

Lessons

learnt from

LOCKDOWN

The highs and lows of the
pandemic's impact on disabled
children and young people

Children and Young People's Summary



Department
for Education



NATIONAL
CHILDREN'S
BUREAU

Part of the family

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges to all children and young people, and even more so for children and young people with special education needs and disabilities (SEND).

Yet we haven't heard much from children and young people with SEND about their experience of the pandemic. The large number of children and young people who took part in this consultation shows us how much children and young people with SEND want to be heard and how much they have to say.

What we did

During February and March 2021 more than 643 children and young people with SEND, 128 parents and 110 professionals who work with or support young people with disabilities shared their views and experiences of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

We worked with young people and their support workers to choose the questions for the surveys and focus groups. We made sure that young people had enough time to think about the questions before the focus groups and that they could choose how they felt most comfortable expressing their views.

We wanted to find out:

- **How the pandemic has been for them? What has been the impact of the pandemic on them? What was most difficult? Have there been any positive things?**
- **What additional support young people will need to help as the lockdown ends and schools go back?**
- **Is there anything we can learn from the experience that could help improve things in the future for children and young people with SEND.**

Over 643 children and young people took part in this consultation. This highlights how much young people with SEND had to say and how important it was to schools, youth groups and parents to support them to express themselves.

“Thank you so much for visiting our project last night...the young people all fed back at the end of the session that they really enjoyed being able to share their opinions.” (Professional)

**“It was great being back and telling our side of how covid affects us”
(Young Person)**

Who took part?

In total

- **425 children and young people took part in focus groups.**
- **218 shared their views and experiences through the online survey.**
- **128 parents completed the survey.**
- **110 professionals who work with children and young people with SEND completed the survey.**
- **Slightly more young men participated than young women.**
- **The young people participating lived all over the country.**
- **The young people who took part had more than 50 different disabilities, health or learning support needs.**
- **The majority of children and young people who took part in the consultation via survey monkey described themselves as White. The focus groups reached a more diverse range of young people with 1/3 of the 425+ young people taking part in the focus groups describing themselves as either Black, Asian or from another ethnic minority background.**

This report highlights the common themes that came out of the online surveys and focus groups. We have given more priority and space to the voice and experience of young people are the least heard perspectives.



What did they say?

→ MISSING FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Children and young people told us:

- That they really missed friends and family. Sometimes it was hard to understand why they couldn't see people or hug them.
- When you don't see your friends for a long time you don't get to practice social skills and it can be hard, a bit awkward or difficult when you see people again.
- Some young people felt lonely, sad or depressed because they couldn't be with their friends or family members.
- Other young people liked the fact that they didn't see so many people. This was often when they found social interaction difficult or when they had experienced bullying at school.
- Sometimes even when young people said they were happy not really going out and seeing people, parents worried that they were getting withdrawn and forgetting their social skills.
- Some young people liked that they got to spend more time with their parents, brothers or sisters. There was time to cook, garden and watching TV together. This was important.
- Young people appreciated that they had learnt how to connect with friends online. Computer gaming was a way that many young people found helpful and fun to stay in touch with friends.
- Some young people said communicating with people online actually made it easier because the screen would put the person speaking big, you could turn off your camera and also there was less pressure to read non-verbal cues.
- Pets were one of the key relationships that helped young people get through this period. Pets became their confidants and best friends.

**“I have been unable to remain in touch with many of my friends and have felt quite isolated and sad. There is only me and mum at home”
(Young Person)**

**“I like that nowhere is busy and people I don’t know can’t be too close because I have social anxiety and trouble talking with others”
(Young Person)**

“I have been able to spend more time with my older brother going cycling and walking the dog. I have learned how to play Pool and Darts with my family” (Young Person)

“I have found it easier to talk to people online rather than in-person. Video meetings make it easier to not worry whether I am maintaining the appropriate amount of eye contact during conversations” (Young Person)

“My pets - cats know when you are sad or unwell - stroking them relaxes me when am not in a good place” (Young Person)



→ NOT ENOUGH SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES

Support for children and young people with SEND and their families changed a lot during lockdown. Some things stopped, like support groups and respite care, assessments and health and social care meetings went online.

People told us:

- **There was less support at a time when they probably needed it the most. Professionals were also often aware of this and worried about it.**
- **Assessments and appointments were cancelled, delayed and rescheduled.**
- **Professionals were concerned that online support and sessions were less engaging and accessible. They were unable to use a lot of play-based activities or go on trips that they would normally do.**
- **Announcements and information about COVID rules could be confusing and not accessible to young people.**
- **Having meetings online with professionals and support workers worked really well for some young people and their parents. It saved time and money, worry about travel. Some young people felt more confident participating in meetings online.**
- **Other young people said they would much prefer meetings to be face to face.**

“We have gone from supporting families multiple times a week to next to nothing. Routine is so important for a lot of the families we support, the impact of a child being with our provision, is also respite for the family. This has all changed and we have seen families really struggle” (Professional)

“I have had some of my young people participate in their PEP and EHCP meetings online which they would have usually not done had it been a face to face meeting - they have been able to turn their cameras off or mute themselves when they wanted to” (Professional)

→ **LEARNING ONLINE OR IN SCHOOL**

Young people had very different experiences of home-schooling or going into school during lockdown. Some young people really didn't enjoy studying online from home. Other young people preferred it. The feedback showed us how important it is to listen to individual young people and their preferences about learning.

