



## Disabled Children's Partnership

### The return to school for disabled children after lockdown

#### Introduction

The Disabled Children's Partnership is a coalition of more than 80 organisations who have come together to campaign for better support for disabled children and their families. Earlier in the year, the DCP surveyed parent carers about the impact of the pandemic and lockdown. You can read the Left In Lockdown survey report here.

<https://disabledchildrenspartnership.org.uk/left-in-lockdown/>

During the first half term of the autumn term 2020, the Disabled Children's Partnership followed up this earlier research with an on-line poll of parent carers of disabled children and young people. The poll asked how the full re-opening of schools had gone for their disabled children; and whether other support such as therapies and social care had been re-instated post lockdown. More than 3,400 parents completed the poll. This report sets out what they told us.

#### Overall picture

Back to school has gone well for many disabled children. Their families are grateful for the efforts schools, teachers and staff have gone to, and are glad to be back.

But there are groups of children who have been let down. Many children with tracheostomies/those who need aerosol generating procedures (AGPs) had been unable to return to school. The promised guidance on AGPs was severely delayed – it was finally published on 13 November – which left many children in limbo.



Some children with conditions that increase anxiety also had particular challenges. Lockdown had increased anxiety for many and some were refusing to go to school. This has historically been an issue but the enormity of the covid pandemic and disruption to lives over the previous six months had been particularly hard for this group. Mental health support is crucial to address this.

Parents reported delays in assessments for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), which may have been a result of the relaxation of the statutory requirements over the spring and summer.

And there was a sizable number of disabled children on part-time timetables. Some families requested this to help ease their children back into school routines while others have been told by the school that they can only attend part-time. There were concerns from some of these families about the amount of support they were getting with home learning.

There were challenges with the wider services and support that SEND children need in order to learn – mental health support, therapy, health and social care, transition and social activities, transport. Many children/families lost services during lockdown and had not yet had them restored

## Recommendations

In light of the findings from this poll, we call on the government, local authorities and the health service to ensure the right support is in place, including where appropriate medical support, therapies and mental health services, to enable children to successfully return to school; and to ensure that where children are not in school they and their families are able to continue learning at home. The government must take proactive approach to ensuring this happens and to holding local areas to account. Specifically, we want to see –

- A clear statement from NHS(E) that therapists and other allied health professionals supporting disabled children should not be redeployed, and should be back in schools providing children with the therapies they need
- Day special schools having the same access to testing as residential special schools
- The learning from the experiences of children, families and schools during the pandemic feeding into the government's SEND and children's social care reviews
- The government urgently concluding and publishing the long-awaited SEND review.

Disabled Children's Partnership  
November 2020

## Results of DCP online survey

### Return to school

#### Returned to school? (3431 responses)

- 76% full-time (2614)
- 11% part-time (387)
- 13% no (430)

#### Analysis

24% of disabled children were not back in school or only attending part-time since schools reopened.

Some of those attending part-time, were doing so because it has been requested by the family to help them settle back into school life after so long off. Children with anxiety may benefit from blended learning, being in school some of the week and learning at home the other time.

### Children who aren't in school

#### If your child has not returned what is the main reason for this? (397 responses)

- 29% Keeping child at home but still on school roll (123)
- 15% School or college say it's not safe (58)
- 15% Not enough support at the school/college (60)
- 11% Home educating (45)
- 9% No school place (34)
- 8% Out of school or college for some time before Covid (31)
- 7% Anxious/school refusing (27)
- 5% Other Illness or infection case at school so isolating (19)

#### Analysis

29% were keeping their child at home but on the school register. From the comments we can see the majority of these children were previously shielding or a parent is in the extremely vulnerable category. Some of them had been advised by their clinical teams to not send their child to school. Another group of children in here are those that are highly anxious and are school refusing.

Those who had been told that school is not safe, include children who need suction throughout the day and AGP procedures. The guidance to enable this group of children to attend school was not published until 13 November.

15% said there was not enough support at the school or college, this included children who were waiting for EHCP assessments or reviews and were unable to attend school until the extra support in the plan was in place in the classroom.

