

Home learning during the Covid-19 lockdown

The impact of school closures on care experienced children



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April 2020

Introduction

Children who have experience of living in care*, including adopted children, face particular challenges in education. Previous Adoption UK research has shown that adopted children, on average, achieve significantly less well in exams than their peers, are more likely to have a range of higher-level learning needs and are permanently excluded twenty times more than their peers.

Many of these children have a mix of learning and emotional challenges. Results from an Adoption UK survey earlier in 2020 showed that three quarters of adoptive families were already experiencing challenges – half of them severe challenges. Less than a month later, lockdown began.

To find out about the impact of school closures on care experienced children, Adoption UK ran a week-long survey in April for parents and carers of care-experienced children who would normally be in school. There were 674 responses.

These responses form the basis for this report, which opens a window on the challenges of supporting vulnerable children's learning at this time, and makes recommendations for the months ahead.

**Care experienced children includes those who are adopted, otherwise permanently placed, or currently looked after (in care).*

Executive Summary

- 85% of care experienced children are not getting any additional support from school
- 50% of parents and carers say their child is experiencing emotional distress and anxiety
- 31% of families are experiencing an increase in violent and aggressive behaviour from their children
- 54% of parents and carers say that the time spent together is improving their relationship
- 63% of parents and carers think their child will need extra support during the transition back to school
- More than half of all secondary aged pupils seem calmer without school

Lockdown has had significant impacts on families, both positive and negative. Some have reported severe challenges, including increases in challenging behaviour, violence and aggression, and concerns about the mental wellbeing of both children and adults in the household. However, some families have reaped positive benefits, enjoying spending more time with their children and having more conversations with them, with many reporting that their children seem calmer without the stress of school.

Those who have attended settings have commented positively on the experiences their child has had, and noted that even part time attendance has had a positive impact. Most who attended their setting were offered a place due to one of the original eligibility criteria (child of key worker, child with additional learning needs, or 'vulnerable' child) but one in ten were offered a place despite not strictly meeting the original criteria. However, some had to battle to get the place, and some were offered less than was needed. Some had to turn down offers because they were unsuitable.

Most children, both at school and at home, have not been offered any additional support in respect of their care-experienced status. Those that have been offered support were largely happy with what was offered and considered it beneficial. Parents/carers of children with special/additional learning needs feel particularly marginalised and concerned.

Parents/carers with children at home had differing expectations of their settings with regards to how frequently and for what purpose the setting communicated with them. Most were either satisfied, or would prefer more communication. There were frustrations around work being provided, with some finding it too much, or not sufficiently differentiated for children with learning needs. It was particularly difficult for parents/carers who are working at home to oversee their child's home learning. Regular welfare checks were sometimes deemed as supportive, while others found them intrusive.

The majority of parents/carers are worried about the transition back to school, and a small number are now seriously considering home educating or changing their child's school. Most believe that their children will need additional support to transition back to education.

Recommendations

Planning now for the re-opening of school settings is crucial. Governments in all four nations of the UK should provide additional funding and resources to help schools support children who will struggle most when school settings re-open. This should include support with learning and with wellbeing. National education departments should also provide clearer guidance to schools about communicating with families and specific guidance to schools about supporting care experienced children and those with special and additional learning needs during school closures.

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1. Scope of the Survey and Report

As schools have been largely closed across the UK, families have been adapting to a new way of life.

Adoption UK wanted to understand the impact of these changes on families with children who are care-experienced, whether adopted, otherwise permanently placed, or currently looked after (in care). In particular, we wanted to know about the educational provision for children – both those in school and at home – and what, if any, specific arrangements were being made to offer additional support to care-experienced children. We also wanted to know what impact these changes were having on family life, and what the implications are for the type of immediate and future support families might need with regard to education and other challenges.

We ran a survey for parents and carers of care-experienced children who would normally be in school which was open from April 14th to April 21st. There were 674 responses. These responses form the basis for this report.

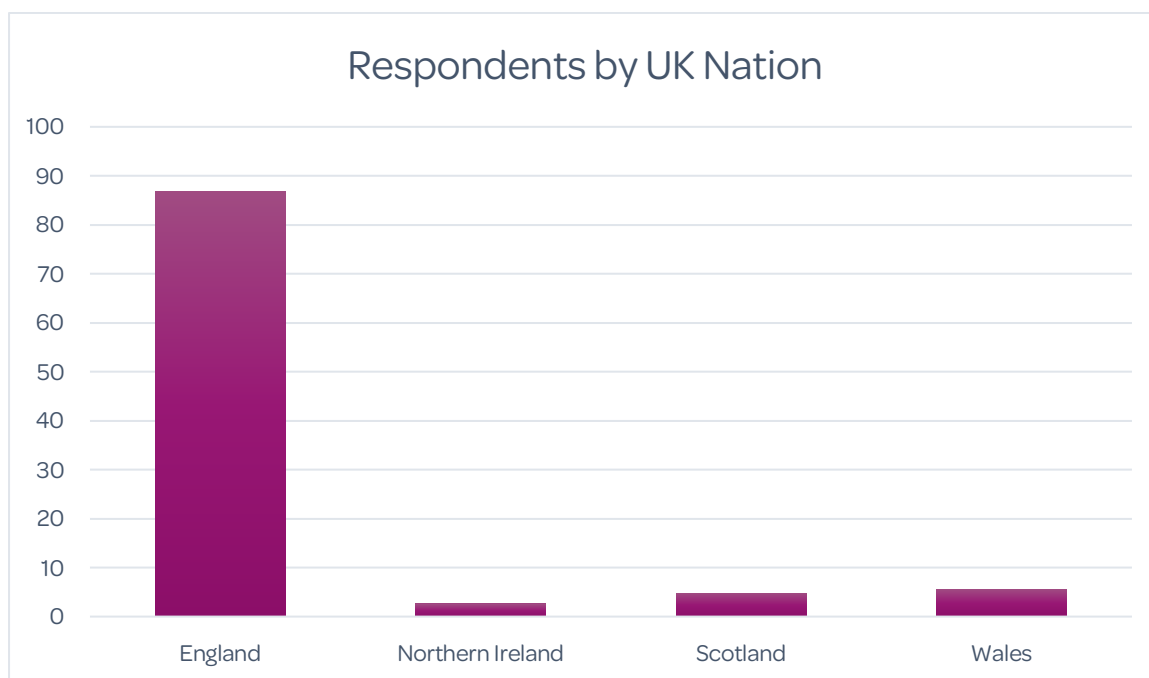
In terms of where the children are doing their learning:

- 15% of children represented in the survey had attended their setting during the partial closures. The majority of those had attended part time or for occasional days.
- 10% of these were offered places despite not fitting the original criteria
- 98% of children represented in the survey had been at home either full or part time during partial school closures
- 61% of their parents are also working from home

2. About the survey respondents

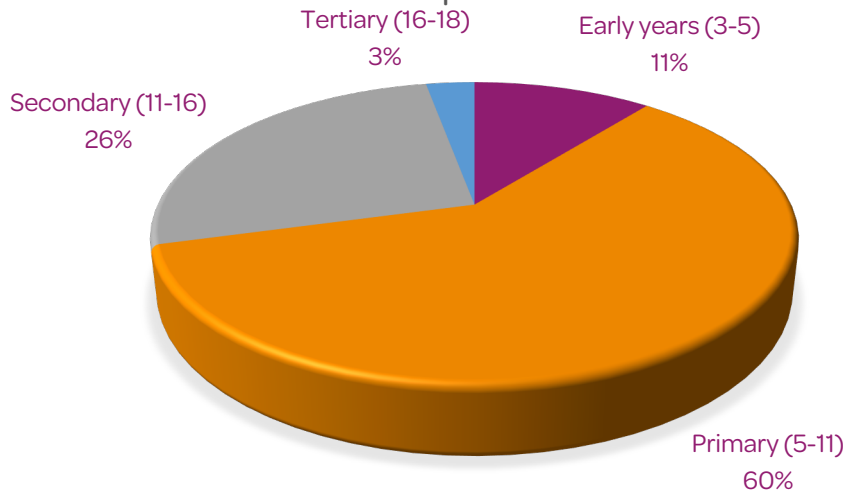
There were 660 valid responses. Each respondent was asked to complete the survey once for each child, meaning that the responses should represent 660 individual care-experienced children.

97% of the responses were about an adopted child. There was a total of 20 children with other legal statuses represented, including looked after children, and those on other legal permanence orders (e.g. SGO).