- **Online lessons were hard to understand or keep up sometimes, lessons were not adapted for children and young people with SEND. Parents sometimes found it hard to help.**
- **It could be hard to get help when you were studying at home. Young people also said it was boring and easy to disengage if you were staring for too long at the screen. It wasn't the same as having the teacher in front of you.**
- **Some young people didn't have laptops or tablets that worked well or their Wi-Fi connection wasn't very good.**
- **Some young people preferred home-schooling. There was less noise and sensory overload. They could work in their own time and take breaks when their mental or physical health needed it and they could withdraw socially or take cameras off without missing out on learning.**
- **The children and young people who returned to school often liked it. They enjoyed the smaller class sizes, more one to one time with teachers and quieter communal areas.**

**“I usually get a lot of support at school from my teaching assistants but I have not had this. My parents both work and don't always have time to do my home schooling with me. I get very frustrated when I don't understand something and then I have no help. It makes really angry, I feel me like I have been left”
(Young Person)**

**“I don't understand the online lessons, I find them difficult”
(Young Person)**

“when I have a day when I am tired or not up to feeling like going out, it is OK as I can go online and turn off the camera and listen.

That is not always easy face-to-face”

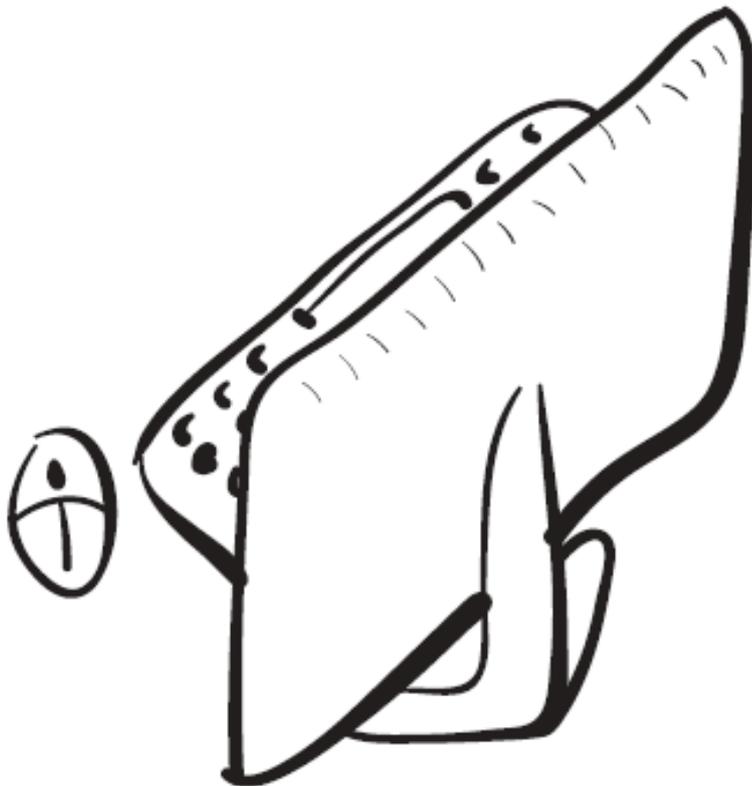
(Young person)

“I’ve enjoyed my independent work and I’ll probably struggle with the visual overload and noise going back to school”

(Young Person)

“I think we should have a medium between online and in person school, perhaps (for example) every Tuesday we are online, then Wednesday we come in person to school”

(Young Person)



→ CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

The COVID -19 pandemic has been a really worrying time for young people for lots of reasons. Not having a clear routine and having lots of change can be really upsetting. Missing friends, family and the fun activities and hobbies that young people normally did was stressful. It put a lot of pressure on young people's emotions and mental health. It has impacted on young people's physical health as well as people found it hard to be as active as before and health appointments have been moved online, delayed or cancelled.

