
Research summary: Covid-19 and the impact on families with autistic children

Background

In summer 2020 the Autism Centre for Education and Research at the University of Birmingham sent out a questionnaire to parents who have autistic children currently in education (up to the age of 25). We were particularly interested in what the experience of lockdown was like for families, what type of support was provided by school, how home education went and what parents have learnt now their children have returned to school.

Who responded?

There were 394 parents and caregivers who responded to the questionnaire. Some responses were not usable (e.g. their child didn't have an autism diagnosis) and we included 294 respondents in the final analysis.

- 93% of respondents were mothers
- 78% of respondents had male children
- 23% reported that there was more than one autistic person in the household
- Average age of their children was 11.3yrs (range 4-25yrs)
- 81% of families were classified as "white British"
- 79% of the children were speaking in full sentences
- 41% of the children were attending primary mainstream schools; 20% secondary mainstream
- 55% of children had an Education and Healthcare Plan (EHCP)
- 91% of respondents provided home education to their children during lockdown

How much did school help during lockdown?

Broadly speaking there was a mixed response from parents and caregivers as to how well school managed the movement into lockdown. For example, when asked "*How well were the changes to your child's schooling managed when lockdown started?*" 12% of respondents said extremely well, 22% very well, 27% said moderately well, 17% slightly well and 22% said not well at all.

Around a half of schools (48%) sent information home to help the child understand more about Covid-19 and the lockdown but only 75% of those respondents who received information found it useful.

The majority of respondents reported having ongoing contact with educators during lockdown (81%) but there was a mixed response in terms of how useful it was (41% saying it was, 31% saying it wasn't and 28% not sure).

What did school offer?

For those respondents who were providing home education, 37% reported receiving no supplementary materials from school to support their child's learning. For those who did, the most common items received were worksheets (46%) and textbooks (31%).

In terms of technology to support home education, 75% of respondents received links to websites, 35% had access to online learning environments, 29% received recorded lessons, 23% live online lessons and 20% lessons via media outlets such as the BBC.

The majority of schools (83%) did not provide the parent/caregiver with individualised learning instructions for the child.

Overall, if the child had an EHCP in place the school was statistically significantly more likely to manage the changes caused by lockdown better, provide more regular communication and offer supplementary education materials.

Home education

The majority of respondents (86%) had not provided home education before.

65% of respondents who provided home education reported that their child struggled accepting them as a teacher.

Approximately half of respondents (48%) reported that there were challenges with technology (e.g. access to computers, using new software).

Health and wellbeing

Half of respondents (51%) reported that their child's energy level dropped during the lockdown period and 42% of children were sleeping worse (44% said it was about the same as before).

43% of respondents reported that their children were lonelier than before lockdown (46% about the same) and 63% of parents reported that their child missed going to school (e.g. friendships, teachers, the structure).

For those children who were markedly anxious pre-lockdown (29% of the sample were "extremely anxious"), there was a reduction in the anxiety levels of some during the lockdown period (16% were classed as "extremely anxious").

Approximately half of parents/caregivers (51%) said they received emotional support during lockdown.

What about the future?

Broadly speaking, respondents were quite positive about the return to school but were nervous about "returning to previous patterns", lack of support and health concerns.

When asked if they would take the option of having some school lessons at home in the future, 39% said they would, 37% said they wouldn't and 24% were unsure.

They were asked if they would choose to educate their child at a "virtual school" and 16% said they would, 32% only part-time, 37% would not and 15% were unsure.

36% of respondents said that Covid-19 had negatively affected their child's future, 36% said it was the same, 12% said it was better and 16% unsure.

“I would like to see our education system learn from this experience and get better at providing for children who struggle in school.” Parent 15yr old boy

“At home he became more confident about his learning. There was lots of praise and encouragement”. Parent 8yr old boy

“Transition is our biggest worry They are expecting a highly anxious autistic child to simply walk through the school gate in September with hundreds of other kids.” Parent 12yr old girl

For further information on this research please contact Professor Karen Guldberg K.K.Guldberg@bham.ac.uk