Children aged 3-18 were included in the survey as nursery funding is available for 3-year-olds in the UK. Education or training is compulsory until a child is 18 in England (16 in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). The majority of children represented in survey results were of primary school age.

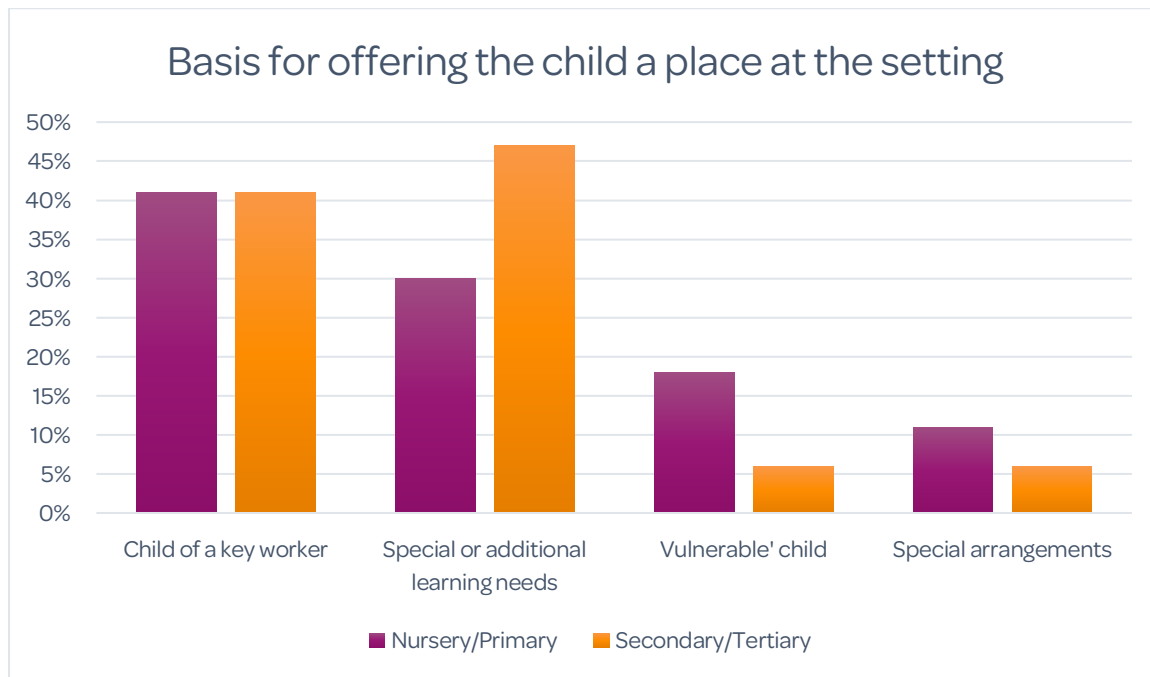
Educational Stage of Children Represented in Responses



In order to account for the over-representation of primary-aged children, all results were broken down into two groups – nursery/primary and secondary/tertiary – during the analysis stage so that differences between the experiences of different age groups could be assessed.

3. Experiences of Families where Children had Attended their Education Setting (including part time or for occasional days)

A total of 99 children represented in the survey had attended their education setting at some point during the Covid-19 closures, including those who had attended for occasional sessions or part time. This is 15% of all children represented in the survey.



Younger children were more likely to have been offered a place at their education setting than secondary/tertiary aged children. In total, 10% of children who attended their setting during the first weeks of Covid-19 closures were offered a place as part of a special arrangement with the school, despite not falling into any of the other official categories in the original guidance documents. This indicates that some settings have flexibly interpreted the criteria on eligibility for provision in order to include previously looked after children who may not necessarily fit the criteria but for whom the negative impact of staying at home outweighs the benefits.

As a part time key worker, my children have some access to school. However, as an adopted child, the school has recognised his vulnerability and has offered him a place at school on any day it is open even if it does not coincide with one of my working days if that would benefit him.

Learning activities for those attending their school setting

Provision of learning activities while children were at their settings mainly fell into the categories of play-based or activity-based learning. Only 6% of children were engaged mostly in formal learning while at their setting (rising to 17% of secondary/tertiary-aged children). In their comments, some respondents reported that the formal learning being provided in the setting was a replica of the formal learning that was being sent to children at home. This may reassure parents with children at home that those still in their settings are not necessarily getting 'ahead' through receiving formal teaching, while others are being left behind at home.

While 44% of children were being set additional work to complete at home (61% of secondary/tertiary aged children), again many respondents reported that this was in addition to part time attendance at the setting and was the same as all other children were being set, rather than homework arising from formal learning.

3.1 Additional Support for Care-experienced Children

40% of children who were attending their setting were receiving additional support in respect of their care-experienced status. This figure rose to 50% for those attending secondary or tertiary settings.

Respondents with secondary/tertiary aged children reported that schools were offering a variety of additional support, including ensuring their child was with staff members they knew and were comfortable with. Several respondents commented on the benefits of working in much smaller groups, or attending school with only a few other children, resulting in their child receiving more 1-1 support and experiencing a calmer environment.

For nursery and primary children, the most common form of additional support was 1-1 support. Many of the children had this in place already, and the setting was doing its best to continue it either with the same staff member, or other staff members well-known to the child but, for a small number of children, this had been introduced since school closures.

Other additional support included the use of visual prompts, allowing comforting toys, time with the school's dog, more breaks, and the benefits of doing a wider variety of activities, including sports coaching.

Many of the children who were attending school were doing so on a part time basis, and respondents with primary aged children did note that their children benefitted from additional contact from school staff on the days when they were at home, where this was offered.

On the whole, those respondents with primary/nursery aged children who were receiving additional support related to their care-experienced status were pleased with what was on offer, with some describing it as "extremely positive" and "exceptional". However, this positive experience must be tempered by the fact that 63% of respondents with primary/nursery aged children reported receiving no additional support.

3.2 General Experiences of Attending Settings During School Closures

Of the 14 respondents with secondary/tertiary aged children who offered additional comments about their experiences of attending the setting during school closures, two stated that they believed there would have been an increased risk of violent and aggressive behaviour from their child had a school place not been available, and three felt that having their child at home full time might have led to a breakdown of the family.

Without it we may have been heading towards adoption breakdown as I never get any respite.

Four respondents noted that plans had changed rapidly, especially at the beginning of the closures. In three of the cases, the child had initially been sent home, and only later been offered a place. Two children were only offered a place after social worker involvement, despite having education, health and care plans in place. In the fourth case, the child was initially in school, but the local authority planned to move all children into a central location for educational provision, and the parent felt that the child would not manage this additional change and so was planning to keep them at home instead.

Four respondents were very positive about the provision that had been made, praising both the settings and the local authorities involved. This included one child who was at a residential setting.

My son's school has smashed it. So pleased. He is in year 11 and this could have been a disaster if they went to a school that weren't so aware of the importance of attachment.

Of the 44 respondents with children of primary or nursery age who offered additional comments, one quarter explained how attending their setting had benefitted their child, especially as it enabled children to keep some sense of routine, as well as the unique situation meaning that children were accessing a broader range of activities and having more adult support not only with learning but also with their play and social interactions. Several respondents had only positive comments to make about the provision made by their child's setting.

The focus on play rather than formal learning has encouraged them to relax and enjoy school! This has been a real turning point for us as a family and helped us all to recognise what they need from formal education.

She has thrived with hardly any kids and basically one to one with an adult!

Our school have done so much to help my son deal with these changes. We are very grateful.

It was clear from the comments that sending their children to nursery or school was a difficult decision for some parents. Three respondents specifically mentioned feeling "guilty" about accessing the school provision, and others were concerned about the risk of Covid-19 infection. In view of the fact that respondents did not take the decision to access school places lightly, it is disappointing how many respondents reported having difficulties accessing provision that their child was entitled to under the criteria, reporting feeling dissuaded from taking up provision, or being refused additional provision, despite experiencing an increase in meltdowns and violent and aggressive behaviour while children were at home.

It has been a battle to get it. I am a key worker, single adopter of a child with an EHCP who is vulnerable, and school expected me not to request childcare.

Whilst waiting for a place to be agreed my children were vandalising stuff in my house.

Other issues that were raised in comments by respondents with primary/nursery aged children included the loss of specialist support that their child had previously benefitted from (e.g. specialist SLT support) and a lack of understanding of the impact of the sudden changes on children who have already experienced traumatic transitions and other trauma in their past, and who may have attachment difficulties.

