse) and one-to-one contact with teachers (14% worse).

There is an overall sense that as online provision has improved, schools' academic expectations have increased, without any change in the amount of support for children and young people with SEN:

"My child usually receives specific support when at school, but none with online learning. There is no differentiation made for him."

Some parents spoke negatively about how the lockdown has been managed by government/schools/ colleges:

"As with my child's experience throughout her education, Covid has been no different: Mainstream schools struggle to differentiate with all aspects of a child who is autistic with a learning need, are seriously under-funded and lack the training. The handling of Covid was aimed at the average child. It's too hard to think of EHCPs, which is why legislation was suspended so they didn't have to think about it . Not much better this time around. Children who struggle will find it doubly hard to catch up and achieve."

"School should remain open for SEND children - even in periods of lockdown. And they should get some learning support at school."

"The lack of support from school and the LA has been shocking. We had to fight and push the school into providing anything - and we were forced to accept a lower standard of provision e.g. a social communication group delivered by a teacher with no experience of delivering this provision. Otherwise there would have been no provision in place. When he returned to school in September 2020, NONE of his EHCP was being delivered."

"I wish they would have a better timetable in place. Saying the day before they were due to go back to school: 'Sorry, you can't' was an absolute nightmare for us! My ASD daughter was distraught at the sudden change and wasn't offered a space at school for just over a week. Her dad and I are both keyworkers, but we don't work the same hours so she could technically be at home with one of us."

"Local authorities need to understand that SEND children have different learning styles and require alternative ways of learning. Not just be expected to sit at a computer and be like a performing monkey."

"It's really exposed how broken the system is. I don't think my child's school really thought about the impact it had on him, but they also didn't have the capacity to do anything more than the bare minimum. Academically it's been a disaster."

Parent carers were asked an open-ended question about how they think the current lockdown will impact their child when they return to school. Many were concerned about how their child would manage the transition from being at home to being in a busy school once again. They were also worried that being out of school for so long has had an impact:

"It has been a disaster for my son. He needs routine and structure, and socialising with his friends. I'm simply unable to give the assistance he needs academically. Discipline is a real problem, because I am not his teacher and so he can simply refuse to work in a way he would never do at school. The constant screen-learning does not engage him in the same way as face-to-face teaching. His self-esteem has plummeted, and his exercise levels have substantially reduced."

"His anxiety has dropped a lot. However, we are now really worried about his weight as he has been over-eating and is getting chubby. There isn't much opportunity to burn this off - especially as the weather isn't great right now!"

"My daughter has shut down and has an urgent emotional referral to CAMHS. She has deteriorated massively. She is 12. She has been signed off school since October. Sport was a massive element of her life before all this; she competed nationally in trampolining. She sleeps most of the day away now, and I have to remind her to eat and complete personal hygiene routines."

"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."

A particular concern related to children and young people's social interaction with peers and coping with extra noise and larger classes. Some wrote about how their child had enjoyed smaller classes and less children in school during lockdown and would struggle to transition back:

"She has done well during lockdown because it is a smaller class (max 15) and she gets very overwhelmed and struggles socially. She will struggle again socially when it goes back to a full class."

Some parent carers were also worried about how their child would adjust to the new routines of school. They wrote about how new routines and social interaction would be very tiring for their children:

"I think she will be very tired with all the social interaction and expectations being on her again."

Many respondents were concerned about the extent to which their child has fallen behind academically, either because home learning has been inadequate or because s/he had not engaged with it:

"This 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. He struggles anyway, and the period away from school has been really detrimental to his engagement with school work."

Some parent carers also wrote that the support provided for their child was inconsistent and inadequate:

"School said they weren't able to support my child's SEN learning. That it would just be childcare. He would get no help."

Other parent carers wrote movingly about their child's high levels of anxiety, self-esteem, lack of confidence and lack of independence since lockdown. Some of these said that their child would not be going back to school because they would no longer be able to cope with it:

"She is now under the child psychiatrist and has been prescribed Sertraline. She has been taking it for four weeks now and so far no change. She hardly leaves the house and is very distressed when schoolwork is mentioned... She is too anxious to join in the lesson, or even to write most days. I cannot see her going back to school without huge issues. She has said she never wants to go back."

"...However, after spending so much time at home this has increased my son's anxieties and he struggles to mask his emotions. His anxiety affects every part of his day and every online session causes a new anxiety as he is being asked to do things that other children can do independently - such as answering a question, or typing a comment in the chat. This is a torturous decision for my son - to pluck up the courage to engage in the chat with peers and teachers."