11% of families were home educating, including 4% (28 respondents) who were new home educators and had de-registered at the school in the new school term.

7% of disabled children were highly anxious and refusing to go to school. From the comments we can see that some children's anxiety had heightened during lockdown and this had made the return to school very challenging for them. It was unclear whether if there had been more mental health and 1-1 support for the child then they would have been able to get back into the classroom.

**If your school or college has not allowed your child to go back, have they provided any support for home learning? (68 responses)**

- 10% Yes
- 35% A little
- 54% No

**If you have chosen not to send your child back why is that? Tick all that apply (224 respondents)**

- 19% education support not in place (43)
- 12% health support not in place (27)
- 44% family previously shielding and consider school unsafe (99)
- 14% child happier learning at home (31)
- 27% child too anxious to return (61)
- 26% parent too anxious to let them return (58)

**26% of those not back in school said that lack of education and health support is a factor.**

## Children in school part-time

**Why part-time? (368 responses)**

- 43% school has put them on part-time time table
- 21% requested part-time to help with transition back to school
- 36% other

Other reasons given included: attend nursery or college which are only part-time; lack of transport; lack of support worker; attendance issues pre-covid continuing after lockdown; anxiety, school refusal; fatigue from condition or medical intervention.

**Has the school provided home learning support for those attending part-time? (365 responses)**

- 18% Yes
- 29% A little
- 53% No

**Children back at school full or part-time**

**How has your child found the return to school or college? (2926)**

- 38% Pleased to be back
- 33% Nervous but settled in ok
- 12% Distressed by the experience
- 7% Refusing to go back after a few days
- 3% Not sure
- 7% Other

**How well did your child's school or college prepare for the return of pupils? (2774 responses)**

- 29% Very well
- 38% Fairly well
- 14% Not well
- 18% No preparation at all

**Analysis**

The majority of schools did prepare children for the return to the classroom and many families were hugely appreciative of their efforts. However, there needed to be increased offer of blended learning for those children who were struggling with the return to school and those who found it very hard to deal with the disruption of schools stopping and starting due to covid infections.

**How well did your child's school or college communicate the safety measures they were taking? (2774 responses)**

- 42% Very well
- 38% Fairly well
- 14% Not well
- 6% No communication at all

Rate the following (2772 responses):

	Excellent	Good	OK	Poor
Learning support offered by school or college	31%	31%	24%	14%
Mental health or emotional support offered	24%	27%	26%	23%
Infection control organised by school or college	33%	37%	23%	7%
School or college transport	31%	23%	27%	18%

Since returning to school has your child been disciplined, sent home or excluded? (2781 responses)

- 90% No
- 7% Yes
- 3% Not sure

Have you been threatened with sanctions regarding attendance? (272 responses)

- 10% Yes
- 81% No
- 9% not sure

Have you been told to de-register your child from the school roll? (338 responses)

- 6% Yes
- 87% No
- 7% Not sure

## Children in school or learning at home who have an Education, Health and Care Plan

### If your child has an EHCP, is all the support being provided? (3053 responses)

- 32% All provision provided
- 39% Some provision provided
- 8% none of the provision is provided
- 4% waiting for plan to be agreed
- 5% waiting for assessment
- 11% don't have a plan

### If you are not getting all the provision specified is this due to Covid? (1435 responses)

- 41% Yes, I was getting all the provision before Covid
- 31% Yes partly – some provision wasn't provided before Covid, but more has now stopped
- 17% No I wasn't getting the provision before Covid
- 11% Other

### If you have been waiting for an EHC assessment, how long have you been waiting? (155 responses)

- 51% more than six months
- 12% 3-6 months
- 15% 1-3 months
- 22% less than a month

### Analysis

9% were waiting for an EHCP to be agreed or assessed, and of those 51% had been waiting for more than 6 months. This compares with pre-covid official statistics showed 60.4% of ECHPs being completed within 20 weeks.