4. Challenges of Accessing a School Place

Care-experienced children of key workers

It is evident from respondents' comments that a considerable number of children whose parents are key workers have not been able to access school provision at all, or not been offered enough school provision, despite being eligible. This has posed considerable difficulties for families, including forcing them to incur additional costs by sourcing alternative childcare.

Respondents in this position pointed out the additional difficulties faced by their care-experienced children coping with anxiety, attachment difficulties and the effects of past trauma in a rapidly changing situation with little certainty.

Both me and my partner were classified as key workers but the school absolutely refused to help us, even for a couple of days while we got our routines and schedules sorted. Very, very unhelpful and do not recognise the additional needs that adopted children may have in these circumstances.

We have been offered only 3 part days a week despite her vulnerable status, her EHCP and my full time key worker status. So I have to use other childminders which is not in line with lockdown and more risky for all than her going to school each day.

'Vulnerable' children

Since adopted and previously care-experienced children were not included in original definitions of 'vulnerable' children in any guidance, schools have been left to take case by case decisions about these children. (N.B. the DfE in England has more recently updated its guidance to specifically include adopted children as a group that should be considered for eligibility). As we saw earlier, some families with adopted children have been able to access childcare through education due to the flexible response of settings, but many more have been unable to do so. For a small number of respondents, the specific circumstances around their child have meant that inability to access their setting has had additional detrimental effects.

I have been disappointed that the school have not had him in a couple of days a week to allow him to access his therapies ... he's been expelled from other schools in the past two years and only been at this school for a term and a half and was settling well. The continuity is now missing again.

My child had only just started his specialist school 2 weeks before lockdown. Having had changes in school and time in the PRU before, this massively contributed to very, very high anxieties.

My daughter has been flexi-schooling for the past two years because she could not handle full time. We had nearly got her up to full time when all this happened. I am worried this is going to set us right back again.

I have contacted the LA to find out about any settings open for LAC but have not had any response.

5. Experiences of Families with Children at Home (including part time)

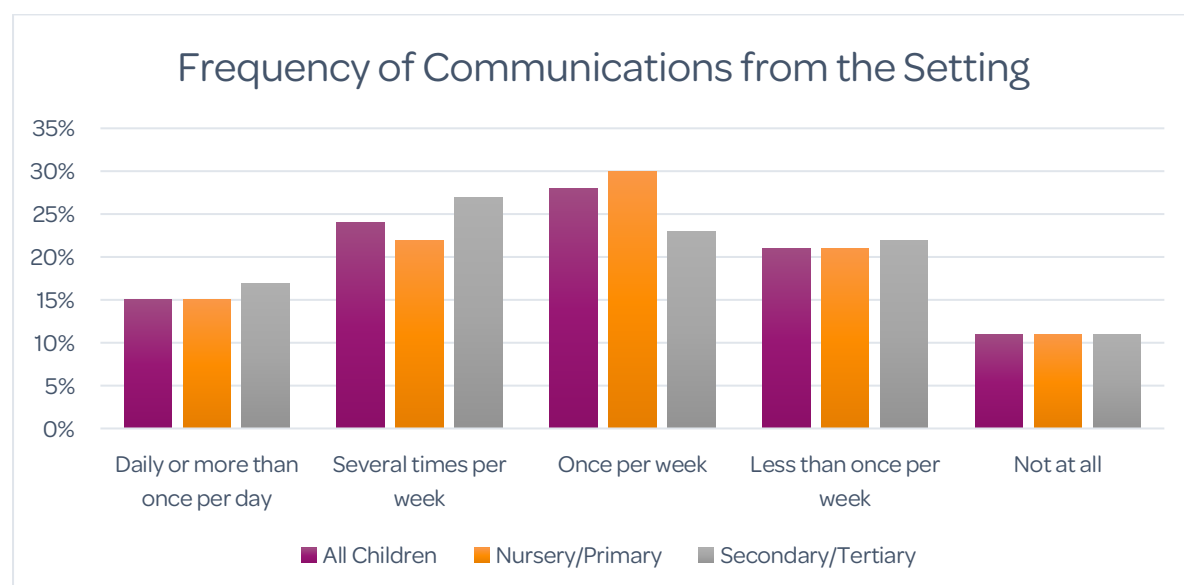
98% of respondents reported that their child had been at home with them during the Covid-19 closures, including those who had been at home part of the time. The proportion of children attending school full time is therefore very low, at just 2%.

Children of secondary/tertiary age were fractionally more likely to have been in full-time education (2.67%) than children of primary/nursery age.

5.1 Communications Between the Setting and the Home

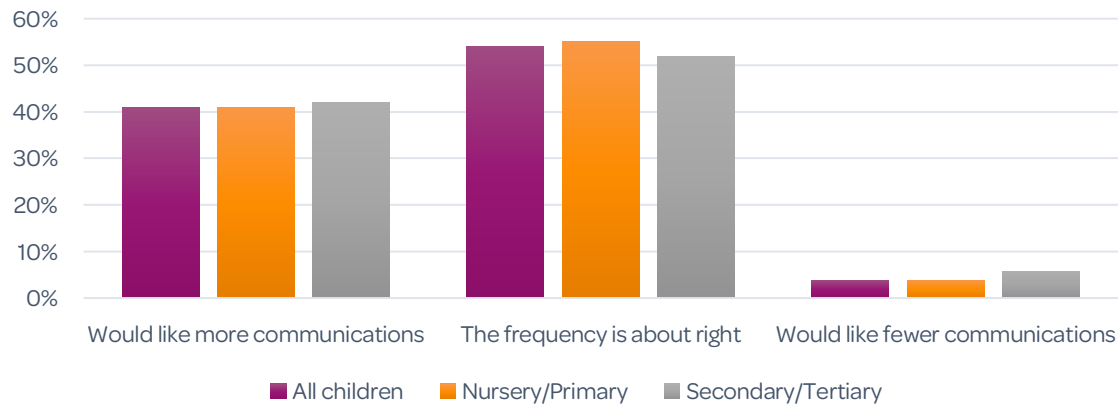
89% of respondents reported that their child's setting was communicating with them or their child while the setting was closed.

The most commonly-used form of communication was email (55%) with the setting's own online platform also frequently used (47%). 36% of respondents reported receiving phone calls from the setting, and 6% had made use of video conferencing facilities.



A slight majority of respondents felt that the frequency of communications was about right, and most of those who wanted changes would prefer more communications rather than fewer.

Satisfaction with the Frequency of Communications



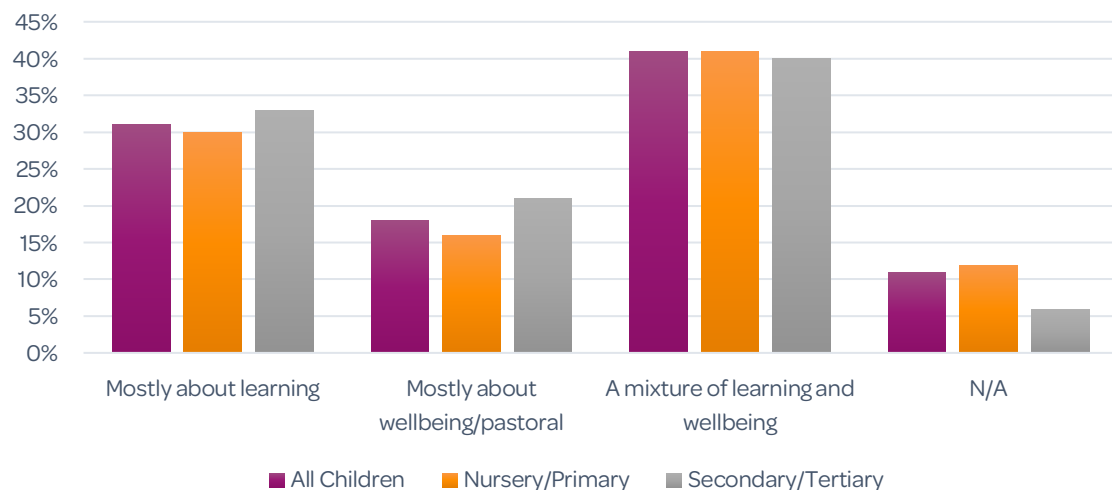
However, the simple assessment of satisfaction with frequency of communications does not convey the complexity of family needs when it comes to communications from their settings. Many respondents reported that, while frequent, communications were impersonal, including one case where communications were organised centrally from a multi-academy trust for all students in all the trust’s schools.