"I am really concerned about the future mental health of all children, but particularly those with additional needs."

"She has really struggled with the lack of routine, working at home (home and school don't mix EVER) Her already delicate mental health has been even severally impacted, she is getting even less support than she was before."

When parent carers were asked about the negative outcomes for their child during the whole period of COVID so far, from March until now, 70% mentioned too much screen time. Around three in five identified missing extended family (64%), missing friends/peers (61%), and getting used to less social interaction (57%); 54% cited lack of exercise for their child. Being behind with school work, anxiety about school, loneliness and fear about COVID were all mentioned by around two in five.

Respondents with a child who does not have an EHCP were particularly likely to identify the following as negative outcomes for their child of the whole period of COVID from March 2020 until now: missed friends/peers, too much screen time, has learnt less/more behind with school work and anxiety about school. The following comments encapsulates some of these issues:

"When a child has no formal diagnosis/EHCP, Secondary schools seem to forget about them. There is an over reliance on parents being able to work with the child (fortunately as a stay at home mum and ex teacher I have time and skills I can use, other parents must be struggling)."

"My daughter has needed lots of support from home and it can be draining given she is Year 9. No extra support is given if you're SEND but not EHCP. No one-to-one built up whilst in school, so my daughter won't interact personally with school when home schooling. I have requested since Y7 that she has a named contact that builds a rapport with her. If this had been put in place, I believe this would have helped."

Those with a child in a mainstream setting were more likely than those in specialist provision to mention anxiety about school and that they had got used to less social interaction. On the other hand, respondents with a child in a specialist setting were particularly concerned about the lack of exercise their child was getting.

Parent carers wrote also about the strain that the last year has put on them:

"Nightmare! As a single parent, I have so much pressure to get it right - from school and from my kids. Expectations are far too high! I'm really struggling to maintain this level of support for my kids. As a family, our mental health is really struggling and the family unit is breaking down. Hard as it is to work from home with young children also at home, it is near impossible with a loud, active, learning disabled child who does not respond to instruction, has meltdowns when his needs can't be met, and stims by constantly banging things all day and half of most nights."

"One size does not fit all. School sends letters home saying how well its suiting everyone. It makes us feel forgotten, ignored and different/a failure."

One area that would seem to be contributing to the pressure put on parent carers is the lack of access to teaching assistant and therapies, particularly Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHs):

"Although the lack of forced social interaction has helped him, because he cannot access the practical support of a TA in the same way, he has struggled to keep up and his work is unorganised and not in the same presentable standard it is in school due to having to rush through slides of text. [--] is generally less capable, with increased anti-social behaviours and increased obsessive behaviours than when he started school in November 2019. His observable/measurable cognitive function is lower than it was at age 3 (he's now 6). He has not so much slowed in his educational development, as rapidly regressed and it is extremely distressing to watch. Without school, he has had no access to any therapy or paediatrician or psychological assessments. He is at a crucial developmental stage, and through the combination of an obstructive, slow and adversarial EHCP process and Covid, he has missed out on nearly four years of desperately needed intervention. It's likely the window for speech and language development is now over and he will never improve beyond a speaking age of less than 18 months - and require full-time care for the rest of his life."

"I am utterly exhausted! I have 3 kids: a 12 year old daughter with undiagnosed ADHD and 10 year old twins, one of whom has quad CP and epilepsy. Usually I am up 4-5 times a night with [--], so during the school day I can rest a little. But with all three at home, there isn't a second to rest (or even go to the loo in peace), so I'm pretty tired. I'm also dealing with my eldest suffering with mental health difficulties due to lockdown, and some real struggles over home-based learning because concentration and focus aren't her best skills. I can't even get a diagnosis because CAHMS is so poor, so we are trying to help her manage without help."

4. The challenges of returning to school after lockdown and what helps

The key challenges for children and young people on the return to school in September 2020 were:

- Social interaction with peers (46%), particularly those with SEMH difficulties.
- New routines (40%), particularly those in mainstream school/college.
- Social distancing (38%), particularly those aged 5-10 years.
- Academic work (37%), particularly those in mainstream school/college.
- Staff changes (35%)
- Bubbles' (31%), particularly those in mainstream school/college.
- Hand sanitising (28%)
- Not being at home (28%)
- Masks (23%), particularly 11-16 year olds
- No clubs (22%), particularly 11-16 year olds.

