No
Isolation

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and other health concerns on school attendance in the UK in the 2020-21 school year

Research Study

4 August 2020

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Key findings

● The survey of parents/carers found that 82% of children are expected to attend school in person in September 2020, 6% are not, and 12% are undecided. The percentage who are not expected to attend in person in January 2021 is the same (6%).

● Students from higher socio-economic groups were significantly more likely than those from lower socio-economic groups to have access to learning materials from their school (90% as opposed to 82%) and to remote exercises with classmates (30% compared to 15%).

● Coronavirus presents health vulnerabilities for a group of children who previously have not missed school because of illness. 57% of children who were reported to have a condition making them vulnerable to coronavirus did not previously miss school because of their condition.

● The primary reasons for non-attendance were health concerns over coronavirus. The most common reason given was the risk of a healthy child contracting coronavirus and becoming ill, and the second-most common reason was the risk of a household member catching coronavirus from the child.

● Mental health challenges that have emerged or grown during the pandemic were a reason for non-attendance for 2% of all children in the sample. This represents a substantial number of children at the national level, and a significant increase from pre-pandemic absence rates.

● Children from wealthier families are more likely to return to school in person. The data show with a high confidence level that a larger percentage of children from higher socio-economic groups (55%) plan to attend school in September than those from lower socio-economic groups (45%).

● Previous or pre-existing health conditions are cause for concern for attending school. 6% of children were recorded to have a serious medical condition or illness that caused them to miss school in the past. 68% of these children were likely to attend school in September and 10% were not (above the overall percentage of 6%).

● Owing to the pandemic, 76% of parents and carers are worried that their children are lonely some of the time, often, or all of the time.

Introduction

In June 2020, as schools in England partially reopened after months of closure in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this study began to assess the prospect that not all children might return to attendance in person. The pandemic has created enormous challenges for children's education, not just from the physical closure of schools, but in the health concerns and uncertainties facing children and their families. This report focuses on the conditions and number of children and young people aged 5-16 in the UK who are unlikely to return to school in the coming academic year (2020-2021). While the current policy in all UK nations is for schools to reopen fully in August or September, this report finds that a significant number of children may not attend in person and that many children are likely to be at a lasting disadvantage if adequate support is not made available.

The report is a continuation of a series of conversations and studies about children and young people who experience serious or prolonged absence from school due to illness. In June 2019, the groups No Isolation and Tomorrow Today convened a roundtable discussion on the topic with various stakeholders in education and policy, and published a summary report. The discussion highlighted some of the gaps and successes in assessing the scale and nature of the affected population and in the provision of services. It found that with no comprehensive dataset to record children absent for significant periods of their education because of chronic or serious illness, it remains difficult to make responsive and effective policy about the issue.[1]

A year later, the availability of relevant data is even more important to respond to the education and health crises. At this critical period in which the educational and social development of children is at stake, this study has sought to better understand the concerns of parents about their children going back to school, the circumstances for vulnerable children and households, and the scale of conditions affecting school return. It is hoped that this information will be helpful in preparing for the coming academic year, so that learning in person or remotely can take place with necessary support and safety.

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1   No Isolation, "Invisible Children: Serious Illness, Prolonged School Absence and Long-Term Impact," 2019, https://www.noisolation.com/global/research/invisible-children/.

Structure

The report has three main parts: a short summary of relevant government guidance and of schoolchildren statistics, a review of corresponding research on the impact of school absences for certain children groups, and a survey of parents and carers on their attitudes to their children returning to school in the coming school year. It concludes with a set of general recommendations that amplify suggestions from other education and health organisations.

Methodology

The research and writing of this report took place between June and July 2020. The survey was conducted by the panel research company Panelbase between 8-17 July. It collected responses from 1,005 parents/carers of children aged 5-16. Quotas were applied to the survey so that the participant spread was weighted by socio-economic group of respondent and by age and sex of child to provide a representative sample of children in the UK. The survey asked about the respondent's background, living arrangements, and children's circumstances. In homes with multiple children, it asked for the age and sex of every child and further questions about just two of the children under the respondent's care in order to maintain participant engagement and preserve representative quotas. The respondent's socio-economic group was calculated by Panelbase through a question about the professional level of the main income earner in the household. Where wider population estimates were made, these were extrapolated using the percentage and population statistics described below.

Limitations

This is a large and fluid topic given the numerous shifts in government policy and public opinion about schools reopening over recent months. Attitudes and policy are liable to keep changing with new developments in coronavirus treatment or the rate of infection. It is hard to establish with precision the number of students likely to miss school in the coming school year, so this study uses survey data and concurrent studies to make reasonable predictions. The survey provides something of a snapshot of opinion, contextualised by the description of different health circumstances that will factor into whether certain children are able to attend school in person. Further research might incorporate case studies to better understand child and parent/carer concerns.

School and attendance data were not always available or readily comparable. For example, statistics from independent schools were not publicly accessible, and devolved governments measure certain school data differently. It would be desirable to have more survey data specific to local authorities and regions to better understand the scale of the issue in specific areas. The survey found 6% of children were reported to also live in another household some of the time. These children may have different levels of support or resources in the other household, for which the survey was unable to account.

Acknowledgments

Government guidance and statistics

Government guidance on attendance

Each of the devolved territories is responsible for their own public health measures and education policy. At time of writing, all plan for schools to reopen fully in August or September, with slightly different practices in place for how schools will accommodate students given new health concerns. Controversially, in England the government has specified that attendance will be mandatory, raising the possibility that parents whose children miss school will be fined. The decision to penalise parents would likely be at the discretion of headteachers, an outcome that has been criticised for putting headteachers in a difficult position.[2] The government announcement that schools in England would reopen fully in September occurred on 2 July, almost a week before this study's survey was launched. It is likely the guidance contributed to greater public confidence in the prospect of children returning to school in the new school year.

Government guidance on shielding

The UK health authorities advised over 2 million people to shield (by taking additional action to prevent coming into contact with COVID-19) for having pre-existing conditions considered to make them extremely vulnerable to severe illness from COVID-19. The guidance was partially relaxed in early July to allow people shielding to gather in small groups outdoors, and from 1 August it no longer advises clinically extremely vulnerable people to shield. In response to the shift in guidance, the carers membership charity Carers UK has called for care and support services to be reinstated as soon as possible.[3]

Among those advised to shield as part of the initial response to the pandemic were several thousand children and young people. As evidence and research has developed over the past few months, the guidance on which children are at the highest risk of severe infection has been updated. The government has adopted the advice of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) on shielding, which recommends that most children and young people do not need to shield after 31 July. It notes that for many children with conditions such as cerebral palsy and scoliosis, "the benefits of school - in terms of access to therapies and developmental support - outweigh the risk of infection."[4] The RCPCH website provides an updated list advising certain children with immunodeficiency, immunosuppression, or oncology to continue shielding, alongside further guidance.[5]

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2   Geoff Barton, "Where's Plan B in the Government's Reopening Plans?," Tes, July 2020, https://www.tes.com/news/coronavirus-back-to-school-plan-future-government-confusion.
3   Carers UK, "Carers UK Responds to Government's Easing of Shielding," 2020, https://www.carersuk.org/news-and-campaigns/press-releases/carers-uk-responds-to-government-s-easing-ofshielding.
4   Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, "UK Government Adopts RCPCH Guidance on Children and Shielding," 2020, https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/news-events/news/uk-government-adopts-rcpch-guidance-childrenshielding.
5   Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, "COVID-19 - 'shielding' Guidance for Children and Young People," 2020, https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/resources/covid-19-shielding-guidance-children-young-people.

Statistics on schoolchildren

The number of schoolchildren in the UK can be calculated by combining national datasets. This report uses the statistics below to estimate there are 8,967,589 pupils aged 5-16 in the UK.

● In England, there are 7,616,125 pupils aged 5-16 in 2020, according to the latest national statistics published by the Department for Education.[6] Of these, 4,117,681 are aged 5-10 (which can be assumed to mean in primary school), and 3,498,444 are aged 11-16 (which can be assumed to mean in secondary school).[7]

● In Northern Ireland, the number of children attending education establishments for primary school is 173,856, and the number in all secondary schools, including special and independent schools, is 151,867, of whom approximately 27,500 are in sixth form colleges.[8] Taking out those in sixth form colleges provides the approximate number of schoolchildren aged 5-16 as 298,223.