While many may have felt the frequency of communication was acceptable, it is clear that for some, the nature of the communications was causing difficulties.

School has not provided any meaningful communication, simply cheerleading from Twitter and sending advice about following government guidelines via email.

They ring every week and ask how things are but don't make any response when I share the difficulties we are having. They finish the conversation as if I've said everything is fine! There is little point in them calling.

Types of Communications Received from the Setting



Communication about wellbeing

While a mixture of communications about learning and wellbeing was the most commonly-used strategy for communicating between the setting and the home, several respondents noted that they would prefer more communication and support about their child's wellbeing, especially as they were experiencing particular challenges.

There have been no welfare checks. The school know that my son can be aggressive and violent towards me.

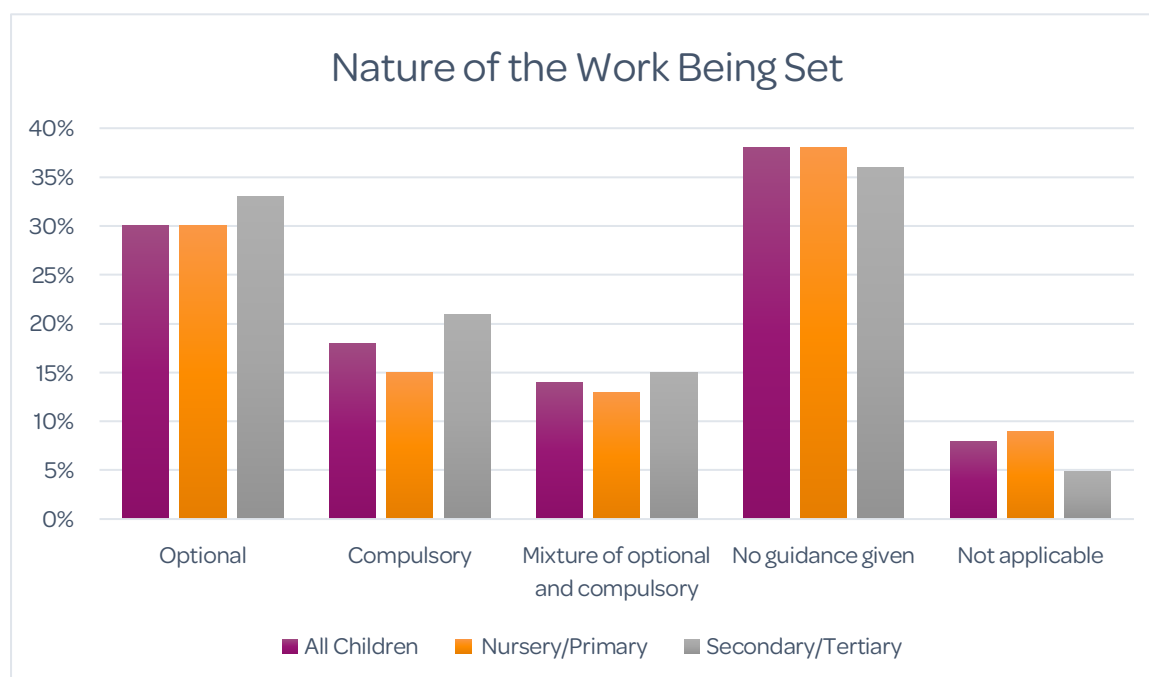
Even where communications about wellbeing were frequent, several respondents felt that they missed the mark.

Our oldest daughter's school ring/email every day, but we are made to feel that they don't trust us – in fact we feel as though they view us as parents from whom a child should be removed, rather than parents who have had to undergo a rigorous process to be able to adopt traumatised children.

Respondents frequently commented on not only what was being communicated, but who was communicating it. Those whose children had special or additional educational needs frequently expressed disappointment that they had received no contact from the SENCO/ALNCO in school, and those whose children benefitted from 1-1 reported their child's emotional distress at not hearing from that key person. While it is recognised that many education staff will be continuing to work under pressure despite family challenges of their own, a simple and quick method of keeping in touch, such as a 'missing you' postcard would help to alleviate the distress of children who are feeling abandoned by important adults in their lives and may ease transition when settings re-open.

Communication about learning

Where communications about learning and set work were being sent to parents/carers, there was a mixed response about the expectations of settings with regards to completion of this work.



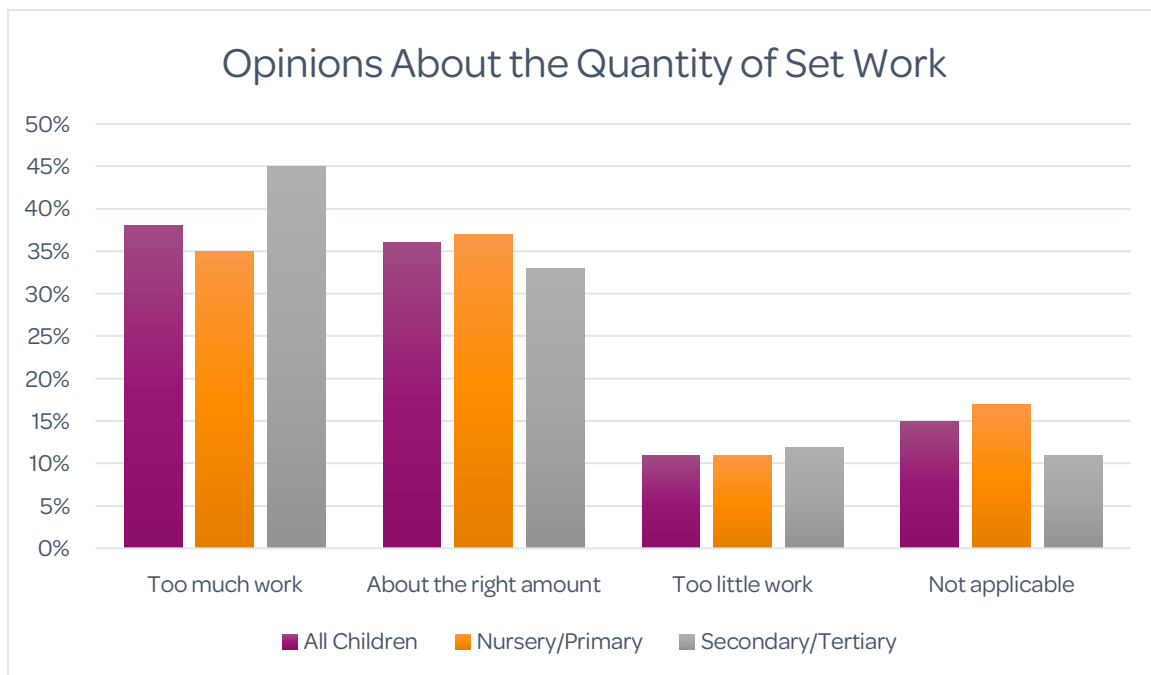
For many parents and carers, the guidance from the setting was not clear as to whether the work being set should be regarded as optional or compulsory. Respondent comments revealed a wide range of approaches from settings, including from respondents who were teachers and noted that their own workplace had a completely different approach from their child's setting. There were even changing expectations within some settings, including different expectations from different teachers, and changing expectations over time.

Before Easter the school ... were very 'hands off' about whether the tasks were completed. After Easter the school will be using a new platform and we have been told there will be daily tasks and we need to provide 'evidence' the tasks have been completed.

Primary school approach has been aimed at doing basic tasks and staying calm. Secondary school threatened children with summer school, or repeating the academic year if children didn't keep up.

[The school has] been clear you should work for an hour each subject and then stop – doesn't matter how far you get – just do your best. A great approach for her as she is very anxious.

Public humiliation of my child when she has not completed work is shaming and unhelpful.



Many respondents, especially at secondary/tertiary level, felt that the quantity of work being set was too much. Parents found it difficult to manage several different communication methods being used at once, and work being set by different teachers with different expectations (e.g. daily tasks from one teacher, but a 3-week project from another in the same setting). Several respondents reported that they found it difficult to access work as they had no printing facility at home and, for others, managing the frequent communications and expectations around work from the setting was extremely difficult in addition to working from home.

There is some email communication but it is confusing and I don't have time to read it all and check my child's work etc. as well as doing my job.

However, the main cause for concern was the lack of differentiation in the work set, with tasks being sent out to the whole class without adjustments for children with special or additional educational needs, or social, emotional and mental health needs.