Respondents also wrote about the challenge of being stuck in one classroom and not being able to move around the school. Break times were also described as difficult in terms of not having 'quiet' areas and not being able to mix with friends in other 'bubbles'. Others wrote about their child's frustration with their peers who did not keep to the social distancing rules and the number of times they had to self-isolate.

Parent carers would like more attention paid to the management of emotions and more measures taken in advance of the return to full- time education in the spring term of 2021

When respondents were asked what they thought would help to manage their child's next return to full-time school after the current, January/February 2021, lockdown, there was a greater focus on the management of emotions (58%), clear instructions about the new rules (47%), advance notice of timetables (43%) and one-to-ones with teacher, SENCo or TA prior to the return (42%).

The table below suggests that there are discrepancies between what schools/colleges did in September 2020 to ease the return and what parent carers hope will happen when they return after the January/February lockdown. A particular difference is in terms of schools/colleges paying greater attention to the management of emotions - 34% of respondents identified that schools did this in September 2020 while 58% said that it would help to manage their child's return after the current lockdown. A significantly high-er proportion of parents would also like to see greater attention paid to the following in advance of the return: providing advance notice of timetables; one-to-ones with teachers, SENCo or TAs in advance of the return; advance notice of who is in 'bubble'; and checklist of how to prepare for return to school. On the return to school after the current lockdown, more parent carers also stated that they would like there to be small groups to start with and adjusted academic expectations.

Comparing measures taken in autumn term 2020 with what parent carers hoped would happen
on the return to school after the January/February 2021 lockdown

	Measures already taken in autumn term 2020 %	Measures that would help manage return after January/February 2021 lockdown %
Visual supports, eg. Photos/videos	34	22
Visit school before start of term	25	18
One-to-one with teacher, SENCo, teaching assistant prior to return	22	42
Checklist of how to prepare for return to school	21	34
Advance notice of timetable	21	43
Virtual tour of school to see how it looks	19	14
Advance notice of who was in 'bubble'	19	35
Social stories about the return to school	17	24
Clear instructions about new rules	63	47
Clear signage at school	46	27
Greater attention to management of emotions	34	58
Adjusted academic expectations	28	38
Being in a small group to start with	18	30
Social stories about being back at school	14	N/A

5. The positive outcomes for SEND children of a year of disruption and lessons that can be taken forward

Although there is often a focus on the negative aspects of the impact of COVID on education, parent carers report some postives. They describe the key positive outcomes for their child of the whole period of COVID from March 2020 until now as:

- Less anxiety/stress/pressure (50%)
- No pressure for social interaction (49%)
- Enjoyed spending time with parents (47%)
- Being out of school/at home (38%)
- More free time (36%)
- Not having to wear uniform (34%)
- Enjoyed spending time with siblings (23%)
- Flexibility of timetable/ less routine (23%)
- Learned more at home/online/1:1 with parent/carer (21%)

Parent carers wrote about some of the things that have been done over the last year of school/college closures and restrictions that have resulted in greater inclusion for their child and a better experience of school/college. It is important to learn from these and take them forward when children and young people return to school/college. Some respondents commented that the school/college got to know their child better and has become more child-led:

"More discussions with the mentor have meant that they have learnt more about my daughter and realise that she 'masks' difficulties at school and presents herself as coping more than she actually is. I hope this will impact how they work with her going forward."

"To be child-led and child-centred more. And to see each child as an individual. Not to assume things about any child."

"Yes, it has demonstrated his strengths and how best to engage him."

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."

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

Others were happy that more attention was being paid to mental health:

"More online lessons, including one each week solely focused on 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!!"

Some parent carers expressed hope that the lesson learnt over the last year would lead to a more flexible approach by schools/colleges:

"Going forward, a mix of homeschool 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. Fining parents for anxious children is not the answer and makes anxiety increase. Allowing school to be the main diagnostic referrer is a disaster as they want to protect their budgets so they cannot be impartial in deciding what support a child needs."

"Education has adapted to use technology better. Now SEN and mental health services need to adapt fast, too. All three aspects need to work seamlessly together, now more than ever before. And they also need much more funding for professional and specialist staff (and less budget wasted on eligibility criteria & associated admin). 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. There also needs to be a gradual transition into adult [services], given that some teenage students with SEN may turn 18 before they have managed to access the education/SEN/mental health services that they were waiting for pre-COVID - or to address issues that have arisen in the past year."

