

## Returning to School – Children with SEND

The survey 'Returning to School – Children with SEND' for parents and carers of children and young people with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities was launched on 1 July. It ran until 24 July 2020, was promoted by email and social media, and received 336 responses.

We (Sheffield City Council – SCC and Sheffield Parent Carer Forum - SPCF) carried out the survey to investigate opinions about children's return to education in September. We also wanted to find out about any learning from lockdown that could be used to improve support to children with SEND in future.

The survey asked three questions:

1. What questions or concerns do you or your child have about their return to school in September?
2. Are there things that the school or setting needs to be aware of to ensure a good transition back to school?
3. Have there been any positives for you and your child during lockdown that we could build on in the future?

This report provides a summary of the responses and recommendations for schools, parents/carers, young people and services. Comments are available in the accompanying document: Appendix: Returning to School – Children with SEND, parent and carer responses by theme<sup>1</sup>.

### Recommendations coming out of the survey

#### Schools / Education providers:

- Communication - Contact children with SEND and their families to discuss specific concerns they have. Maintain good communication, especially now and through the first few weeks of term. Provide clear information about what school will look like, including in accessible formats such as social stories, as soon as possible.

Good communication with families has been emphasised throughout COVID-19. If schools haven't already done so, it is strongly recommended that contact is made with families, before the start of term, to discuss their child's individual needs and concerns. This will help to allay any difficulties children may face on their return.

- Meeting needs – Recognise that immediate challenges for children need to be addressed but that they may not be long term challenges, so regular review of progress throughout the coming academic year is essential. Put the SEN provision a child needs in place, whilst recognising that this may need to be

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<sup>1</sup> Please request this by emailing [kate.hughes@sheffield.gov.uk](mailto:kate.hughes@sheffield.gov.uk) or [john.featherstone@sheffield.gov.uk](mailto:john.featherstone@sheffield.gov.uk)

adapted within new bubble models. Discuss any changes to provision with parents as soon as possible. Where parents ask for a more flexible approach, consider carefully with them how reasonable adjustments can be made. Continue to follow good practice on meeting SEN needs. EHC plans must once again be implemented in full. The work that would ordinarily be done to assess and support children should continue under COVID-19 measures.

- Transition - Make sure that, as far as is possible, all the usual transition activity that you would do to ensure that children are supported has been done, including sharing of information with staff. Acknowledge in your communication to families that the transition back into school may be challenging and encourage parents to get in touch with the SENCO if they have any questions or concerns.
- Medical needs - Talk to parents whose children are clinically vulnerable or clinically extremely vulnerable about their health plan. These children should be identified to you by health services.
- Well being - Have a clear plan to support children's emotional well being and anxiety and communicate this to parents and pupils.

#### **Parents/carers:**

- Talk to your school / education provider about your concerns and questions.
- Read the guidance published by public health on returning to school safely: [www.sheffield.gov.uk/backtoschoolsafely](http://www.sheffield.gov.uk/backtoschoolsafely)
- Read guidance produced by SCC and CAMHS for parents on supporting children to return to school: <https://tinyurl.com/y6y2gpty> and <https://tinyurl.com/y5h3k93n>
- Read tips from Sheffield Parent Carer Forum about how to help your child prepare to return to school/their setting: <https://tinyurl.com/y3t2c8h9>

#### **Children and young people:**

- Listen to your school and parents about how school will be different. Ask for help if you need it. Know that everyone is working hard to make sure that you get the help that you may need.

#### **Services:**

- Have a plan as to how you will support children who are struggling with the return to education.
- Encourage education providers and parents to contact you if they are experiencing difficulties.
- Provide reassurances to families about how you will support children in the 'new normal.'

## Survey findings

The findings to each question have been summarised below.

### Q1: What questions or concerns do you or your child have about their return to school in September?

Key concern	Points raised by parents and carers
COVID-19 safety, health and hygiene	Particular concerns were around if the child/someone in their household was clinically vulnerable and previously shielding.
Children catching up with learning	Many parents are concerned that their children with SEND have fallen further behind and become more isolated during lockdown. How will they be helped to catch up, both academically and in terms of wider skills?
Transition arrangements	Many parents had concerns about their child's ability to cope with transition as most of the usual transition activities had to be cancelled. Families asked for more information about their child's new school/class.
How social distancing will be explained and maintained	Parents were concerned that Children with SEND will find the new rules hard to understand and follow and may be penalised for this. Will school staff still provide personal care/support and how can children cross bubbles to access IR/nurture support?
School transport	Concern was raised about social distancing on minibuses and public transport, and the mixing of bubbles.
Children's anxieties about returning to school	Parents/carers want to know what support will be available for children who are anxious about the return to school.
Adapting to returning to school	Children with SEND more likely to struggle to adapt – parents were concerned this will lead to challenging behaviour and/or school refusal.
Appropriate support	Some parents/carers said their child would need more support following the COVID-19 lockdown. Many parents worried that support for their child might be reduced.
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Will children be able to have a phased return?</li> <li>• Will parents be fined if they don't send their child to school?</li> <li>• Will EHCPs be enforceable again?</li> <li>• Will there be changes to exams?</li> </ul>