● In Wales, the total number of pupils aged 5-16 in January 2020 was estimated at 389,655.[9] (School children data was rounded on collection).

● In Scotland, there are 398,794 pupils in primary school, 257,660 in secondary aged 11-16, and 7,132 in special education, for a total of 663,586.[10]

Statistics on school absence

As a point of comparison, it is useful to note school absence rates prior to the pandemic as well as attendance rates after the partial reopening of schools this summer. These data are collected differently in each nation so are not suited for aggregation or like comparison, but the most recent statistics from each nation are listed here.

● In England, the overall absence rate for the autumn term 2019 was 4.9% (authorised absence: 3.6%; unauthorised absence: 1.3%).[11]

● In Northern Ireland, the overall absence rate for the 2017/2018 academic year was 5.8% (3.9% authorised; 1.9% unauthorised).[12]

6   This refers to pupils in state-funded nursery, primary, secondary and special schools, non-maintained special schools, pupil referral units and independent schools.
7   Department for Education, "Schools, Pupils and Their Characteristics," 2020, https://explore-educationstatistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics.
8   NI School Census, "Schools and Pupils in Northern Ireland 1991/1992 to 2019/20," 2020, https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enrolments-northern-ireland-summary-data.
9   StatsWales, "Pupil Level Annual School Census," 2020, https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Educationand-Skills/Schools-and-Teachers/Schools-Census/Pupil-Level-Annual-School-Census/Pupils.
10   Scottish Learning Directorate, "Pupil Census Supplementary Statistics 2010 On," 2020, https://www.gov.scot/publications/pupil-census-supplementary-statistics/.
11   Department for Education, "Pupil Absence in Schools in England: Autumn Term 2019," 2020, https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-autumnterm
12   Northern Ireland Department of Education, "Attendance at Grant-Aided Primary, Post-Primary and Special Schools in Northern Ireland

● In Scotland, the absence rate for 2018/2019 was 7% (4.4% authorised, 2.6% unauthorised).[13]

● In Wales, overall absence rates were 5.3% for primary school and 6.2% for secondary schools; approximately 5.75% across both levels.[14]

Attendance rates in June and July when schools partially reopened in England were low. On 1 June a wider opening of nursery and primary schools began, with records suggesting that the daily attendance rate of pupils in reception, year 1 and year 6 "increased each week from around 15% on 2 June to around 40% on 2 July, and then remained broadly stable."[15] These are far below normal attendance rates.

On 15 June a wider opening of secondary schools and colleges began, with an advised maximum of a quarter of students attending at any one time. Daily attendance for pupils in year 10 and year 12 in schools increased from "around 10% in the week commencing 15 June to around 13% by 2 July and then remained broadly stable".[16] The records across primary and secondary suggest reservations among a large proportion of parents/carers or eligible children about returning to school immediately in June and July.

Literature review and related research

Relevant academic research on previous pandemics is limited, but there is a growing amount of grey literature on school absences and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children in the UK. The following section highlights a selection of studies that provide important context and knowledge to this topic.

Loneliness and emotional wellbeing

School closures and the lockdown have had a negative impact on childhood loneliness and emotional wellbeing. Data collected in the first few weeks of lockdown showed that two thirds of parents already perceived their child to be feeling lonely, an increase of approximately 50% from pre-lockdown levels.[17] Findings from an early report into how families are coping with the challenges of COVID-19 by the

–2017/18," 2019, https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/attendance-grantaided-primary-post-primary-and-special-schools-201718.

13   National Statistics for Scotland, "Summary Statistics for Schools in Scoland," 2020.

14   Welsh Government, "Absenteeism from Schools by Pupil Characteristics: September 2018 to August 2019," 2020, https://gov.wales/absenteeism-schools-pupil-characteristics-september-2018-august-2019.

15   Department for Education, "Attendance in Education and Early Years Settings during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Outbreak," 2020, https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-ineducation-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak.

16   Department for Education.

17   Kathryn Lester, "Allowing Young Children to Play with Their Friends Must Be Prioritised as Soon as Possible When Lockdown Is Eased," The Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health, June 2020, https://www.acamh.org/blog/young-children-to-play-with-friends-must-be-prioritised-when-lockdown-is-eased/

research network Emerging Minds' Co-SPACE project showed that over half of parents surveyed are concerned about their child's emotional wellbeing.[18] A subsequent Co-SPACE study over a one-month period in lockdown found parents/carers of primary school age children reporting an increase in their child's emotional, behavioural, and restless/attentional difficulties, while parents/carers of secondary school age children reported a reduction in their child's emotional difficulties but an increase in restless/attentional difficulties.[19]

The findings on loneliness are troubling given the adverse effects loneliness and social isolation can have on children's mental health. A recent rapid systematic review concluded that children and adolescents who are lonely "are probably more likely to experience high rates of depression and probably anxiety during and after enforced isolation ends."[20] As the developmental psychologist Kathryn Lester has described, there is plenty of research linking poor emotional health in childhood to long-term mental and physical health difficulties, as well as poor educational and occupational outcomes. That these negative impacts have been shown to disproportionately affect children from disadvantaged backgrounds adds to concern that the lockdown will exacerbate existing health and social inequalities.[21]

The evidence of these trends over the past four months and possible remedies havebeen explored in the work of the various children's commissioners. A study led by the Children's Commissioner for Wales found that while most 12 to 18-year-olds surveyed felt safe, over half felt worried about their education, and many respondents wanted more faceto—face contact with teachers.[22] Scotland's Children and Young People's Commissioner has said that Scotland must make mental health services for children universal following the coronavirus crisis.[23]

Young carers

The pandemic has put considerable strain on young carers. In July 2020 the Carers Trust published the results of a survey of 961 young carers aged 12 to 17 and young adult carers aged 18 to 25. The responses "point to a steep decline in the mental health and wellbeing of the hundreds of thousands of young people across the UK who provide unpaid care at home for family members or friends." It found that "40% of young carers and 59% of young adult carers say their mental health is worse since Coronavirus." [24] Alongside the impact on mental health, over half of young carers said their education is suffering since the pandemic began. In response, Carers Trust calls for greater prioritisation of mental health support for young carers, and greater support from education providers.[25]

18   Polly Waite et al., "Report 02: Covid-19 Worries, Parent/Carer Stress and Support Needs, by Child Special Educational Needs and Parent/Carer Work Status," 2020, https://emergingminds.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2020/05/Co-SPACE-report-02_03-05-20.pdf.
19   Samantha Pearcey et al., "Report 04: Changes in Children and Young People's Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties through Lockdown," 2020, https://emergingminds.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CoSPACEReport-4-June-2020.pdf
20   Maria Elizabeth Loades et al., Rapid Systematic Review: The Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness on the Mental Health of Children and Adolescents in the Context of COVID-19, 2020.
21   Lester, "Allowing Young Children to Play with Their Friends Must Be Prioritised as Soon as Possible When Lockdown Is Eased."
22   Children's Commissioner for Wales, "Coronavirus and Me," 2020.
23   The Observatory of Children's Human Rights Scotland, "Independent Children's Rights Impact Assessment on the Response to COVID-19 in Scotland," 2020.
24   Carers Trust, "My Future, My Feelings, My Family: How Coronavirus Is Affecting Young Carers and Young Adult Carers, and What They Want You to Do Next," 2020.
25   Carers Trust, "Our Survey on the Impact of Coronavirus on Young Carers and Young Adult Carers," 2020,

Life-limiting conditions

In assessing future access to schools, it is important to account for the population of children with life-limiting and life-threatening conditions (LLCs). These terms have been used to describe those who "may benefit from input from paediatric palliative care services."[26] A recent study conducted by the University of York and the Together for Short Lives charity revealed a significant rise in the number of children in this group in England over the past 17 years, increasing to 86,625 in 2017/2018 compared to 32,975 in 2001/2002.[27] According to the study, the prevalence of LLCs was highest among the most deprived groups of the population (who are least able to afford the associated costs of care), and the overall number of children with LLCs across the UK is likely to increase slightly each year over the next decade.[28] Alongside such projections, the pandemic has added to the challenges families have in getting the right support, signalling rising need for appropriate palliative care.

Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

The pandemic has affected resources for children with special educational needs and disabilities. In England 12.1% of all pupils have SEN support and another 3.3% have an education, health and care (EHC) plan for additional support, while around 8% of UK children report having a disability.[29] A survey of by the Disabled Children's Partnership of 4,000 families of disabled children on the impact of lockdown found that three quarters of participants had seen vital care and support stop altogether, leaving parents and young siblings taking on all care responsibilities. It revealed that many parents whose children were eligible for a school place had not taken up places, largely out of concerns over their children's health or the lack of suitable provision. Nearly a third (32%) of respondents said they were receiving no support specific to their child's needs from school, while a quarter said they were getting good support.[30]

The loss of provision for SEND children can have serious consequences. Campaigners have told the government's cross-party committee on the impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services in England that support for children with additional needs had "dropped off a cliff" during the pandemic, and as a result the physical, emotional and mental health of many had deteriorated. They have seen some schools using the risk assessment process of the pandemic as 'a blanket excuse' for not meeting their obligations to students with special needs, who must not be left behind in the coming school year.[31] In the county of Kent alone, five children with special educational needs committed suicide in the space of three months (the National Child Mortality Database has also reported a possible increase in child suicides

https://carers.org/what-we-do/our-survey-on-the-impact-of-coronavirus-on-young-carers-and-young-adultcarers-.

26   Lorna Fraser et al., "'Make Every Child Count': Estimating Current and Future Prevalence of Children and Young People with Life-Limiting Conditions in the United Kingdom," 2020.

27   Fraser et al.

28   Fraser et al.

29   Department for Education, "Special Educational Needs in England," 2020, https://explore-educationstatistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england; Department for Work and Pensions, "Family Resources Survey: Financial Year 2018/19," 2020, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/family-resources-survey-financial-year-201819.

30   Disabled Children's Partnership, "#LeftInLockdown - Parent Carers' Experiences of Lockdown," 2020.

31   The Education Committee of the UK Parliament, "Oral Evidence: The Impact of Covid-19 on Education and Children's Services," 2020, https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/627/pdf/.

across England during the lockdown).[32] These events reinforce the importance of identifying children in need and providing suitable support in the coming months.

Absence from school

Absence from school is often categorised generally as 'school non-attendance' or 'school absenteeism'. The law requires children to receive a full-time education until age 16 (the terms differ slightly in each nation) and it is the responsibility of parents to ensure this takes place, either at school or, with permission, at home. Absence from school may be caused by short-term illness, refusal to go school, or other reasons of the student, school, or parent. It is up to schools to determine whether an absence is authorised, usually based on receipt of adequate explanation for the non-attendance.[33]

Persistent school non-attendance can have wide-ranging consequences for children. Various studies have shown how persistent school non-attendance can lead to poor academic performance, isolation and depression, and worsened family and peer relationships. Longterm effects can include economic deprivation and social maladjustment, while chronic childhood illness has been linked to lower educational attainments and socioeconomic status in adulthood.[34] Research into the effects of 'summer learning loss' (referring to long school holidays) in the US has demonstrated that "extended interruption of one's studies causes not only a suspension of learning time, but causes a loss of knowledge and skills gained", particularly for lower income students.[35]

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK, school non-attendance has also been linked to future social inequalities. A study from the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) published on 18 May found that poorer families (who are more likely to have been exposed to coronavirus and hurt more by lockdown) are less willing to allow their children to return to education.[36] The study found that children from better-off families are spending 30% more time on home learning than children from poorer families, corroborating research by the Sutton Trust showing middle class pupils are much more likely to take part in online classes than working class pupils (relating to access and support).[37] At the time of the IFS study's survey (29 April to 12 May), fewer than half of parents said they would send their child back to school if they had the choice, which would risk the creation of wider inequalities.[38] Although our survey did not ask about choice, its results suggest a change in attitude in the subsequent two months, with 82% of children likely to return to school (see full results below).

32   Sally Weale, "Deaths of Children with Special Needs in Kent Raise Concerns over School Closures," The Guardian, July 13, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/jul/13/deaths-special-needs-childrenkent-raise-concerns-over-school-closures.
33   M.S. Thambirajah, Karen Grandison, and Louise De-Hayes, Understanding School Refusal: A Handbook for Professionals in Education, Health and Social Care (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2008).
34   Anne Case, Angela Fertig, and Christina Paxson, "The Lasting Impact of Childhood Health and Circumstance," Journal of Health Economics 24, no. 2 (2005): 365–89, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0167629604001262.
35   OECD, "A Framework to Guide an Education Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic of 2020," 2020, https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/framework_guide_v1_002_harward.pdf.
36   Andrew Alison et al., "Learning during the Lockdown: Real-Time Data on Children's Experiences during Home Learning," 2020, https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14848.
37   Carl Cullinane and Rebecca Montacute, "COVID-19 and Social Mobility Impact Brief #1: School Shutdown," 2020, https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-and-social-mobility-impact-brief/.
38   Alison et al., "Learning during the Lockdown: Real-Time Data on Children's Experiences during Home Learning."

Lockdown may have made parents participate more in their children's education but decreased children's attachment to schooling. A research survey from the University of Exeter has found that school closures during the pandemic have led to a major change in attitudes about parental responsibility for children's education, with families now more likely to think they should be involved in their child's education.[39] Against this, a policy note prepared by the World Bank on the shocks of the pandemic on education warns that "for some children and youth, being out of school may cause disengagement and reduce their schooling persistence", leaving some especially vulnerable to dropping out.[40] Parents and schools should be sensitive to such cases in the coming school year.

School responses

The pandemic and response has presented huge challenges for schools. Schools have maintained teaching on-site for vulnerable children and children of essential workers while simultaneously providing new levels of distance learning, which has required extra staff and funding. A report from the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) in June found school leaders have fewer teaching staff available at a time of greater need, with only 75 per cent of their normal teaching capacity in May.[41] A subsequent NFER report on home learning found that nearly all pupils received some remote learning tasks from their teachers, but it raised concerns that almost half of exam-year pupils in Years 11 and 13 were not provided with work by their school (due to the cancellation of exams). These pupils may find returning to education in September particularly difficult after six months without school engagement.[42]

Some schools have made positive steps to stem the impact of closures on inequality gaps. Research by the Sutton Trust found that a third of teachers reported contacting specific parents to offer advice about supervised learning, and a fifth reported their school is providing pupils with laptops or other devices. But the study found a disparity in provision, where "28% of the most advantaged state schools had offered devices to pupils in need, compared to just 15% in the most deprived schools where need is highest."[43] To lessen the fallout on social inequality, the government could provide funding to schools in disadvantaged areas to help affected students to catch up.

Remote learning

The physical closure of schools has led to the expansion of remote learning, requiring teaching and learning conditions and equipment that are not always available. For educators, this centres on access to both technology and training. Statistics from a 2018 study by the Organisation for Economic Co-

39   University of Exeter, "Coronavirus Has Led to Major Change in Attitudes about Parental Responsibility for Children's Education, Survey Shows," 2020, https://www.exeter.ac.uk/news/research/title_793916_en.html.
40   World Bank, "The COVID-19 Pandemic: Shocks to Education and Policy Responses," 2020, https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/33696.
41   Caroline Sharp, David Sims, and Simon Rutt, "Returning Pupils to School: Schools' Responses to Covid-19," 2020, https://www.nfer.ac.uk/news-events/press-releases/return-of-pupils-to-school-schools-responses-to-covid19/.
42   Eemer Eivers, Jack Worth, and Anusha Ghosh, "Home Learning during Covid-19: Findings from the Understanding Society Longitudinal Study," 2020.
43   Cullinane and Montacute, "COVID-19 and Social Mobility Impact Brief #1: School Shutdown."

operation and Development (OECD) show progress in the equipping of schools with computers in the UK between 2009-2018.[44] But the findings suggest there are significant training needs to improve the ability of teachers to integrate digital devices into instruction. While 75% of teachers in England reported that the use of ICT for teaching was included in their training (above the 56% average among OECD countries studied), only 40% had ICT skills for teaching included in their professional development activities (well below the OECD average of 60%). Slightly under two-thirds (62%) of teachers felt they could support student learning through the use of digital technology "quite a bit" or "a lot", below the OECD average of 67%. Access to equipment and training should be prioritised in preparing for ongoing learning arrangements and future disruptions.