"We have made the most of it and as a family been able to spend more quality time. I believe as a result, my children - who both have SEND - have learnt more important things in life than just GCSE's and formal school. My son has learnt practical skills, building and constructing, problem-solving and learning from his errors, rather than panicking and letting someone down. He flourished in lockdown 1 and has far more confidence in lockdown 2. My daughter has learnt more about herself. Her condition and has far more support for the emotional impacts, which has given her skills to emotionally regulate and manage her own mental health. She has also learnt more about animal care, growing and making things from scratch. It has been a pure pleasure to have them home and nurture them into young adults."

"Let's not just push the narrative that children are 'behind'. School teaching hasn't moved into the technological age. We teach as we did 50 years ago, whilst the rest of the world has moved on. Let's focus on what children have gained, how they have become resourceful, have found interests in other things, and how problem-solving and technology have helped them. My sons hand-eye coordination and concentration has improved dramatically (via the Xbox). He's learning research skills without having to visit a library (his dyslexia is profound, so looking anything up in a book is very difficult). This isn't the doom and gloom the media are so desperate to peddle."

Finally, one respondent talked about her own privilege in being able to home educate her child and highlights how this option is only available to those who can afford it:

"In the long run, I think we will look back at this as precious family time. I think, in academic terms, she has suffered far less than she would have if she had been at school. We are not constantly bracing ourselves for the latest government announcements re start dates, etc. as we are operating outside the system. However, I do realise that we are only able to extract these positive outcomes due to our privilege. I have given up my own teaching job in order to support my daughter. Many families could not afford to do this. It has become clear that SEN + social/economic deprivation is a truly damaging mix. The Government needs to address this huge issue (instead of relying on Marcus Rashford and other impressive/generous individuals to pick up the shortfall)."

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear from the findings of this research that, despites signicant improvements in home learning during the second lockdown, the provision has not worked well for many children with SEND during the past 12 months. However, given the positive experiences of children feeling less anxious and stressed during this time, it seems that the education system was not working well prior to the pandemic. As one parent suggested, 'It's really exposed how broken the system is.' The recommendations relate to children with SEND but are likely to benefit all children in making the education system more responsive and flexible. We would like to think that all children with SEND could 'feel happier in their own clothes' both literally and metaphorically as we move forward, post-pandemic to a more holistic and inclusive education system for all.

1. The findings from this report suggest there are opportunities, post-Covid, to create a more flexible and individually responsive school system - for ALL children not just for those with SEND - to learn and indeed to thrive. This could move away from fixed notions of the parameters of a school day or learning only taking place in the classroom and could draw on the positives of online learning and the newly enhanced technology skills of teachers.

2. On the return to school, time should be given to focus on the shared experiences of children (and indeed staff) during the period of the pandemic and this should be a starting point for attending to the social, emotional and academic needs for all children. While everyone has lived through the pandemic differently and individually, it is also the biggest, single shared experience of our lives.

3. Continue to prioritise and give time to social, emotional and mental health as there was increased anxiety for many on the return to school in the autumn as well as during periods of lockdown. Parent carers reported that schools did privilege the emotional well-being of children in the September return to school and this success should be further enhanced.

4. Build on the advantages that technology brings – new ways to keep in touch, to deliver learning, to re-imagine therapies and to build stronger relationships with parents and families.

5. Identify, evidence and harness the strengths and abilities that children have developed during lockdown including greater creativity, improved technological and fine motor skills, improved independent learning and time management.

6. Reassess where children with SEND are academically, socially and emotionally and recalibrate child-centred targets from those starting points. Each child has progressed in different ways and at different rates. Recalibrating baselines and developing ways forward across all areas (not just academic) should be a priority for children with SEND.

7. Develop more explicit teaching around social communication and interaction for children with SEND, but to support all children, in the post-pandemic period and develop stronger peer learning approaches in all areas. Some children with SEND have clearly struggled with social interaction in school, are apprehensive about returning as well as looking forward to seeing their friends. More attention to scaffolding peer relationships in school would benefit all children but would especially support those who experience challenges in social interaction.

8. Improve understanding of why children with SEND can become so anxious in school and how the school environment, processes, community, interactions and teaching can flex and adapt to change this.

9. All children with SEND should be offered school places during any period of lockdown. Only 53% of parent carers in this survey said that they had been offered school places during the second lockdown.