Young people said:

- They felt sad, lonely or angry during the lockdown.
- The lack of routine was really unsettling for some young people and sometimes this meant that they got more anxious and their behaviour was more challenging for those people looking after them.
- A lot of young people worried a lot about getting COVID or passing it on to loved ones.
- Some young people were said they were worried about going back to school or being around lots of people again.
- COVID restrictions actually helped some young people's mental health. Quite a few young people said that they liked home-schooling and enjoyed the extra time to rest at home. They could create calmer environment with less noise than school and this suited them.
- Young people's fitness levels had been going down because they couldn't take part in their normal sporting activities and life was very much confined to the home.
- Sleep patterns had also been really disrupted.
- Some older young people had to attend medical treatment by themselves and this was really difficult for them.
- Medical appointments online were seen as a positive by some young people but others still preferred to see doctors face to face.

**“I get angry more often”
(Young Person)**

**“Being away from school has made me even sadder and I don’t
like feeling like it, now when I eat I feel sick so I don’t eat”
(Young Person)**

**“I have been sleeping better during lockdown- because it’s been
quieter and there is nothing to stress about in the morning”
(Young Person)**

**“I have enjoyed having more time to reflect on my behaviour, beliefs
and thought systems. I have had the time to re-evaluate if the people
in my life are causing me more good than bad”
(Young Person)**





→ RETURNING TO SCHOOL SAFELY

Young people were worried about how to reopen schools and clubs safely. Concerns included not finding it easy to understand the rules, worries that people were not sticking to the rules and generally being very worried about catching or passing on COVID-19.

“Please make sure that young people with SEND are prioritised first when our age group are inline to be vaccinated”

(Young Person)

“It’s hard to understand some of the things Boris does say I get very confused with the big words”

(Young Person)

Recommendations

→ YOUNG PEOPLE'S MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING

- When schools open up don't just put pressure on to catch up with school work. There needs to be more time for talking about feelings, learning to be with friends again and doing fun things to help young people become confident and happy again.
- Open and / or restart youth clubs, sports and outdoor activities (including social clubs for neuro-diverse young people) and extra curriculum activities.
- Provide more mental health support services including bereavement support and support for children and young people who worry lots about COVID-19.
- Make sure that we keep some of the extra downtime / family time that happened during lockdown. Before COVID-19 young people often had very 'busy' lives that could be overwhelming on the senses and stressful.
- Consider limiting COVID-19 news stories on TV until after watershed as these can be really worrying.
- Get more 'therapy' pets both in school settings and at home (where appropriate). Pets can really help a lot of young people in difficult times.



A 'one size fits all' approach doesn't work

- It's really important to have a clear routine for young people but also choice as young people all need different things.
- Keep smaller class sizes and extra one to one support where needed.
- Keep some choice and the option for some young people to continue online learning. Especially for those children who cannot come into school yet for physical or mental health reasons or people who really did well learning from home. Then they can still be connected to school when they can't come in.
- Help children and young people to participate in their Education, health and care plan reviews and Personal Education Plan meetings online.
- Provide more training for school staff and teachers about supporting children and young people with SEND.
- Ensure children and young people have the correct technology and access to Wi-Fi to be able to access school from home when they need to.
- Create the school systems and environment where school staff / teachers can implement the things they learn on training to support children and young people with SEND.

Make sure we can return safely to school:

- Give clear messages about COVID safety and make sure the information is accessible.
- Give vaccinations for staff working with SEND young people.
- Develop plans for Educational psychologists and Speech and language therapists to return to school and face to face visits safely.
- Don't keep changing the rules about COVID.

Young people, parents and professionals all recognised that for many of these recommendations to happen there would need to be a commitment to funding and resourcing the education, health and social care sectors and voluntary sector adequately to be able to deliver.

Conclusions

The experiences that children, young people, parents and carers have highlighted through this report clearly communicates the difficulties, pain, anxiety and stress of the last year. For many families it has been an incredibly challenging period.

However, in the stories about what has helped people get through this period there is a glimpse of a possible future where there is a bit more time to relax, consolidate, be flexible, take time with loved ones and explore interests. Where young people can be in learning environments with smaller class sizes, less sensory overload, more one to one support or the option to engage online when that suits an individual young person. We can begin to see and explore possibilities for an alternative vision where we have learnt the lessons from this experience and commit to keeping those elements that can work, to create a better future for children and young people with SEND.

→ ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A big thank you to the hundreds of children, young people, parents and practitioners from across England who took time to share their views in the focus groups and on the survey.

The consultation was co-designed by FLARE, the national young SEND advisors to the Department for Education.

→ ABOUT KAIZEN

The Council for Disabled Children asked Kaizen to design and deliver this consultation. Founded in 2000, Kaizen have delivered dozens of consultations with tens of thousands of people. They have worked with thousands of children and young people including in hundreds of schools, and in community organisations and premier league football Academies. For more about Kaizen, see www.kaizen.org.uk

Making Participation Work

This resource has been created by the Council for Disabled Children as part of the Making Participation Work programme, a joint partnership between the Council for Disabled Children and KIDS, and funded by the Department for Education. For more information about the Making Participation Work programme, visit us at:

<https://councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/our-work/participation/practice/making-participation-work>