## Health and social care support that helps with learning

### If your child received social care before lockdown has this been reinstated? (3020 responses)

*Excluding those who weren't getting social care before lockdown (1161)*

- 14% stopped in lockdown, now fully restarted (158)
- 29% stopped in lockdown now partly reinstated (339)
- 28% stopped in lockdown not been reinstated (330)
- 15% all social care continued during lockdown (173)
- 14% Some social care continued in lockdown and now more restarting (161)

### If your child received therapies before lockdown has this been reinstated? (1865 responses)

*Excluding those who weren't getting therapies before lockdown (1805)*

- 12% stopped in lockdown, now fully restarted (215)
- 33% stopped in lockdown now partly reinstated (591)
- 37% stopped in lockdown not been reinstated (660)
- 2% all therapies continued face to face during lockdown (29)
- 13% Some therapies continued face to face in lockdown and now more restarting (229)
- 4% Some therapies continued face to face in lockdown and now mostly restarted (81)

### Have you tried to access a health assessment for you or your child since the easing of lockdown?

Excluding "not needed to" (33%) and "not aware I could" (44%) (but including other) (484)

- 13% yes and now getting support (61)
- 27% yes but didn't lead to any support (130)
- 18% yes but refused the assessment (89)
- 42% other (204)

Other reasons given – a lot of people waiting for assessment or assessment done and waiting for outcome; many said they had no time or said they that have no confidence in the system



## **Comments about the return to school**

### **Encouragingly, the poll received a lot of really positive comments about how schools has supported children returning to the classroom:**

If it wasn't for my son's school and his amazing teachers then we would be in a very different situation. They truly have been a god send.

I think our school has handled the return brilliantly. Low key and focussed on recovery and socialising. Our daughter is enjoying school and feeling valued, and we are happy that she is being kept safe.

College is very important for my child. She loves the routine, the independence & the community. College have done everything they can & keep us updated on all issues & actions to keep our children safe as possible. I needed the break too as having very little sleep for 6 months is very debilitating I was a wreck. She is back to being the bright, happy, cheeky & loveable young lady she usually is.

Amazing support and response from the school can't praise them enough, very thankful that my son is able to go back and is happy and making so much progress

The school broke the class down into small bubbles which has helped massively as my son struggles in larger groups. He has settled very quickly which is the first time in his school life

### **However, there were issues highlighted**

We have closed twice since Sept for covid and currently started our 2nd closure 2 days ago the school have been brilliant but the disruption has caused problem in our child not coping with all the changes and no routine with school.

More transition time was needed before my son could start a secondary school. I feel schools are doing the best they can but this is unfortunately not benefitting children like mine.

Very little communication from school and no therapies for 7 months

Heightened anxiety from lockdown having impact "He's had to see the Ed Psych and his ability to cope in school has deteriorated dramatically and we're now looking towards specialist provision, the gap between him and his peers has widened"

I think there should have been a slower transition back to school and not so much pressure to for them to be in school 5 days a week from a 1 day transition the week before going back. Also every EHCP should have been reviewed and updated a lot of children are not the same children they were before covid, there has been a lot of regression educationally

He's very happy to be back, but I've been emailing many members of staff every single day to try to make up for the lack of handover from last year. My son has profound disabilities: can't walk, toilet himself, feed himself or talk and yet there was a complete change of class team - not one member of his class team this year knew him from before. This isn't new, it happens every year, but normally the old staff pop in and out of the classroom to help the new staff learn. But because of covid bubbles that hasn't been possible. I agree with the bubbles but it has been very worrying knowing that no adults around him know anything like enough about him. For the first few weeks he wouldn't eat or drink or use his eye gaze communication device. School staff had forgotten where they were at with his equipment (e.g. helping him to use a toilet chair rather than change him on a bench). Thankfully things have really picked up now that I've encouraged staff to think about him trying to be as independent as possible, wanting help with trying to feed himself, wanting to use the toilet chair he's been waiting a year for etc. Since then he's started using his eye gaze talker, started eating and drinking, and they have found his toilet chair. It's a huge relief. It has been a very worrying time, realising that no one person in the school knows what's going on for him, and has an oversight of his needs (EHCPs are too long winded and they are ignored). The school don't welcome parents coming in at any time, but I haven't managed to get in to do one bit of training with them which seems to have transformed things. Much of this is pre-covid - the new staff team each year, the lack of parent access and as such are concerns that I have been raising with school. But covid and the need for bubbles have really exacerbated it. Overall the school have done a great job, are working really hard, but there are these major flaws. It's such a relief to have him back in school, he missed so much and he needs to be there. He is delighted to go in every day.

