



School attendance and elective home education one year after COVID-19: Research with children with neurodevelopmental conditions

A policy briefing from the National Children's Bureau

Background to the study

This study investigated the levels and causes of school attendance and elective home education one year after COVID-19 for children with neurodevelopmental conditions. Children who have an intellectual disability or autism are the most vulnerable amongst children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and score consistently at the bottom of any national attainment criterion (DfE, 2014). Children with neurodevelopmental conditions already presented with high levels of school absenteeism before the Covid-19 pandemic, and it is thought that many of these children have since been removed from school registers to become home educated.

The study's data derived from an online survey which approximately 1,200 parents, of children aged 5-15 years old with neurodevelopmental conditions, have responded to. This survey established their child's school registration status in March 2020 and 2021 and explored factors associated with absenteeism. This included: the reasons for absenteeism among children with neurodevelopmental conditions; the child, family and school factors associated with school absenteeism; and the barriers and facilitators of school attendance, alongside parent's experiences of home schooling and elective home education.

Key messages from the study

School attendance problems:

Physical health problems were not a major barrier to school attendance - Additional physical health problems were not associated with total days absent or persistent absence.

COVID-19 had a limited impact - COVID-19 absence was only the third most likely reason for absence after refusal and ill-health.

Children's unmet need in school was a significant barrier – up to 31% of school attendance barriers were linked to unmet need.

Mental health an important barrier – anxiety was significantly linked to more days absent, more likely persistent absence, and more day's school refusal.

School closures were not helpful - blanket school closures and home schooling likely exacerbate existing difficulties with school attendance. Support for homeschooling was not perceived as very helpful on a scale of 1-10, satisfaction with school support for home schooling was about 5.5.

Parent-teacher relationships are crucial - Parent-teacher relationship a significant independent predictor of total days absent and persistent absence, as well as school refusal and exclusion.

Elective Home Education

COVID-19 had a limited role in school de-registration - Dissatisfaction with schools for not meeting the additional needs of children with neurodevelopmental conditions was the main reason for de-registering before and after the pandemic.

Personalised education and one to one support – this was seen by parents as the main advantage of Elective Home Education.

Child Mental Health – levels of child mental health were similar between children in Elective Home Education and those registered to attend a school.

Policy roundtable

To support the study, a private policy roundtable was held to share the findings of the study, and to facilitate dialogue between academics, the sector and policy makers across the four UK nations. Attendees at this roundtable included parent advisers, the study research team, academics from across the UK, and representatives from government education departments from each of the nations.

The following recommendations were informed by these discussions. However, these recommendations are the sole responsibility of the study partners.

National Policy Recommendations

National policy should focus on preventing the root causes of school absence

National policies that seek to maximise attendance at school for children with neurodevelopmental conditions must address the root causes that lie within the system, rather than viewing the child or family as the problem within the child or family. This approach requires a strong emphasis on removing barriers to attendance, including: unmet special educational needs; lack of flexibility in policies and practices; mental health and wellbeing difficulties; and bullying.

Trusting relationships between children, families and schools are of paramount importance for supporting high levels of attendance.

National guidance for schools should emphasise that working with parents as partners and respecting their views are key features of a successful approach. As part of this, schools should be transparent about the support they offer children with neurodevelopmental conditions to access their education, and set out what reasonable adjustments they expect to make, including to policies and procedures around attendance. Schools should reflect on how effective they are in this area and identify ways they can better build positive relationships with families.

Improving attendance is best supported by multi-agency teams in place around the school and the family

National policy should conceptualise services that focus on improving attendance as part of the wider integrated offer for children with neurodevelopmental conditions. As well as providing additional advice and support for children and families, attendance services should also promote inclusive practice across schools in their area, working with specialist disability services, mental health support teams, and other school-focused services.

At a system level, the support of other key agencies – including the NHS and children's social care - should be drawn on as part of a strategic local approach to improving attendance.

Data on low attendance should be carefully tracked and used to address systemic inequalities.

At both the local and national level, more granular data on the underlying drivers of low attendance should be collected and analysed. In particular, data should be considered in light of the Public Sector Equality Duty required by the Equality Act 2010. This duty requires an analysis of whether children who are persistently absent have protected characteristics, including disabilities, and requires consideration of what barriers can be removed to improve their participation.

Flexi-schooling should always be considered where this is the best interests of the child

For some children, flexi-schooling is the best option for them to successfully engage with their education. However, it can sometimes be difficult for families to arrange such agreements with their school. Guidance from national governments should allow schools to take a flexible approach, be clear that all requests should be considered on a case-by-case basis, and that decisions should be taken in the best interests of the child.

Low attendance is often a precursor to 'Elective Home Education'

Many are educated at home because schools cannot meet their needs. The term "Elective Home Education" does not properly represent the entire cohort of children and young people being home educated. National governments should consider other terms which are more inclusive of the range of family's experiences of choosing home education for their children.

Local authorities should use their register of children not in schools as a base for identifying children and young people being home educated who may need additional support with their learning and put measures in place to support with this. This should include facilitating access to additional services, including education services.

Anxiety and mental health difficulties are a leading cause of low attendance

Thresholds and waiting times for access to children's mental health services are exacerbating problems for children and young people, more should be done to address barriers to accessing mental health support and ensure it can be access when problems first emerge.

Further research is needed in this area

There should be further longitudinal research on elective home education and school attendance difficulties for autistic and neurodiverse children; this should measure academic outcomes and experiences over time.