Teacher has sent email direct to my child noting work had not been submitted by a due date and stating that they would have to escalate if further submission dates were missed. Created significant anxiety for my child and appeared to have been sent without any consideration of what may be happening to my child/family.

We were abandoned with little support via EHCP before all this happened. Learning sent home for first 2 weeks off is totally inappropriate for my child's level as it's a "standard class work" pack and I have NO IDEA how to teach a child with ADHD, ASD, sensory processing issues who is 3 years behind her peers in learning/development terms so this is a REAL struggle.

The work set is 'one size fits all' and so some of it is not suitable for my foster daughter to complete or attempt. She is not able to do any of it independently and as I have 2 other children to do work with as well, I am not really managing to cover much.

While this has been an unprecedented situation which teachers have had to respond to very quickly and under intense pressure, it is clear from respondents' comments that some settings have been better able to cater for children with additional needs than others.

I know they've done special work packs for all the kids with SEN and the higher achieving ones for the parents that wanted it. But they've been equally supportive of me not doing anything. The SENCO really understands.

5.2 Additional Communications and Support for Care-Experienced Children

Only 15% of respondents with a child at home reported that they were receiving any additional support in respect of their child's care-experienced status.

Of the 84 respondents who used the comments to tell us more about the additional support offered by their setting, 22, or just over a quarter, were referring either to being offered a place in school (which they had refused in some cases) or support that was being provided on occasional days when the child was attending school rather than support that was being offered while the child was at home.

Of the rest, most referred to more regular communications, and phone calls or other keeping in touch communications from class teachers and other key members of staff. A smaller number of respondents reported schools going even further, offering 1-1 video sessions with key adults, Zoom sessions with peers, providing alternative school work and setting an individual timetable.

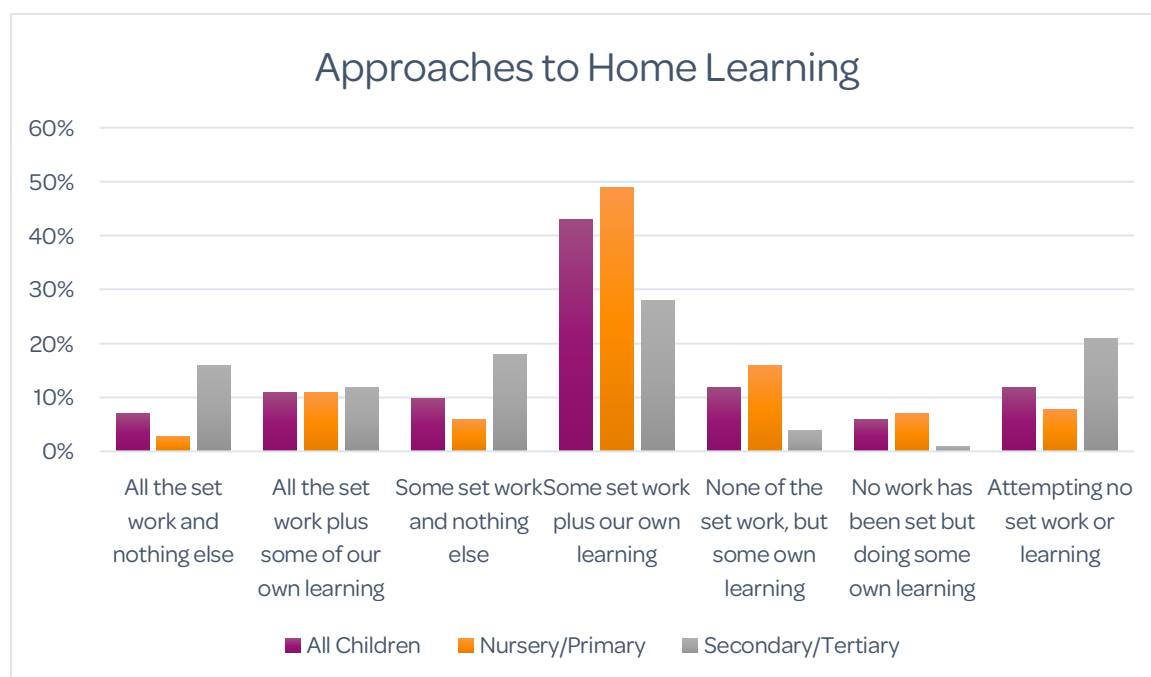
Respondents were generally appreciative and positive about the extra support that they had received. However, this still leaves 85% of children represented in the survey receiving no additional support in respect of their care-experienced status. For looked after and previously

looked after children in English settings, these settings will still have been in receipt of EYPP or PP+, and several respondents commented that they felt their child’s setting could be making better use of PP+ during school closures.

5.3 Experiences of Learning at Home

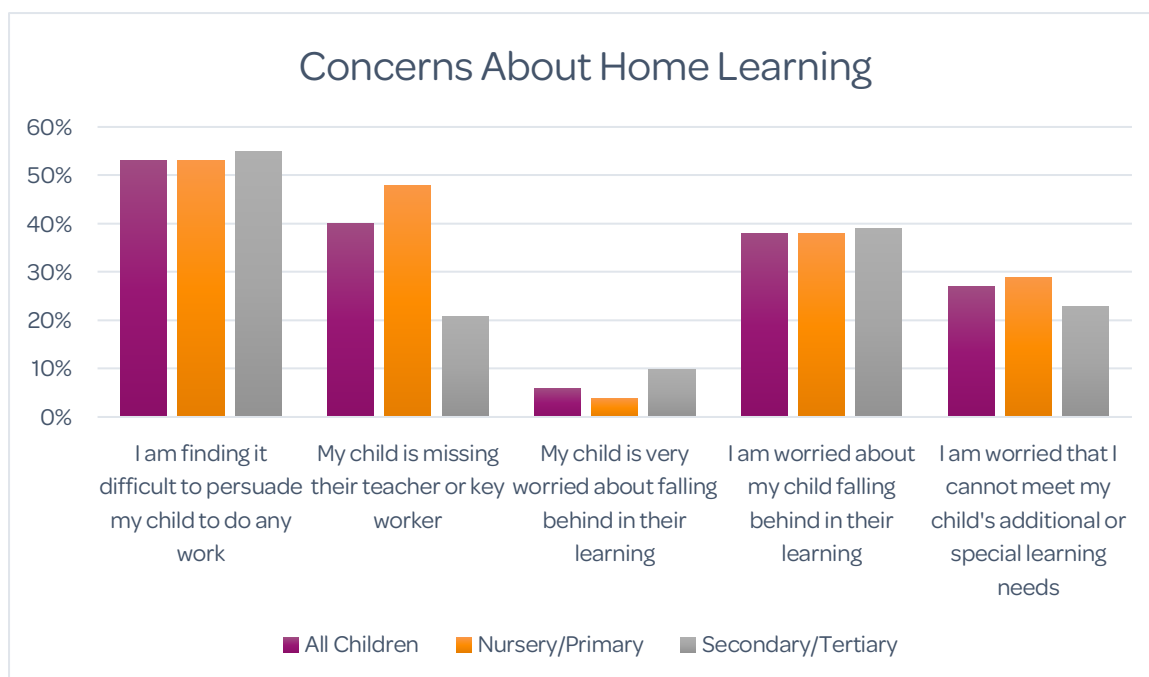
Parents and carers had a variety of approaches to making home learning work for them. 88% of children were able to access some learning at home, whether that was work set for them by their setting, activities organised at home, or a mixture of both. However, there was a significant proportion of children for whom no learning was being attempted. This was much more common among secondary/tertiary aged children (21%), although some of the children in this age group who were not learning could have been year final year students whose examinations have been cancelled.

The chart below shows that although the most common approach was to complete some of the work provided by the setting and also some activities devised at home, there was a significant difference in approach between families with nursery/primary aged children and secondary/tertiary aged children.



82% of nursery/primary aged children are accessing some learning activities provided by their parents or carers, either instead of, or in addition to the work provided by the setting. This figure falls to 45% for secondary/tertiary aged children, although older children are more likely to have work provided by their setting.

Respondents reported accessing some of the many resources that have been made available for families online (e.g. keep fit and drawing classes) as well as incorporating their own arts and crafts, lifeskills and family activities, and games and activity-based learning ideas.



More than half of the survey respondents reported that they were finding it difficult to persuade their child to do any learning activities.

My son has SEND and is very resistant to formal learning ... this episode is purely survival for both of us.

My son has high levels of anxiety and is living in survival mode. It is difficult to engage him in any home learning.