For pupils, much of the remote learning methods used during the pandemic take place online or require a computer or tablet. OECD data collected prior to the pandemic found that in the UK, 92% of students reported having a computer they could use for school work. Of those students in the bottom quartile of the socio-economic distribution, 81% reported having a computer they could use for school work. It notes this rate may be lower during the pandemic in cases where the home computer needs to be shared among household members. A study by the Sutton Trust in April found that "in the most deprived schools, 15% of teachers report that more than a third of their students would not have adequate access to an electronic device for learning from home", and a similar percentage would not have adequate internet access.[45] The most affluent state schools showed far lower rates of students without adequate access to technology, revealing uneven opportunities for remote learning.

Parental involvement and access to an appropriate place to study are additional variables in the effectiveness of the home learning environment. The OECD suggested that access to a quiet place at home to study may have deteriorated during the crisis, prior to which 89% of students had reported having a quiet place to study at home, falling to 81% among students in the bottom quartile of the socio-economic distribution.[46] These rates sit below OECD averages, and indicate further constraints of remote learning during the pandemic. Similarly, the range of parental support varies across households, with the Sutton Trust finding that "more than three quarters of parents with a postgraduate degree, and just over 60% of those with an undergraduate degree felt confident directing their child's learning, compared to less than half of parents with A level or GCSE level qualifications."[47] As levels of educational attainment are often linked to socio-economic status, this is another factor likely to disadvantage children from poorer backgrounds.

44   OECD, "School Education during COVID-19: Were Teachers and Students Ready?," 2020,
https://www.oecd.org/education/United-Kingdom-coronavirus-education-country-note.pdf.
45   Cullinane and Montacute, "COVID-19 and Social Mobility Impact Brief #1: School Shutdown."
46   OECD, "School Education during COVID-19: Were Teachers and Students Ready?"
47   Cullinane and Montacute, "COVID-19 and Social Mobility Impact Brief #1: School Shutdown."

Vulnerability

The pandemic has had consequences for the sizeable population of children who are considered vulnerable. The Children's Commissioner for England's 2019 childhood vulnerability report estimates the total number of children in England currently receiving statutory support or intervention to be 723,000 children, a slight increase from the year before (710,000). But it estimates that 2.3 million children are living with risk because of a vulnerable family background, more than a third of which are not known to services and not getting any support.[48]

Other reports throughout the pandemic have painted a troubling picture for vulnerable children. The Children's Commissioner for England's April 2020 report, "We're all in this together?", outlined local vulnerability profiles for councils in order to better identify children who need help during and after the lockdown.[49] But in the same month the government reduced protections for youth in care, and subsequently charities have noted an "alarming" series of cases in which trafficked and unaccompanied children are going missing from the UK's care system.[50]

In response to the government's plans to reopen schools to all children in September, the commissioner called for sensitivity and support around the strain this period has placed on children. She expects many children will struggle to adjust and urges schools to work to prevent a spike in exclusions or off-rolling, and for the government to commit to an NHSfunded counsellor in every school.[51] She also warned that tens of thousands of vulnerable teenagers whose lives have been disrupted by Covid-19 could fall through gaps in provision and face increasing risks.[52]

Alternative provision (AP)

Children in alternative provision are among the most vulnerable but may have poor access to quality education. The Centre for Social Justice published a report in May 2020 identifying areas in the country where alternative provision education offers a low chance of receiving a quality education. It found huge disparities between the north and south, with "one in 50 pupils in the North East achieving a basic pass in maths and English, compared to one in 12 in Outer London". The report recommends the government replicate successful models where AP schools are supporting mainstream schools and vice versa, including by publishing templates of good local systems of AP and establishing an AP system improvement fund.[53]

48   Children's Commissioner for England, "Childhood Vulnerability in England 2019," 2019,
https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/childhood-vulnerability-in-england-2019/.
49   9 Children's Commissioner for England, "We're All in This Together?," 2020,
https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publication/were-all-in-this-together/.
50   Mark Townsend, "Number of Missing Vulnerable Children Soars as Safeguarding Is Cut during Pandemic,"
The Guardian, June 6, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jun/06/alarming-rise-in-cases-ofmissing-children-following-safeguarding-cuts.
51   Children's Commissioner for England, "Anne Longfield Responding to the Government's Plan to Reopen
Schools to All Children in September," 2020.
52   Children's Commissioner for England, "Teenagers Falling through the Gaps," 2020,
https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publication/teenagers-falling-through-the-gaps/.
53   The Centre for Social Justice, "Warming the Cold Spots of Alternative Provision," 2020.

Attitudes on returning to school

Parental attitudes on children returning to school have eased as the pandemic has gone on. A survey from mid-April by Not Fine in School and Square Peg found half of respondents listed the possibility of their child catching COVID-19 as their biggest concern for when schools reopen, with over a third worried their child will struggle to return to school, and almost a fifth expecting their child will be anxious to begin with. Almost a quarter of respondents said they intended to home educate after lockdown ends, up from 5% who home educated before lockdown.[54]

Similarly in the Co-SPACE study from May, around half of participating parents expressed they do not feel comfortable about their children going back to school. Parents from lower income households were less comfortable than those with higher incomes. Among the most common concerns of parents were how their child would handle social distancing measures and the possibility their child will catch or transmit COVID-19. The study found that parents of children with SEND are particularly uncomfortable about their children attending school (out of concern they will not get the necessary support), as were parents who do not work, and those with lower incomes (both expressing the most common concerns listed above). While parents/carers of children and young people in mainstream schools perceived only a minority of their children do not feel comfortable about attending school, the majority of children with SEND or a pre-existing mental health difficulty were reported to be not comfortable about attending school.[55]

A series of surveys over the course of several months revealed parents becoming more open to the idea of sending their children back to school. Parentkind, a membership organisation for parent teacher associations, ran three distinct surveys in March, May, and July (the March survey covered immediate concerns as school closures began). The May survey found the majority of parents coping well or better than expected with lockdown measures, schooling arrangements and support. Most respondents expressed comfort with their children returning to school once it is considered safe, with a quarter wanting a September return date, and only 10% wanting widespread vaccination prior to a return, even if this were over a year away.[56] In the July survey, almost three quarters (74%) of parents said they will send their child back to school at the start of the coming academic year, 3% will not, and 23% of respondents do not yet know. For those undecided or planning to keep their children back, the biggest reasons were worries about how social distancing will be managed; worries about the safety of the school staff as well as that of the children; and needing much more information and reassurance.[57]

54   Not Fine in School and Square Peg, "Survey to Highlight the Concerns around Re-Opening Schools during the Current Covid-19 Pandemic," 2020.
55   5 Samantha Pearcey et al., "Report 03: Parents/Carers Report on Their Own and Their Children's Concerns about Children Attending School," 2020.
56   Parentkind, "Coronavirus: Second Parent Survey Results," 2020, https://www.parentkind.org.uk/News/Majornew-Parentkind-research---over-a-quarter-of-a-million-parents-have-a-say-on-school-closures-and-coronavirusfears.
57   Parentkind, "Coronavirus: Third Parent Survey Results," 2020, https://www.parentkind.org.uk/News/Parentkind-survey-finds-parents-want-more-say-in-how-their-childreturns-to-school.

Forthcoming research

Alongside the research covered above, there are several ongoing studies or resources to monitor relevant to this topic. These include:

● The COVID-19 Educational Technology and Engagement study at University College London. This study is exploring parent/guardian perceptions, opinions, and experiences of student learning with technology during the pandemic. It aims to help guide a variety of stakeholders "to understand how educational technology has been used to engage or disengage students and parents during the pandemic, which may assist in identifying future uses of educational technology to improve student learning outcomes, as well as school/parent communication."[58]

● The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health's online compilation of research studies from across the UK on children and young people's experiences and insights around COVID-19.[59]

● Parliament's cross-party committee on the impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services in England. The committee continues to accept evidence and publish related reports.[60]

Survey results

The survey was designed to measure opinions of parents/carers across the UK on whether their children would attend school in person in the coming school year.

Participants

The survey respondents were 1,005 parents or carers with one or more children aged between 5-16 under their care. Children are the primary unit of analysis for this study, and there were at least 1,703 children under respondents' care (seven respondents indicated they had five or more children). With the child-specific questions limited to two children per family, the survey collected information on a total of 1,477 children. Note that some percentages do not add up to 100% because of multiple children or responses, responses of don't know, or rounding.

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58   Institute of Education - UCL, "Educational Technology and Parent Engagement in the UK during the COVID-19 Pandemic," 2020, https://covidedtechstudy.weebly.com/.
59   Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, "COVID-19 - Research Studies on Children and Young People's Views," 2020, https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/resources/covid-19-research-studies-children-young-peoplesviews.
60   The Education Committee of the UK Parliament, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Education and Children's Services," 2020, https://committees.parliament.uk/work/202/the-impact-of-covid19-on-education-and-childrensservices/.