Parent/carer quotes included:

- *I would like to know whether specific arrangements are in place for children who have health needs / vulnerabilities and have been shielding.*
- *What provision will there be for catch up for work that has been missed? Will my child get extra support, above that they already get for SEN?*
- *Lack of transition, meeting new teachers and support staff is causing extreme anxiety.*
- *I really don't think I am going to be able to get her back [into school]!*
- *... I don't believe that she would safely follow any social distancing put into place within school or remember to follow proper procedures for hand washing.*

**Q2: Are there things that the school or setting needs to be aware of to ensure a good transition back to school?**

<b>Key theme</b>	<b>Points raised by parents and carers</b>
Anxiety about returning to school	Parents wanted schools to know that their children were anxious about school following the COVID-19 lockdown, particularly in relation to the virus, friendships, separation from parents, coping with change.
Specific issues relating to child's individual needs	Parents worried that important information about their child's needs, the impact of lockdown and support/accommodations required for the return to school may not have been passed on to new teachers.
Importance of following guidance / hygiene measures	Parents wanted schools to understand their concerns about implementing infection control measures and supervise/support children who struggle to comply with them.
General readjustment to being back in school	Many parents said their child will need extra support and flexibility to adapt – some parents/carers asked for a phased return. Parents stressed the importance of reducing sensory overload and help to re-establish friendships.
Suggestions to aid transition	The more accessible information schools can provide about what to expect, the better. Suggestions also included: virtual or face-to-face meetings / school visits before start of term; introducing homework slowly; providing a keyworker / trusted adult to talk to; buddying; extra support; catch-up tutoring; and a focus on emotional wellbeing and re-establishing friendships. Parents said good home-school communication – and listening to parents – is vital.

Parent/carer quotes included:

- *My worry is I won't even be able to take him into school to settle him with everything as it is so will end up having to leave him hysterical at drop off time.*
- *They need to know the needs of my child. The psychological issues COVID-19 and no school have caused the anxiety...*
- *Awareness that lots of SEND children will have been very isolated for months, many not having many friends or any contact with their schoolmates... SEND kids very likely to be even more socially isolated and lonely.*
- *He doesn't want to go back full time... Expecting him to go in and hit the ground running in September full-time is unrealistic at best and the death knell of his school experience at worst.*
- *I hope they will be extremely caring and understanding.*

**Q3: Have there been any positives for you and your child during lockdown that we could build on in the future?**

<b>Key theme</b>	<b>Points raised by parents and carers</b>
Family time	More quality time as a family.
Schools communicating well	Many parents/carers said schools had supported them well throughout lockdown, but others said that they had not.

<b>Key theme</b>	<b>Points raised by parents and carers</b>
Children learning new skills /learning in new ways	Some parents said their child had benefitted from more personalised learning, less social pressure, more 1-2-1 attention and fewer distractions. Some felt it would be useful to continue remote learning but others had not been able to engage their child in this.
Reduction in child's anxiety/increased happiness	Some parents said their children thrived being at home as school creates anxiety and stress for them. For others it was the opposite.
No negative elements of school	Respite from social pressures and bullying, being less tired, not having to rush around in the morning, and reduced anxiety.
Speech & language development	Some children's communication had improved through more one-to-one attention at home.
Increased physical activity & exercise	Some children had been more physically active, benefitting their physical health.
Smaller classes in the summer term	A number of parents reported that their child had benefitted from smaller class sizes, more support, and a quieter environment.
Better understanding	Some parents/carers got to know & understand their child better – particularly their educational level and learning needs.
Benefits of home schooling / 1:1 learning	Several people noted their child had benefitted from more one-to-one working, and less rushing around. A number of families felt that the benefits were so significant that they wanted their child to have a more flexible approach to education, including continuing some learning at home.

Parent and carer quotes included:

- *Communication is the key, even if the message is not always positive it's so important just to be told what is going on.*
- *He is a totally different child without the pressure of school.*
- *We have spent more time on early reading activities and I believe that my son's speech and language has improved...*
- *... reduced anxiety levels due to the reduced numbers of children / people in the building and the increased space available.*

## **Conclusions**

The survey shows that the experience of families of children with SEND has been varied with both substantial challenges and positives. It showed that many families had significant concerns about their child's return to school, and many unanswered questions. Education provides need to engage with families to provide the information and reassurance they need as their child returns to education. It is important that education providers and support services continue to work to address individual needs to enable children to make good progress as they return to more formal education, through continued implementation of support, monitoring of progress and assessment of the challenges that children face, always working closely with families.

Recommendations are set out at the start of this report.