By day 2 it was evident why my daughter has 1:1 in school. I have to be very creative and flexible in order to get her to engage with home learning ... to maintain emotional stability in our family learning may have to reduce further.

I would like to do more things with him but his attachment difficulties mean that he actively resists this.

Respondents' comments revealed that lack of communication from the setting and in particular, lack of feedback on completed work was very demotivating for some children, and made it more difficult for parents and carers to continue to keep them engaged in the work being provided by the setting.

Concerns were particularly strong among parents and carers of children with special educational needs. In addition to set work often being undifferentiated, many felt out of their depth supporting children with complex needs who would ordinarily have had specialist support in school.

Ridiculous pressure from school to undertake specific academic learning, with specific timetables. My daughter has SEN, statement and full time 1:1 support but school have not acknowledged this at all.

Our child was about to undergo assessment for special educational needs and this has been delayed, which is a big concern for us as our child was already struggling.

My son is under SEN in reception at school ... I am so concerned about how far behind he will now be. This will affect his self esteem further and will be even harder for him to catch up.

5.4 Home Learning and Home Working

61% of the children represented in this survey had parents/carers who were also trying to work from home, either part time or full time. All of these children were at home with their parents/carers at least part of the time while schools have been partially closed.

The vast majority (91%) of these working from home parents/carers were also attempting to support their children to complete work provided by their setting and/or learning activities of their own devising, but two thirds of them stated that they were struggling to manage working from home alongside providing home learning, and one third said that they were experiencing emotional distress and anxiety.

Parents who were working from home experienced additional difficulties in attempting to cover work provided by their child's setting. Many spoke of the difficulties and even "impossibility" of giving their best both to their work and to their child's learning.

The expectation of the school is solely based on making sure they have covered all the topics that they would have in school which I find unachievable. Parents like me that are working full time at home cannot also teach their child. My son is year 10 ... and I feel that he will not be equipped next year to be able to fulfil his potential.

Others commented on the difficulties of maintaining their own wellbeing and that of their child. For some families, having a parent in the home, but unavailable due to work, was causing difficulties for the child.

Trying to manage the demands of an anxious, stressed child and working full time is very difficult and stressful for us all... My daughter thinks all her teachers have disappeared or died.

I can't do it. I am a single parent... My mental health is suffering from living with a violent child and not having the ability to go to work for a period of feeling safe.

My child has found it very difficult with us working from home. We are tag teaming but she still doesn't cope with this. I probably get about 10% of my normal work done.

Several home working parents expressed concern that their child would fall behind because they simply didn't have the time to devote to ensuring their child was engaging with learning.

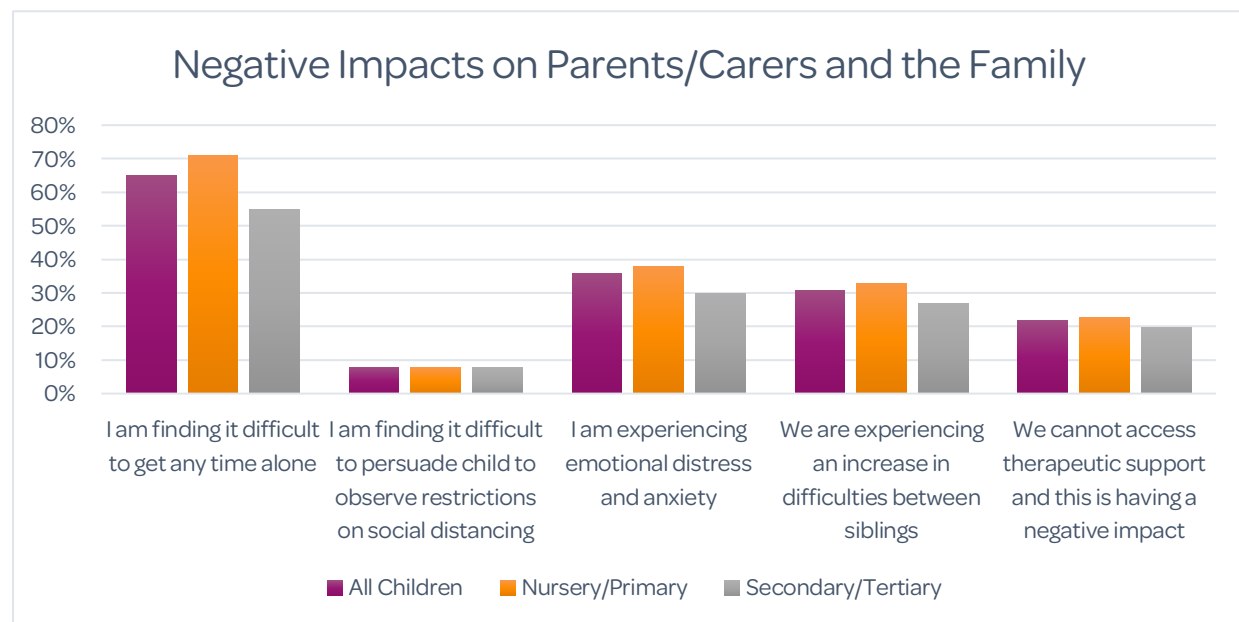
I am neglecting the children as I'm trying to work. They cannot do any self-led learning.

I do worry she won't be at the level she should be for starting school in September because she's not in nursery. I'm doing what I can but also working full time at home so it's a very difficult time.

Flexible, understanding employers were highly-valued by home working parents/carers, but others noted that it was difficult to explain to their employer why their child could not simply learn independently, or occupy themselves with play or activities.

5.5 The Impact of Home Learning on Family Life

Only 2% of respondents reported finding nothing difficult about having their child at home with them, either full or part time, during the partial school closures.



The main concern for parents and carers in terms of the impact on themselves and the family was the difficulty in finding time alone. As would be expected, this was a more prevalent concern among parents/carers of younger children but was still a significant challenge for parents of teens.

Our son's attention span is very short so we need to have a huge number of possible activities to try every day he is at home. Obviously this is getting increasingly difficult.

I am trying to work from home full time which I am finding very difficult as my daughter's anxiety about coronavirus is making her very clingy. I am a single parent adopter so I have no break from this.

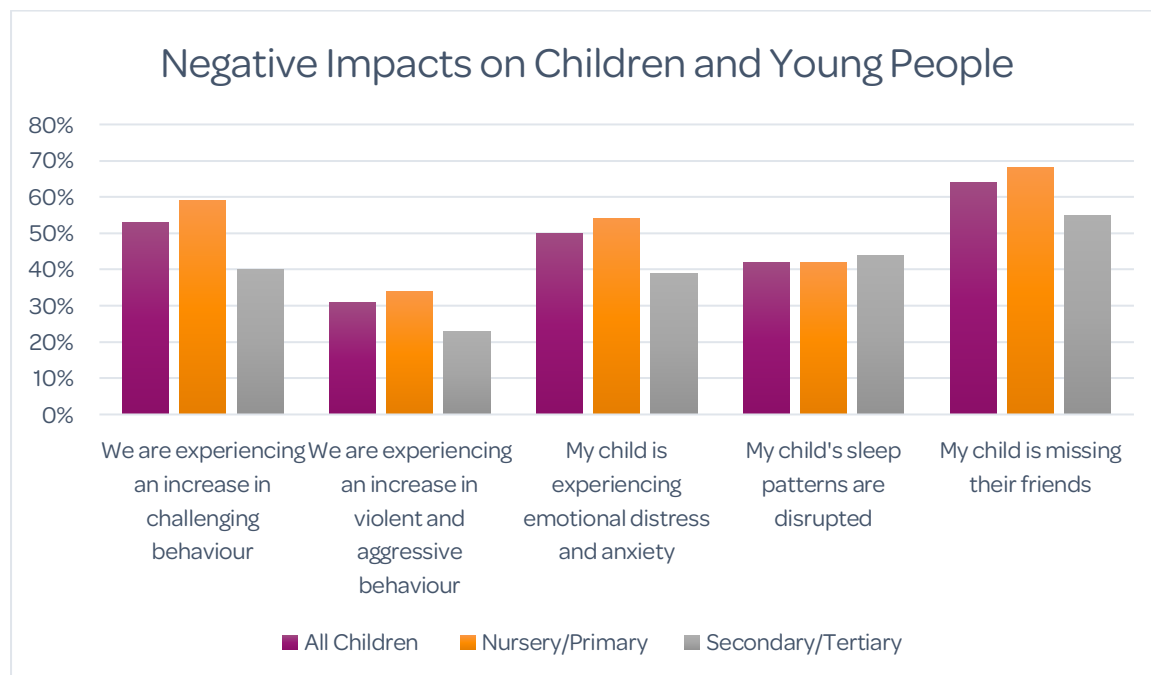
As a single parent with my own health needs, meeting his needs are priority, meaning I struggle to meet my own, get exercise or time alone.