Number of children under respondent's care
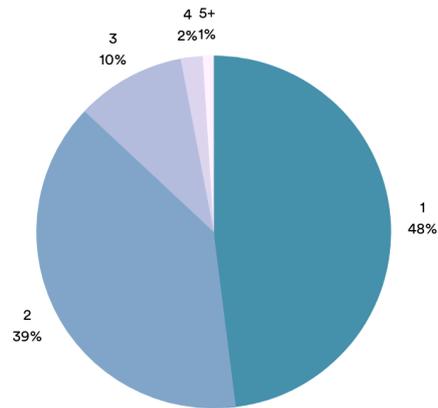
Education during lockdown

At the beginning of the school year, the vast majority (97%) of the 1,477 children attended state-funded schools, and 1% were home educated. After schools closed to everyone except vulnerable children and those with a parent identified as a key worker, 6% continued going to school. Of the 1,373 children who stayed home when schools closed, most (1,185, 86%) had access to materials from the school for independent study, and half (686, 50%) were reported to have help from household members for a certain number of hours per day. Students from higher socio-economic groups were significantly more likely than those from lower socio-economic groups to have access to materials from the school (90% as opposed to 82%) and to remote exercises with classmates (30% compared to 15%).

Medical conditions

Coronavirus presents health vulnerabilities for a group of children who previously have not missed school because of illness. 82 children (6%) were reported to have a serious medical condition or illness that has caused them to miss school in the past, whereas 110 children (7%) were reported to have a medical condition that makes them vulnerable to illness if they get coronavirus. Of the group of 82, 47 reported having a condition making them vulnerable to coronavirus. Therefore 63, or 57%, of the 110 children who were reported to have a condition making them vulnerable to coronavirus did not previously miss school because of their condition. These results suggest that the coronavirus has created new health concerns for 4% of children, and that under half (43%) of children who have missed school in the past because of a medical condition are perceived to be vulnerable to coronavirus. Within respondents' households, the rate of vulnerability is understandably higher. A quarter (252) of respondents reported there was an adult in the household with medical conditions making them vulnerable to coronavirus.

School attendance

The survey found that 82% of children are likely to attend school in person and 6% (93 children) are not in September 2020 (12% were undecided). This reflects conditions and opinions in mid-July and may to change over time as the health situation develops.

If schools are open, and government policy allows, my child will be attending school in person in September 2020

Net: Disagree (1-2)	6%
Net: Agree (4-5)	82%
1 - Strongly disagree	3%
2 - Disagree	3%
3 - Neither disagree nor agree	12%
4 - Agree	34%
5 - Strongly agree	48%

If schools are open, and government policy allows, my child will be attending school in person in January 2021

Net: Disagree (1-2)	6%
Net: Agree (4-5)	84%
1 - Strongly disagree	3%
2 - Disagree	2%
3 - Neither disagree nor agree	10%
4 - Agree	30%
5 - Strongly agree	54%
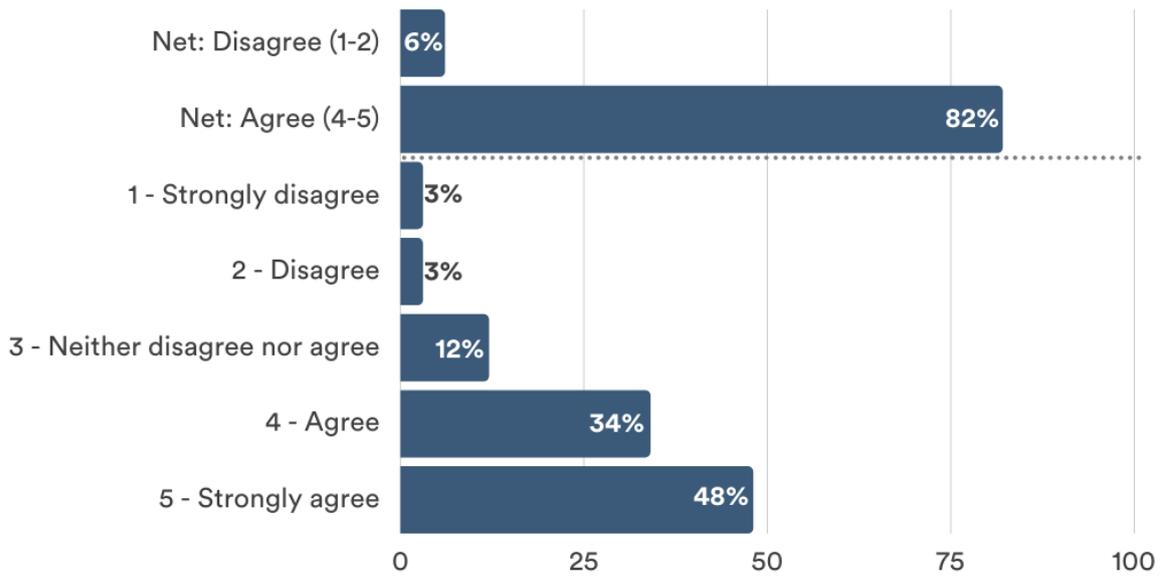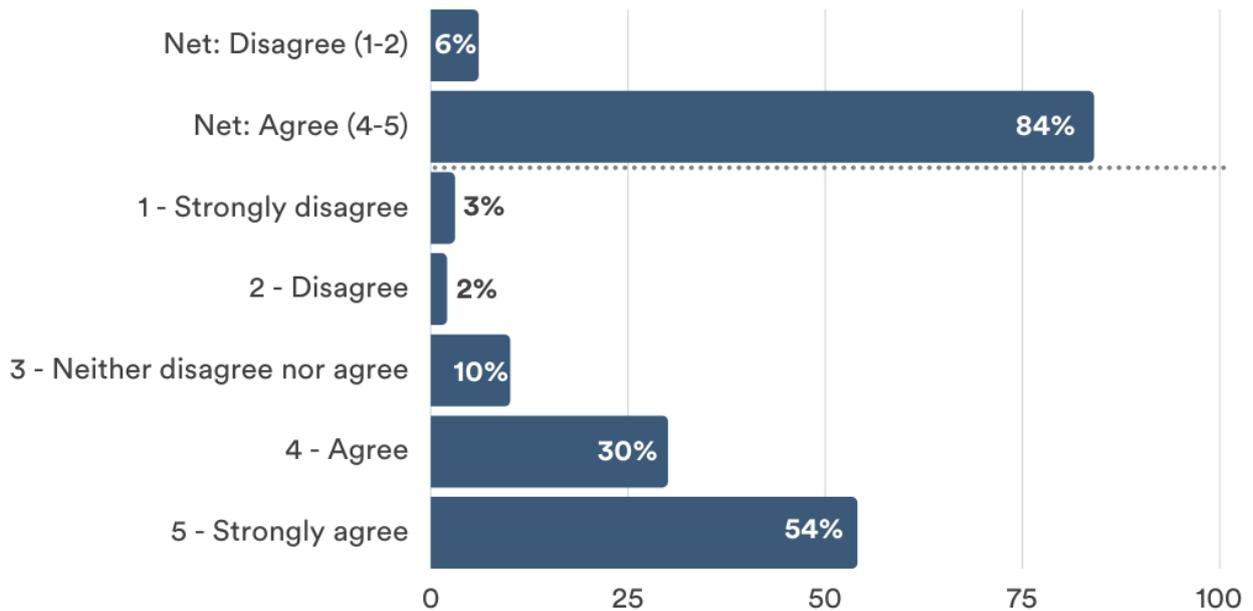
The responses to the same question for January 2021 showed a small increase in net agreement (to 84%) with a higher proportion of respondents strongly agreeing with the statement, and a very slight decrease in net levels of disagreement with the statement, but the same percentage of strong disagreement. Part of this group would not be attending school in person in any circumstance, for reasons including persistent health conditions or homeschooling, but the responses of others reflect the conditions of the pandemic. The survey asked for the reasons for possible non-attendance for the 268 children who either disagreed or were undecided on the question of going to school in September.