### **Things that are missing – not just therapies, but experiences and activities**

Well, as my point of view on this topic is, that common sense has left the building. A parent can not enter school to access WC these days. My family's school run takes hours. Whilst I understand the reasoning behind bubbles, parents outside the building are in close contact with each other at drop off and collecting times, so no avoiding other bubbles really. My issue is more with how government has chosen to deal with this as schools are simply following those guidelines/ restrictions. So much joy has been sucked out of children's school experience- no swimming, no horse riding, no excursions, no walks. Those are vital for children with disabilities, real actual experiences is how they learn and improve and find enjoyment in. They are missing out on so much and whilst my son's school is providing excellent learning opportunities, it should be able to resume more activities, after all we now live in a society where we wear masks and over sanitize and if need be self isolate. I want more for my son. He deserves more. It's part of curriculum therefore it needs to be resumed. We have paused our lives too much for a virus that we have no control over from the moment we step foot outside we are exposed and hiding from it is not the most sensible thing to do

## Quotes from parents

### School

My son has massive anxiety issues. This has not been addressed at all. He was having limited outreach learning before the summer break. This was working well, now he's expected to go into the setting, which is terrifying for him. He's refusing to go some days and not engaging and being disruptive on other days. No plan or communication from school on how to resolve this.

Could somebody please take the case of the suction machine misunderstanding further? There are lots of children with tracheotomies that are missing out on school, and children like my daughter who are not receiving the care they need because she can't be suctioned.

Knew that I was stressed but having my child back at school was a massive weight off my shoulders. Immediately my mental health was better. Back into a routine and I was not dealing with the anxiety 24 hrs a day.

It's a very frustrating time as no one seems to be 100% sure what to do for the best and although I want to protect my son as much as possible, my other son has returned to school and so it now just feels like Arran has been forgotten about and is being discriminated due to his health conditions.

### Health and social care

It is so frustrating how therapy services have not started up. These were already stretched before the pandemic.

All of her NHS specialist inputs remain suspended or withdrawn by discharge. - The ONLY reinstated therapies are those provided by her School's own (privately employed) highly specialised clinicians, the School itself being charitably run, rather than State controlled.

The constant blaming of COVID-19 for lack of provision is beginning to have a detrimental effect on my child. We have not had a face to face meeting with assessments etc being offered via video link which are completely unsuitable and unacceptable for the assessments needed. We are still awaiting operations planned for April 2020 and that service hasn't even been in contact. I understand that measures were taken to protect the NHS with staff being sent to "the front line". The expected dearth of emergency cases never materialised so staff should have been returned to normal duties ASAP. Staff have now been returned to duty but don't appear to be carrying out their duties, instead blaming COVID-19 for lack of service.

## Annex – Details of respondents

### Number of responses

3431 responses from parent carers across the UK.

East of England	8%
Midlands	16%
London	11%
North East	8%
North West	12%
South East	19%
South West	11%
Yorks and Humber	7%
Northern Ireland	3%
Scotland	3%
Wales	3%

### Age of child

Under 5	4%
5-15	74%
16-18	16%
19-25	6%

### Type of school child attends

Mainstream school or college	41%
Day special school or college	45%
Nursery or pre-school	1%
Residential special school or college	2%
Alternative provision/PRU	2%
Elective home education	1%

### Ethnicity

White – UK	83%
Other white back ground	4%
Asian – Indian/Pakistani/ Bangladeshi/Chinese/other	4%
Black/African/Caribbean	3%
Mixed Ethnic	2%
Other	1%