22% of children represented in the survey were unable to access ongoing therapeutic support because of restrictions, which was having a negative impact on them. In addition, many respondents expressed disappointment that, although they had hoped to use their child's time at home to engage in more therapeutic input and nurturing activities, this had not happened due to their own commitments to work, or their child's anxious or avoidant tendencies.

I really thought we would be able to use this time for high levels of nurture and sensory activities, but it just didn't turn out like that.

With the general anxiety around Covid-19, pressures on working parents, the lack of self-care and alone time, and disappointment around expectations of home learning not being fulfilled, it is no surprise that 36% of parents reported experiencing emotional distress and anxiety. Adoptive parents will not be alone in finding this an extremely difficult time, but the additional challenges of caring for traumatised children during a national trauma will undoubtedly take their toll in terms of mental health.

Parents and carers also reported negative impacts of partial school closures on their children’s wellbeing.

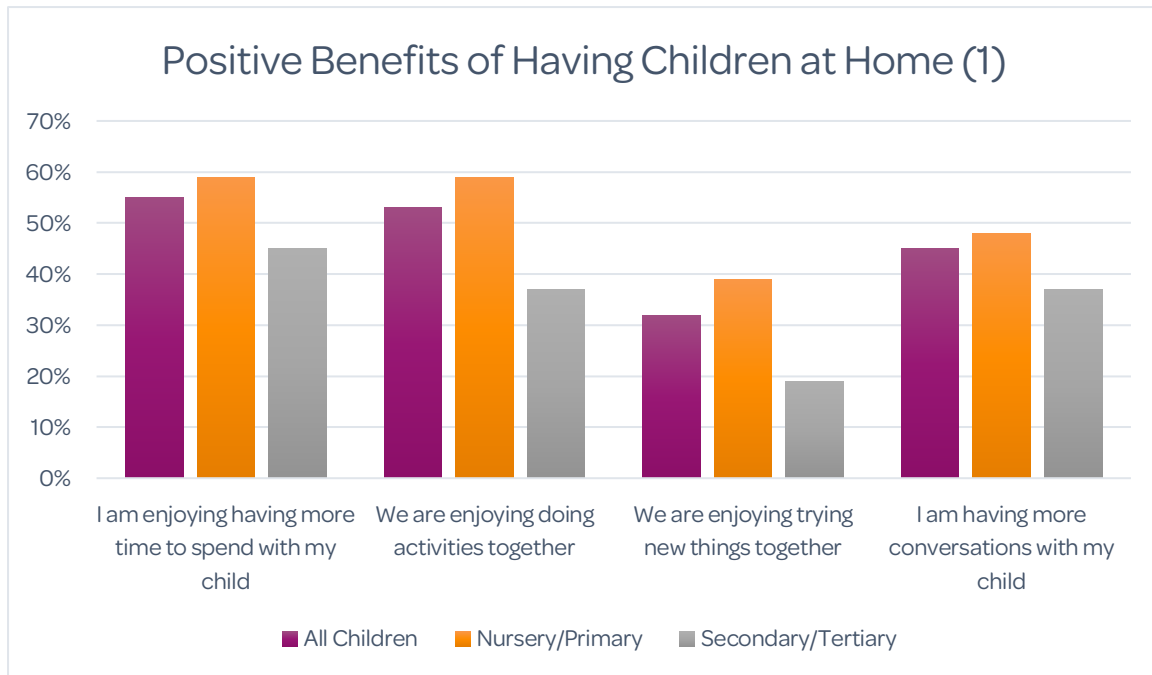


50% of children represented in the survey were said by their parents/carers to be experiencing emotional distress and anxiety. That, coupled with the large proportion of parents/carers who reported an increase in challenging behaviour (53%) and violent and aggressive behaviour (31%), and the 42% of children with disrupted sleep patterns, suggests that this period of lockdown has had a significant negative effect on the emotional wellbeing of a large number of care-experienced children. In comments, several reported that their child had regressed to behaviours and coping strategies that had served them well when they were much younger.

Adoption UK’s *2019 Adoption Barometer*, due to be published later in 2020, will reveal that three quarters of adoptive families were facing challenges already.

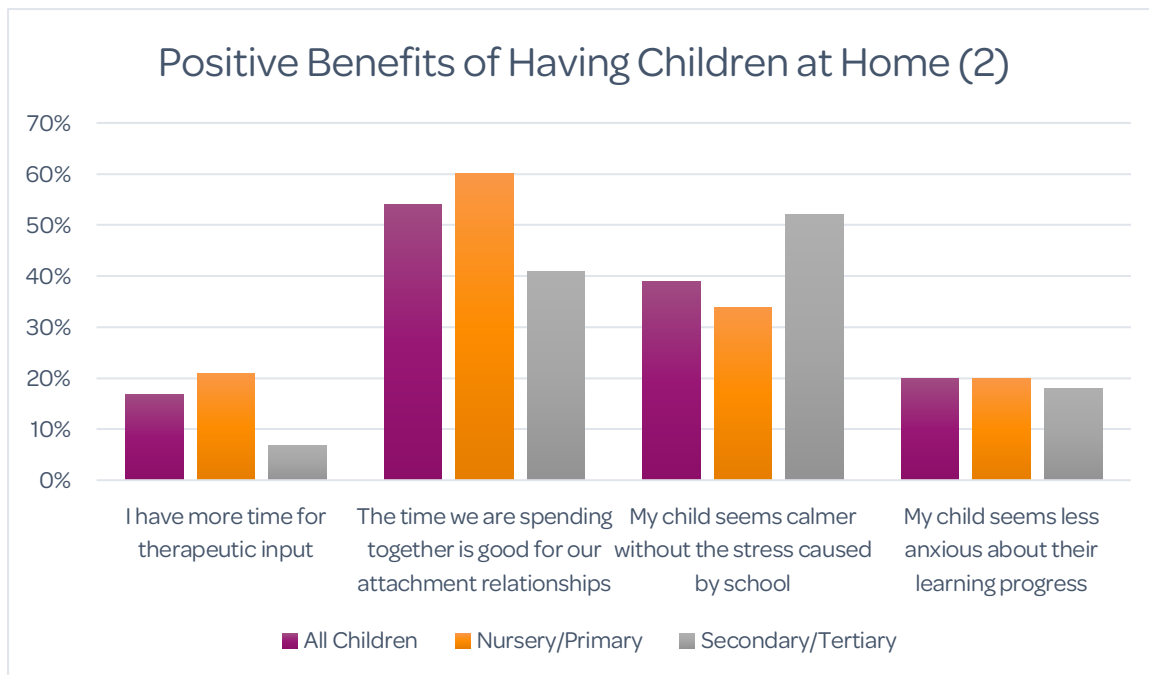
There is serious concern that the additional pressure families are now under could lead to many more joining the hundreds each year that experience a family breakdown where a child leaves their home prematurely.

However, despite the clear negative impacts of the lockdown on families with care-experienced children, it is also the case that some families have been able to find positives in the circumstances. 89% of respondents were able to identify at least one positive outcome.



In terms of the general relationships between parents/carers and their care-experienced children, many are finding positive benefits of the time they are spending together at home, including enjoying opportunities to spend time together, talk more and do more activities together. These benefits are more pronounced for parents/carers of younger children. Some respondents reported that they were having more life story conversations with their child, talking more about their past experiences and their adoption.

Relationships between the children and us do appear to be improving. There are overall less stresses and arguments between the children... I do think our attachment is improved and they have asked more questions about their adoptions than ever before. We have had more time to talk about this which has been positive.



When considering issues more relevant to care-experience and to education, there are slightly fewer positive responses, but it is still notable that some families are experiencing benefits.

While the majority of parents (54%) feel that the time they are spending with their child is good for the development of their attachment relationship, relatively few are able to find additional time for therapeutic input, perhaps because many are working, caring for several children, or focusing on home learning.

52% of secondary/tertiary aged children and 34% of nursery/primary children seemed calmer without the stress caused by school. In fact, respondents' comments revealed that many parents/carers had re-evaluated their children's experiences of schooling during this time at home, even to the point of seriously considering flexi-schooling or home education.