Health concerns over coronavirus made up the primary reasons for non-attendance. The most common reason given was the risk of a healthy child contracting coronavirus and becoming ill, with the second-most common reason being the risk of a household member catching coronavirus from the child. Mental health challenges that have emerged or grown during the pandemic, such as anxiety, were a reason for non-attendance for 31 children, representing 12% of those who may not attend school in September, and 2% of all children in the survey sample. While this might seem a small percentage, it translates to a substantial number of children at the national level and a significant increase from pre-pandemic absence rates.

Reasons for non-attendance

Reason	Percentage
Risk of healthy child getting coronavirus and becoming ill (130)	49%
Risk of household member getting coronavirus from child (112)	42%
Child has new mental health challenges since Covid-19 began, such as anxiety or school refusal (31)	12%
Risk of vulnerable secondary carer, such as a Grandparent, getting coronavirus (31)	12%
Child has physical health condition preventing them from attending (15)	6%
Other (28)	10%
Don't know (52)	19%

Socio-economics groups and attendance

The decisions on school attendance tend to reflect socio-economic background. The data show with a high confidence level that a larger percentage of children from higher socioeconomic groups (55%) plan to attend school in September than those from lower socioeconomic groups (45%). The strength of opinion softens somewhat with respect to January, but the rate of overall agreement or disagreement with the prospect of attending school in person remains unchanged, with the same correlation along socio-economic lines.

Additionally, there was a negative correlation between those children who live in a flat and will attend school in person. This suggests that children living in what may be smaller housing environments without as much access to outdoor space are somewhat less likely to return to school, particularly compared to those who indicated they lived in an attached house, whose responses showed a positive correlation with school attendance in person.

These findings are important to take into account in preparing for the new school year. They highlight the possibility that children who may already have fewer resources for educational support may be disproportionately more likely not to attend school in person.

If schools are open, and government policy allows, my child will be attending school in person in September 2020 - by socio-economic group
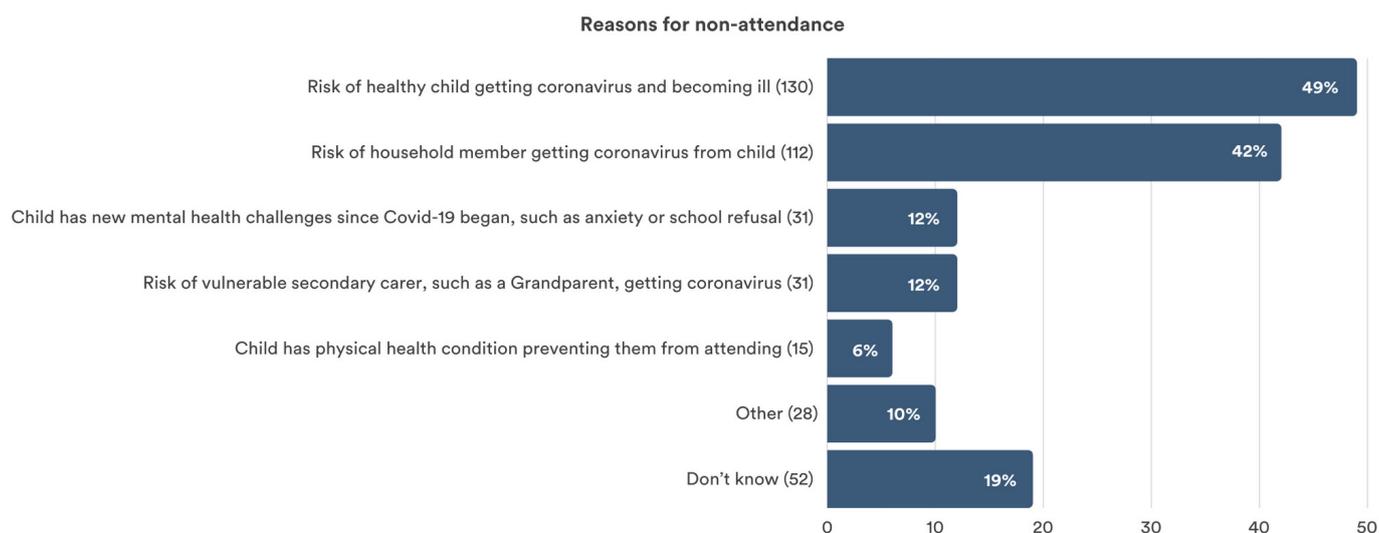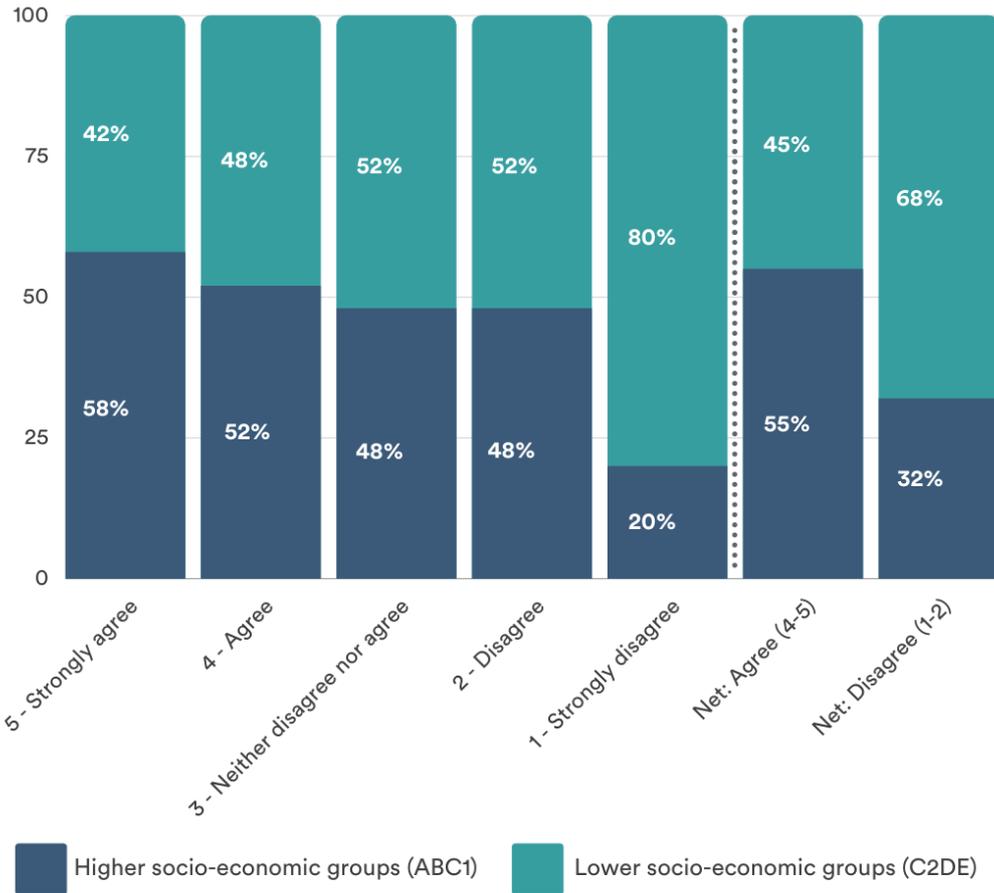
	5 - Strongly agree	4 - Agree	3 - Neither disagree nor agree	2 - Disagree	1 - Strongly disagree	Net: Agree (4-5)	Net: Disagree (1-2)
Lower socio-economic groups (C2DE)	42%	48%	52%	52%	80%	45%	68%
Higher socio-economic groups (ABC1)	58%	52%	48%	48%	20%	55%	32%

■ Higher socio-economic groups (ABC1)   ■ Lower socio-economic groups (C2DE)

If schools are open, and government policy allows, my child will be attending school in person in January 2021 - by socio-economic group

	5 - Strongly agree	4 - Agree	3 - Neither disagree nor agree	2 - Disagree	1 - Strongly disagree	Net: Agree (4-5)	Net: Disagree (1-2)
Lower socio-economic groups (C2DE)	42%	51%	56%	53%	60%	45%	57%
Higher socio-economic groups (ABC1)	58%	49%	44%	47%	40%	55%	43%

