

Lockdown at home less stressful than school for children with special educational needs and disabilities

2 September 2020, by Eil Vowles

The majority of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) felt less stress and anxiety away from school and at home during lockdown, according to a survey of parent carers carried out by the University of Sussex.

Three out of five parent carers felt their child with SEND were less stressed, as lockdown allowed greater time spent with families, increased one-to-one time and greater flexibility to pursue own interests at home while removing the social pressures of school, requirement to wear uniform and experiences with bullies, the nationwide survey reveals.

But the study, carried out by the University of Sussex School of Education and Social Work, also details how four in ten parent carers of children with SEND felt they received no support from [education](#) or other agencies during lockdown.

Parent carers told the University of Sussex researchers they felt children with SEND had been overlooked and forgotten about. Some felt their children with education, health and care (EHC) plans should have been allowed to continue attending school and receiving one-to-one support.

Schools and government ministers are now being urged to take steps to ensure that the return to classrooms this week for children with SEND is a gradual, phased and slow-paced process in order to support the wellbeing of children.

Education experts at the University of Sussex are recommending teachers and schools focus on mental health, wellbeing, routines and relationships across the first term back rather than prioritising the catch-up on academic progress. They are also advising that schools incorporate the positive aspects of lockdown homeschooling and bring

them into the classroom environment.

Dr. Jacqui Shepherd, Lecturer in Education at the University of Sussex, said: "Our survey has shown that the experience of lockdown has been very different for different families but the message for a return to school is near unanimous; it must be phased and gradual, with priority given to routines, wellbeing and social aspects of education ahead of academic pressures.

"Teachers, teaching assistants and SENCOs should take time listen to parent carers and children with SEND, as they have had unique experiences that can be used to revitalize and improve education."

Dr. Christina Hancock, Lecturer in Primary Education at the University of Sussex, said: "Schools, teachers and SENCOs [[special educational needs](#) co-ordinators] should ensure personalized discussions with children and [parents](#) to fully understand their unique experiences through the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Using this knowledge will help to ensure the support is appropriate to the needs of the child. Some children might prefer highly structured activities across the first few days, whilst others need time and space to speak with their friends."

Parent carers surveyed this summer were divided over their perceptions on returning to school, with an equal number indicating their child was eager to go back as there were respondents who felt their child was not looking forward to the prospect.

Four out of five parent carers reported concerns about their children returning to school after many had been happy and more relaxed at home. They expressed a range of anxieties including: social

pressures, being bullied, being behind in their work, COVID risks, being in a new class or school with new children and adults, keeping up with homework and adapting to new routines.

For other parent carers, the return to school was seen as helpful because of the increasingly challenging verbal and physical behaviours shown at home, while some children were also keen to be with friends and back in a familiar routine. Nearly 90% of survey respondents identified personal stresses and problems at home related to the care and responsibility of supporting their child with SEND during lockdown.

Dr. Shepherd said: "In our survey, it was clear that parent carers of children with SEND had a number of concerns about returning to school including social interactions, social distancing, noise, all-day learning and transport arrangements.

"Parent carers also reported a preference for ensuring the current needs of children are assessed given that some children might be at a very different level socially, emotionally and academically than they were before lockdown."

Building on parent carers' concerns about returning to school this week, the experts at the University of Sussex have made a number of recommendations for schools and teachers designed to help ease the transition in a newly published report.

The recommendations include schools being prepared to incorporate technology, phased returns, one-to-one support, small-group work, social stories, checklist and visual supports to support children to transition back to full-time education as well as incorporating home learning preferences established over lockdown to allow them to be continued in the classroom.

Parent carers in the study have suggested schools use technology to further engage families into the [school](#) day or to conduct virtual tours walking pupils through all the changes related to the learning environment. Parents also told researchers that the use of a checklist or social stories would help ease anxieties for returning children by providing clarity around changes such as social distancing rules.

Dr. Hancock said: "We believe the significant changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic have created an opportunity to revitalize education for children with SEND if schools, government and policymakers consider retaining or adapting the aspects that worked well across the home learning experience.

"Although parents encountered many challenges in homeschooling during lockdown, our survey shows they clearly had some positive experiences that enhanced learning and reduced anxieties, such as more time with their families, greater flexibility, the ability to pursue personal interests and limited social pressures.

"Parents found that small aspects such as their children deciding their own routines or taking a break when needed were all beneficial, and these could be continued in the classroom.

"Embedding these positive aspects of homeschooling into schools offers the potential for real and lasting impact for [children](#) with SEND and would significantly enhance their classroom learning experience."

More information: Education and COVID-19: Perspectives from parent carers of children with SEND: www.sussex.ac.uk/webteam/gateway...ucation-and-COVID-19—perspectives-from-parent-carers-of-children-with-send.pdf&site=26

Provided by University of Sussex

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