

The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services

Evidence from Coram Family and Childcare

We welcome this inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services. The effects this pandemic has had and will have is something we, at Coram Family and Childcare, have been aware of and monitoring since its extent became clear. Many of the families we have spoken to report a whole host of issues stemming from the need to home-school, a loss of income, rising costs from being at home and concerns about safety, amongst other issues.

Coram Family and Childcare provide critical expertise to this enquiry, through our long-established knowledge of families' wants and needs around childcare and early years services. Our Parent Champions scheme supports local parent volunteers who give a few hours each week to talk to other parents about the local services available to families. Over 70 Parent Champions and coordinators from across the country responded to our online survey about how Covid-19 has impacted them personally and other families in their local area around childcare and children's services. We ran a further survey of 250 parents nationally through the 'YouGov Direct' platform, asking about the impact of Covid-19 and the lockdown measures on their lives.

Their key themes from their feedback can be broadly placed into three categories:

- The impact to date on children and parents
- The reopening of settings and
- Provision for children with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND)

Impact on children and parents

Parent Champions told us that lockdown had negatively affected their children in a number of ways, including their mood, sleep, behaviour and play and learning. They commented on a lack of routine, child loneliness and a struggle to maintain interest in learning amongst other issues.

- "It has impacted every aspect of my child's life, deteriorated behaviour, reluctance to learn, violent and verbal outbursts"
- "When you are stuck in a 1 bed flat and there are 6 people it's harder"
- "The majority of the feedback we are getting is that parents [are] struggling to home school and normal family routines are harder to maintain"

Clearly, the impacts on children are wide ranging and, in the minority of cases, profound, with one parent reporting their child suffering from regular panic attacks as a result of the lockdown. There are real concerns about how children's development is being affected, as well as how childcare settings and schools can make up for the learning that has been missed when they reopen. These issues are often amplified for families with children with SEND who may not be able to access the additional support they need.

More positively, the majority of parents who completed our YouGov Direct survey said that they felt confident supporting their children in a number of different areas around learning and development and emotional wellbeing. However, they also raised concerns about not being able to access the information they needed to best support their children. Much like our Parent Champions, 43% of parents who completed our national survey reported a negative impact on their child's social, emotional or physical behaviour.

Many parents reported struggling financially as a result of lockdown and rising household costs. Parents referenced the costs of home learning, such as buying a printer, ink and paper, as well as the extra cost of food as children were eating more, and electricity as devices are being used more. The situation is worsened by the fact that a significant number of parents reported not having access to guidance and information on financial support that they might be entitled to.

Reopening Settings

The reopening of schools and early education settings is critical to support children's learning and development as well as supporting working parents, but parents have mixed feelings on this. Of our Parent Champions around 40% did not feel confident about returning to school or childcare, and in our national survey this number stands at 55%. This is clearly a great deal of concern for many parents.

Unsurprisingly a primary concern for many parents is safety, for both children re-entering settings and at risk family members. One parent said she needed to **"make sure it is safe for my children to go back due to my underlying health condition"** and another said she was scared **"of letting their child go to nursery as they will not be able to maintain social distancing."** Most parents said that they would feel more comfortable about returning in September, as long as the infection and case rate is down. Parents were aware of the impact of a prolonged break from education and so were keen for children to return as soon as they felt it was safe enough. Some parents however said they would not return until a vaccine had been found.

Many parents said that they wanted more information in order to feel confident about their children returning. One parent stated **"We don't feel it is safe for our children and there has not been enough in-depth information."** The complexity of the situation means they need more information to allow them to make a clear and informed decision.

Significantly, a large majority of parents said that the reassurance they need to make them feel more confident about their children returning will come from the school or childcare provider itself, rather than government or local authority advice. 78% of parents surveyed through YouGov Direct said that the school or childcare setting releasing their plans to keep children and staff safe would make them feel more confident about returning.

Some who said they would take up places also mentioned that they felt they had no choice due to a **"need to make up for the money lost being home."** For many families, the decisions they are making about safety, are influenced by external pressures like this.

SEND Provision

While the issues we surveyed our Parent Champions about can be difficult for all, there are particular challenges for families with children with SEND. The need for learning and development activities tailored to their needs and one to one support can make lockdown and the closure of settings particularly difficult. When asked about whether the current situation has had an impact on support for children with SEND locally, 47% reported that it had.

There are consistent mentions of less engagement and availability from SEND services, including one parent who said, “No annual review, no speech and language therapy, no preparing SEN children for secondary”. While another mentioned how in spite of having two children with SEND on the vulnerable list, “No support has been offered.” This exemplifies the extent to which some parents are struggling to access support. One of our Parent Champion coordinators mentioned that many parents have turned to informal sources of support such as WhatsApp groups, rather than the services they used before.

Another of our Parent Champion coordinators reported that many settings are only offering part time places to children with SEND, as having too many children with SEND in a setting at once is seen to compromise safety. This shows that while settings are finding the means to provide some support, capacity issues persist.

Recommendations

- Local, national and central governments should work together to make sure families are able to easily access the information they need, including on financial support and attending school and childcare.
- Government should work with employers to make sure that parents do not face undue pressure to take up childcare or school places in order to protect their employment.
- Support and funding should be made available to local SEND services so that they can provide access to equivalent support to what was available pre-lockdown.
- Schools and early years settings should be supported to provide detailed and accessible descriptions of their plans to promote and maintain the safety of children and staff, in order for parents to have the level of information that will reassure them.