■ Higher socio-economic groups (ABC1)   ■ Lower socio-economic groups (C2DE)
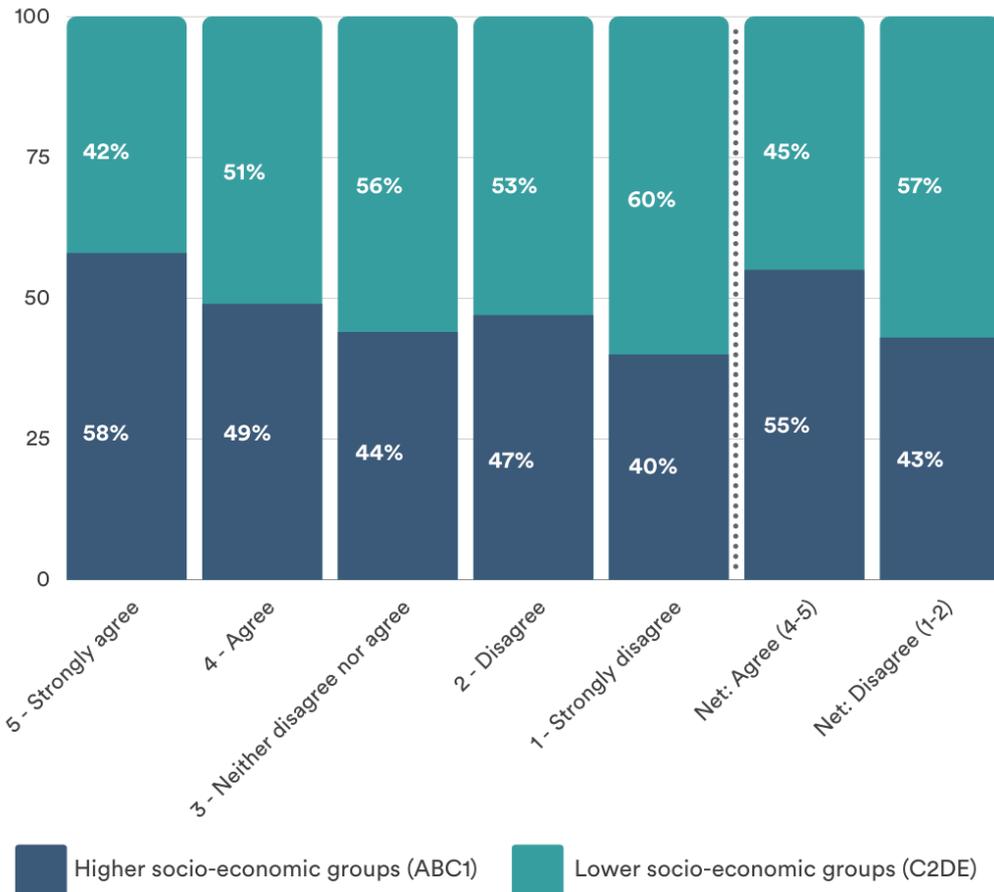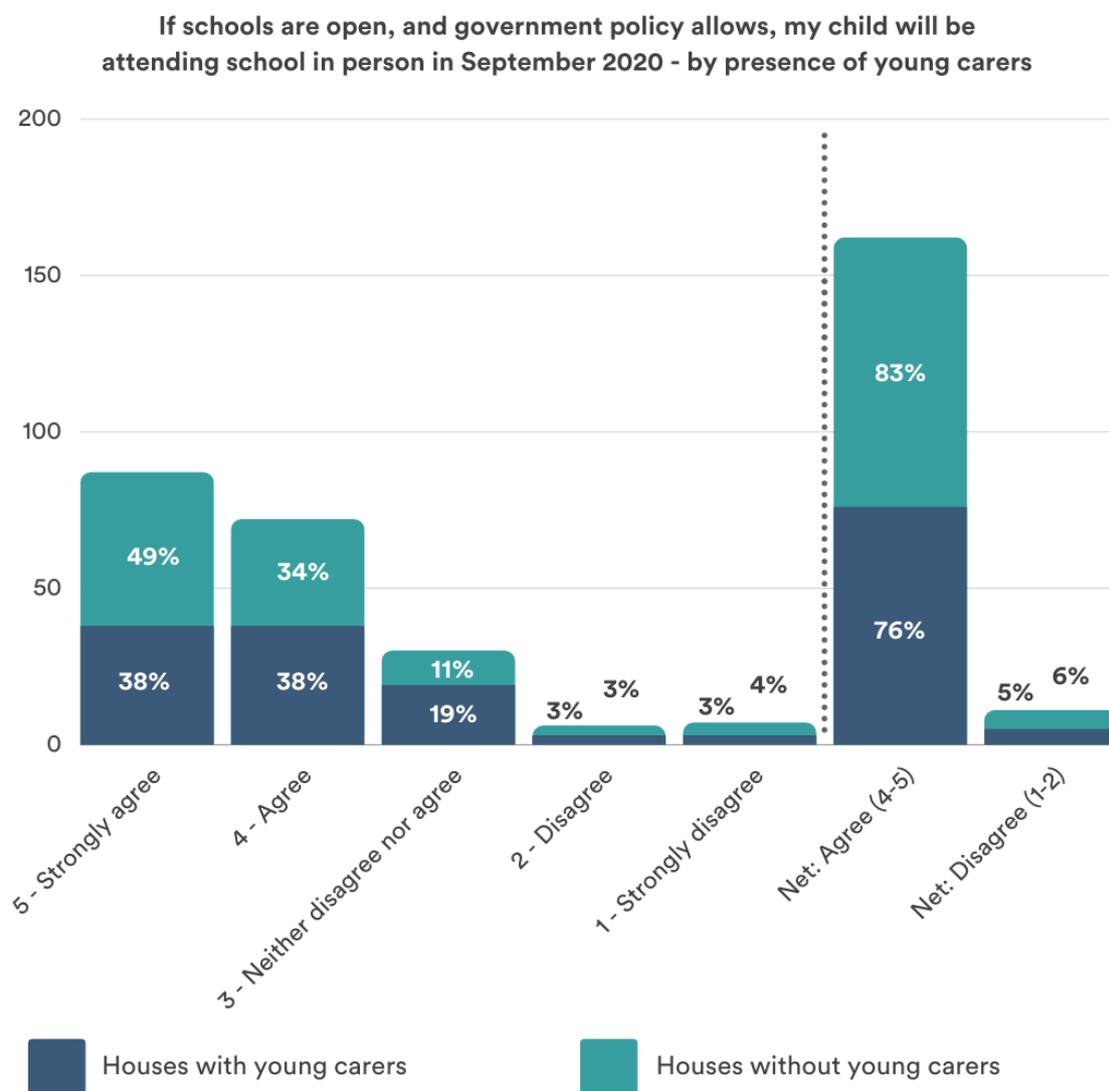
Health circumstances and attendance

Previous or pre-existing health conditions are cause for concern for attending school in person. Of the 82 children recorded to have a serious medical condition or illness that caused them to miss school in the past, 68% were likely to attend school in September and 10% were not (above the overall percentage of 6%).
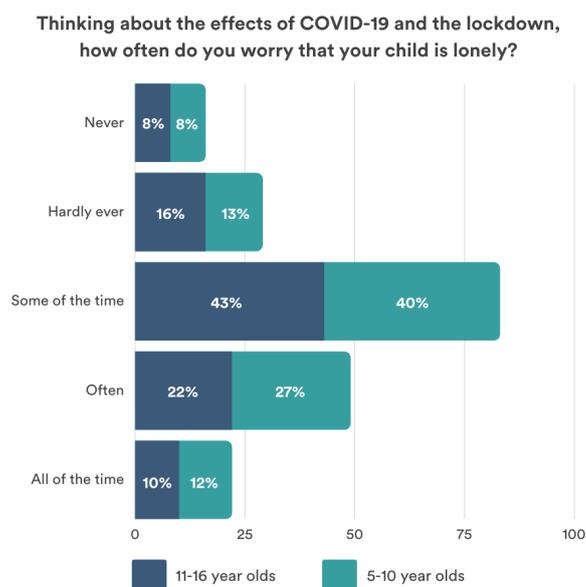
These concerns extend to the child's household. For the 25% of children living in a household with a family member vulnerable to coronavirus, it was expected that 76% would return to school in September, while 10% would not. Of all the children unlikely to attend school in September (6%), 40% lived in a house with a vulnerable family member. It is thus clear that family vulnerability factors into attitudes on whether or not a child will return to school.

Households with young carers presented similar responses. 10% (97) of respondents reported there was a young carer in their household. Children who live in houses with young carers (the young carer may be the child in question) are slightly less likely to return to school than others. The need to provide care in this period may continue to inhibit educational opportunity for young carers.