Our son was having a difficult time with this teacher who does not get adopted children, so missing the rest of this year and going in with a new teacher is not necessarily a bad thing for us.

I feel it is good to have time to catch up with the basics he had missed. He has gone up a reading level in the past 4 weeks, and is learning to spell for the first time.

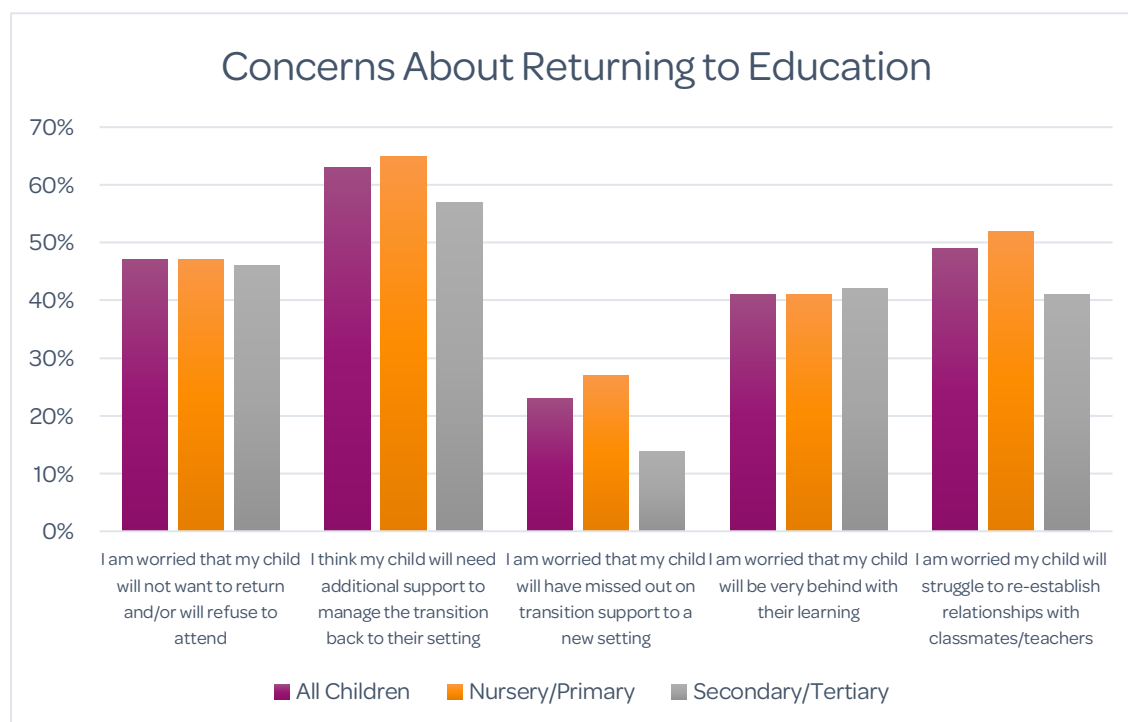
My child has lost his stress and anxieties after not attending school.

He's thriving with all the 1:1 attention I've been able to give him and I think this has really helped his learning.

The variety of responses within the survey show that there is no single experience of the Covid-19 lockdown among adoptive families and those with care-experienced children. Some are finding the whole situation exceedingly difficult, coping with increased anxiety and challenging behaviours in the home, finding school work inaccessible, and worrying about their child's wellbeing and education, others are able to find opportunities for development and growth in their family life. For the majority, the reality is probably somewhere in between.

6. Looking to the Future

The majority of respondents had some concerns about what would happen when educational settings re-open.



Education settings will need to be prepared for children returning to school reluctantly, and returning to coping strategies that may have been left behind some time ago. Parents/carers felt that 63% of the children represented would need additional transition support to return to their current setting, and 47% may not want to return and refuse to attend. The situation is perhaps even more pressing for children who are due to transfer to a new setting in the next academic year, having missed the usual transition programmes.

Many care-experienced and adopted children have experienced abrupt and devastating transitions in the past, and continue to find transitions and change difficult. The closures of schools due to lockdown did not constitute a 'good ending' for children. There were none of the preparations and signs that herald the coming summer break, for instance, such as the changing season, school trips, end of term discos and parties, and there was little time to say goodbye. For those due to change setting next year, there was no proper closure on their time at their previous setting – no prom, no special assembly, no yearbook or other rite of passage. All of this took place in an atmosphere of heightened anxiety nationally, and amid fears around health and wellbeing of family members.

At the time of writing, there are no indications as to when education settings may re-open, so children have experienced a sudden transition, followed by a period of ongoing uncertainty. When settings do re-open, children will be experiencing yet another transition on these unstable foundations.

What worries me is that schools will be too overwhelmed to provide a special introduction and settling in period for children with problems.

I am very concerned about transition back to school and after school club as school have shown no understanding of trauma and difficulties so far.

My youngest is struggling with leaving the house. Going back to school will be a massive challenge.

The return to school is likely to be particularly challenging for children with special or additional learning needs who may already have been finding it difficult to access education in line with their peers. Now, after a long period away from education, often with unsuitable work being set and none of the supports or interventions normally provided for them in school, these children face returning to education with a mountain to climb. When launching the SEND Review in September 2019, the DfE in England said that they were committed to breaking down the barriers to a good education for children with SEND. Now, more than ever, children will need their governments to make a commitment to providing funding and support for all with special and additional learning needs.

Another group of children facing specific challenges are those who were due to change settings at the end of the academic year. Some respondents described their specific concerns about children potentially re-entering education in a new class, or a new setting.

Very concerned about her going back to school as very unsettled when started P1. Change of teachers to P2 was going to be worked on prior to summer holidays.

Without any closure, child is confused, lost and not sure what is expected. Any chance of returning to school for A Levels seems unlikely. We honestly feel like we have been abandoned.

Where parents have felt that the significance of these events have not been acknowledged by their child's setting, it has impacted their view of the setting negatively.

There have been no video messages from staff known to our child, no acknowledgement of the loss of all the year 6 'fun' that my child has been looking forward to for the last few years ... I'm very frustrated.

For some parents, this period at home, and their experiences of their setting during this time has prompted them to consider more permanent changes. 10% of respondents stated that they were now "likely" or "very likely" to consider home educating their child permanently, while others had decided to take the opportunity to look for a new school that could better meet their child's needs.

Having my child home over these few weeks, she is a completely different child, relaxed on the whole, healthier, more able to regulate, able to accept consequences for behaviour, playing board games, having a healthier relationship with her sister and dad. She has embraced home learning and is enjoying learning.

My son is so much happier and less stressed that I have realised that he is not happy and therefore I am now looking to move schools.

Recommendations

Overall recommendation: Governments to provide additional funding and resources to help schools support children who will struggle most when school settings re-open.

- Learning support including the extension of 1-1 support for some children, especially those with recognised special and additional learning needs, and funding and resources to expedite access to higher level support where processes have been delayed due to Covid-19 or learning challenges have become more severe due to the period of time out of education.
- Additional counselling, mental health and transition support for those who need it, and especially those with a history of trauma, or who may have experienced trauma, bereavement, anxiety due to loss of family income and other challenges as a result of Covid-19.

Further recommendations

National education departments to:

1. Provide clearer guidance to schools about communicating with families

Parents are experiencing a huge range of different approaches from schools, and even from different teachers within the same school. Some are being told to prioritise wellbeing and not worry about learning, while others are being threatened with summer school and detentions for uncompleted work.

2. Provide specific guidance to schools about supporting care-experienced children and those with special and additional learning needs during school closures

Parents/carers of children with special and additional learning needs report a serious lack of support, undifferentiated work and no guidance for them as parent/educators. Most care-experienced children at home are receiving no additional support in respect of their care-experienced status, even where schools are in receipt of additional funding to support them.

3. Guide and fund schools to make special transition arrangements for care-experienced children and those with special and additional learning needs on their return to school. Ensure schools can support these children to catch up once they have returned.

Parents/carers are very concerned about the transition back to education settings. Departments for education need to be thinking ahead on this issue and providing advice and guidance to settings around, for example, phased return to settings. Settings may need additional funding in the short to medium term to provide extra 1-1 staffing, extra counselling, mental health and wellbeing support, and extra learning support.

In the longer term, parents/carers are worried about the impact of this time on their child's learning. This is particularly concerning for those whose children have special and additional learning needs and who are finding themselves unable to access the work provided by their setting.