If schools are open, and government policy allows, my child will be attending school in person in September 2020 - by presence of young carers
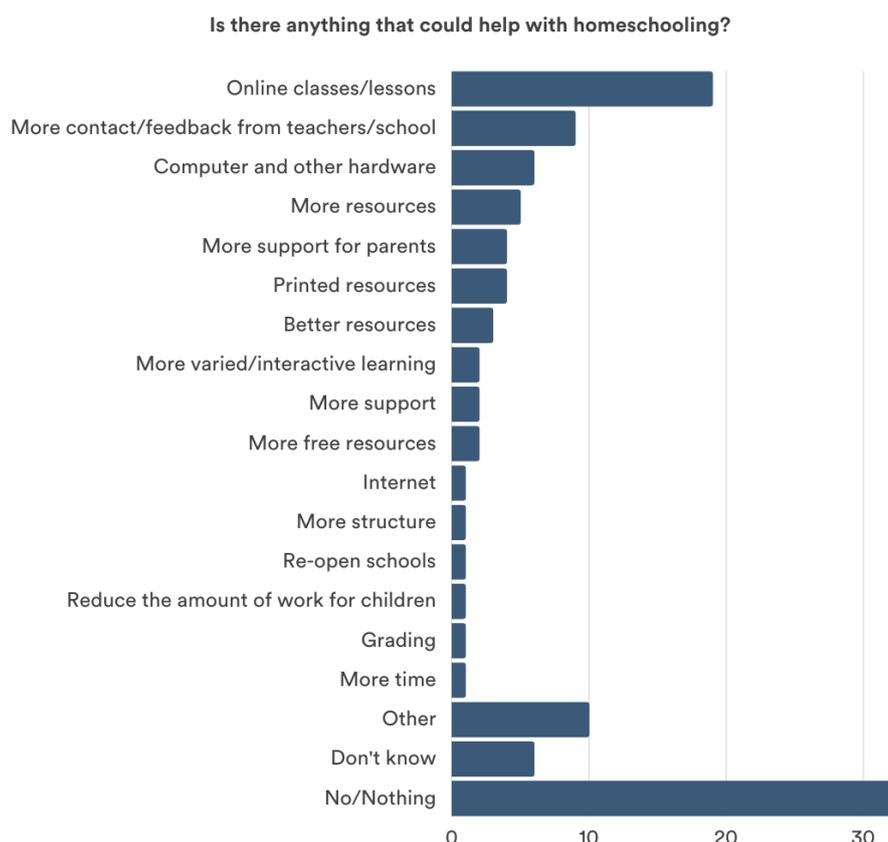
Child loneliness

In relation to emotional wellbeing, the survey asked parents and carers about their children's loneliness in this period. It found that 76% of parents and carers are worried that their children are lonely at least some of the time. The results showed that more parents of 5-10 year olds worry their children are lonely often or all of the time than parents of 11-16 year olds. This might be partially explained by higher usage of non-verbal communication forms and play among younger children (as these are harder to recreate remotely), and older children having greater access to social technologies.

Thinking about the effects of COVID-19 and the lockdown, how often do you worry that your child is lonely?

Category	11-16 year olds	5-10 year olds
Never	8%	8%
Hardly ever	16%	13%
Some of the time	43%	40%
Often	22%	27%
All of the time	10%	12%

Ways to improve homeschooling

The survey concluded with an open-ended question asking respondents what could help with homeschooling, based on their experiences. The biggest priorities were online classes (19%) and more engagement with teachers (9%). A computer or other physical hardware was a priority for 6% of respondents (close to the OECD statistic that 92% of students reported having a computer they could use for school work). The remaining answers centred on access to resources and general support.

Is there anything that could help with homeschooling?

Category	Value
Online classes/lessons	~19
More contact/feedback from teachers/school	~9
Computer and other hardware	~6
More resources	~5
More support for parents	~4
Printed resources	~4
Better resources	~3
More varied/interactive learning	~2
More support	~2
More free resources	~2
Internet	~1
More structure	~1
Re-open schools	~1
Reduce the amount of work for children	~1
Grading	~1
More time	~1
Other	~10
Don't know	~6
No/Nothing	~31

Conclusion and recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a period of huge disruption and uncertainty for children. School closures and other measures in response to the pandemic have interrupted or impeded children's education and impacted their emotional wellbeing. It is vitally important that the children worst affected in this period are identified and supported. This report has focused on understanding and measuring the population of schoolchildren who will not attend school in person in the coming year, so that adequate measures to support their learning and socialisation can be provided.

The first half of the report reviewed recent studies and grey literature on child health and school attendance. Among the conditions affecting school attendance, it found evidence of a rise in loneliness among children during the pandemic, and of the adverse and potentially enduring effects of loneliness on children's emotional wellbeing. Young carers, children with life-limiting conditions, and children with special educational needs and disabilities have all seen their circumstances and provisions constrained during the pandemic.

The second half of the report covered the major results of a survey of parents and carers across the UK on their children attending school in person in the 2019-2020 school year. It showed that 6% of children are currently unlikely to attend school in person in September 2020 or January 2021, with even more undecided. A third of these will not return because of mental health challenges that have emerged or grown during the pandemic, highlighting the need for suitable mental health support. Those who do not return to school are more likely to be from lower socio-economic groups with less access to learning materials, which may contribute to a widening in social inequality among this generation.

There are other lessons to be drawn for childhood education in the longer term. Planning for future pandemics should ensure that education leaders are prepared for interrupted learning. This includes being able to implement distance learning and help teachers cope mentally.[61] Teachers should have greater access to training to enable them to deliver content to students online. Other schemes that facilitate remote learning should be considered, such as mobile libraries to enable children to access reading materials and ensuring universal access to learning technology.

Many groups have developed work and resources around this subject. These include:

● Nip in the Bud has produced a film and factsheet with advice for parents to support children returning to school.[62]

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61   GEM Report, "Coronavirus: Could Education Systems Have Been Better Prepared?," Global Education Monitoring Report, 2020, https://gemreportunesco.wordpress.com/2020/03/18/coronavirus-could-educationsystems-have-been-better-prepared/.
62   Jess Richardson, "Supporting Children Returning to School After The Lockdown," 2020, https://nipinthebud.org/tips-for-parents-and-teachers/.

● Not Fine in School, a parent/carer-led organisation, offers support to children and young people who struggle with school attendance.

● The Children & Young People's Mental Health Coalition released a briefing in May on the issues affecting mental health support for children and young people. It details specific recommendations for the Department for Education.[63]

● The Children's Commissioner for England has said that to address risks to vulnerable teenagers, "the Department for Education, schools, LAs, police forces and safeguarding partnerships need to work together on a plan to identify, track, support and ultimately re-engage these children."[64]

● The Sutton Trust has called on schools to consider running 'catch-up classes' for children from poorer backgrounds over the summer or when schools return in order to ensure the most disadvantaged children are reached and not left behind.

● The Sutton Trust also highlights the crucial need "for disadvantaged children to be able to access food while schools remain closed. If pupils are hungry, learning cannot be their main priority, and for some a Free school meal was their only guaranteed meal of the day."[65]

● The Health Conditions in Schools Alliance focuses on the experience of children in school. Its membership of over 30 organisations, including charities and trade unions, works collaboratively to help children with health conditions get the necessary care in school. Its position on school reopening is that where appropriate and possible, children are better off in school.

● Nottingham City Council's COVID-19 student survey report drew several clear conclusions for supporting transitions back into schools that are transferable.[66] These include how children and young people will benefit from:

o Clear and visual information regarding what is planned
o Knowing who their teachers will be; being able to connect with key staff ahead of transition
o Opportunities to build peer connections
o Adjusted returns to lessons and to the curriculum
o Flexible expectations of their learning and skills
o Some rehearsal of prior knowledge and skills
o Structure and routines

63   Children & Young People's Mental Health Coalition, "Responding to COVID-19: Issues Affecting Mental Health Support for Children and Young People," 2020, https://cypmhc.org.uk/902-2/.
64   Children's Commissioner for England, "Teenagers Falling through the Gaps."
65   Cullinane and Montacute, "COVID-19 and Social Mobility Impact Brief #1: School Shutdown."
66   Maddi Popoola, Elaine Looney, and Anthea Gulliford, "COVID-19 Student Survey Report," 2020.