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The impact of Covid-19 on School Starters: Interim briefing 1

Parent and school concerns about children starting school

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About the research team

The study was undertaken by a team at the University of York, The National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR) and the Education Policy Institute (EPI).

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Introduction

Children who started school in the Autumn Term 2020 did so during a period of instability brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic. Early years settings closed in March 2020 to all but vulnerable children and the children of key workers. When restrictions were lifted in June 2020, nursery attendance levels did not return to pre-lockdown levels, with many parents choosing to keep their children at home. As such, many children due to transition to Reception classes in September 2020 may have missed out on some of the typical activities put in place by schools and nurseries to prepare them for the move. Meanwhile, many families were experiencing unprecedented pressures in terms of juggling home learning and caring responsibilities with work, financial stressors, and health concerns.

The School Starters study, funded by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), aims to explore the impact of the disruption caused by the pandemic on children's transition and adjustment to Reception classes across England. The primary research question is 'What is the relationship between Reception Year children's experiences of the COVID19 pandemic and their socioemotional wellbeing, language and numeracy skills?'

In order to answer this question we will be following children, parents and schools over the academic year 2020/21, exploring schools and parents' perceptions as well as collecting child outcome data on language, numeracy and socioemotional wellbeing.

This paper reports initial findings from a survey of parents and schools carried out in the Autumn Term 2020. We focus here on their concerns prior to, and after, the beginning of the school year, particularly in relation to the Early Years Foundation Stage's areas of learning and development. More information about the main study can be found in the study protocol [here](#).

Key Findings

- 76% of schools (44 out of 58 schools) reported that children who started school in Autumn 2020 needed more support than children in previous cohorts.
- According to schools, children are struggling particularly with three areas of development: 1) communication and language development (96%; 55 of 57 schools) of schools reported being 'very concerned' or 'quite concerned'); 2) personal, social and emotional development (91%; 53 of 58 schools) 'very concerned' or 'quite concerned'); and 3) literacy (89%; 51 of 57 schools) 'very concerned' or 'quite concerned'.
- 56% of parents were concerned about their children starting school following the lockdown.
- A large proportion of parents who expressed concerns about their children's transition to school were particularly concerned about children's social and emotional development (33%) while far fewer were concerned about language and communication (3%).
- Once the school year started, most parents (96%) thought that their child had settled in well and 85% of parents did not report any concerns about how their child was coping in school.

Limitations

The data reported here is limited in so far as it is a self-selected sample, drawn from only 58 schools. The parent data comprises primarily of responses from mothers. Our sample does, however, cover a wide geographical reach and, as an exploratory study, provides detailed information relating to school and parental concerns surrounding the impact of Covid-19 on school starters.

Methods

Questionnaires were sent for schools to complete via Qualtrics between October 2020 and January 2021. Schools forwarded a questionnaire to all parents in their Reception Year (YR) on our behalf. The questionnaires required both quantitative and qualitative responses but were designed to be brief and take no more than 15 minutes to complete. The full questionnaires are included in the study protocol.

The **school questionnaire** aimed to capture the school context, such as class size, timing and transition of children into YR, areas of concern and priorities for the coming year in terms of Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) learning areas. The schools were given the option of who was best suited to complete the survey, e.g. Headteacher, Head of Early Years or Reception class teacher.

The **parent questionnaire** aimed to capture experiences of the first national lockdown, the home learning environment, concerns about children starting school, and impressions of children's adjustment to YR.

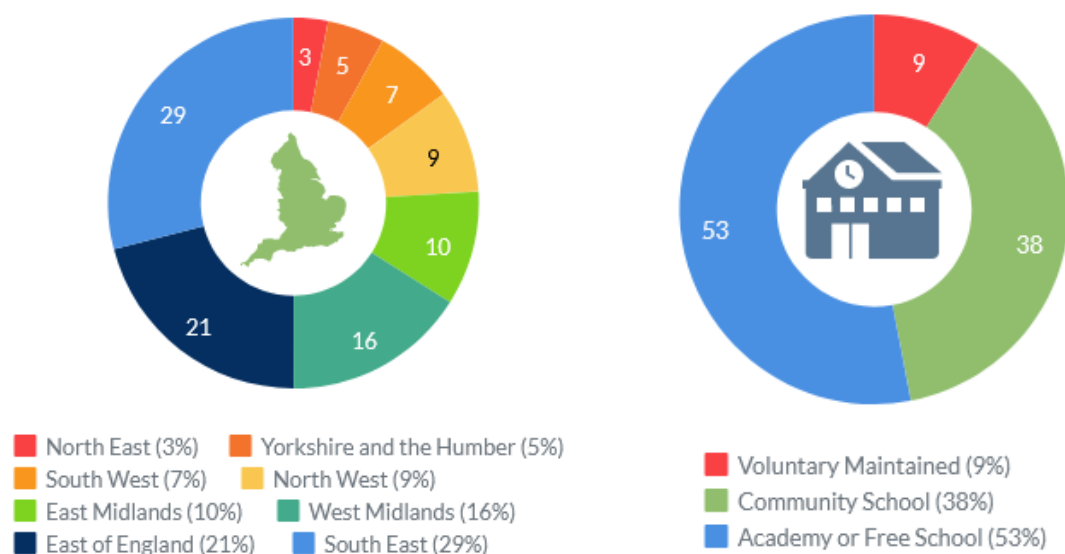
The survey results were analysed descriptively using Excel. Free-text answers were further coded thematically. Extracts from these free-text responses are provided in the main body of this report to illustrate the findings of the main survey analysis and to provide context and richness to the data. They were chosen to represent the predominant views of parents and schools.

Sample

Schools

Schools were recruited from across England. The eligibility criteria for schools were that they were not participating in EEF Early Years trials, they were not Early Adopters of the new EYFS and that they had more than 15 children entering YR in 2020. Fifty-eight schools completed the school survey. There was a particular focus on recruiting schools from the East of England, East Midlands, South East, South West and West Midlands, which is represented in the sample. However, schools were also accepted from all regions across England provided they met the eligibility criteria (Figure 1a).

Figures 1a and 1b. Location and type of schools participating in the survey



All types of schools were eligible to take part with the exception of independent schools (Figure 1b). Reception cohorts ranged in size between 12¹ and 114 pupils, with an average size of 48. Schools in this sample had an average of 21.2% of children eligible for FSM, slightly higher than the national average of 17.3%, and an average of 15.3% of children with English as an additional language (EAL), slightly lower than the national average of 21.3%.

Parents

673 parents (92% mothers) from 52 participating schools responded to the online survey between the 6th November 2020 and the 5th January 2021. Most respondents were educated to at least A-Level equivalent (79%) compared to 57% for the general working age population (2019 figures, LGInform, 2021) (Figure 2) and speak English as their first language (92%), which is comparable to figures from the last UK census (92%; ONS, 2012). Fourteen percent of parents reported being a key worker during the first lockdown in March 2020, compared to 33% of the general working population (2019 figures, ONS, 2020). Overall, 26% of respondents were working from home during lockdown, 19% reported being a fulltime parent/carer (not working), 16% were furloughed during lockdown, 15% reported being employed full-time (outside the home), 12% were employed part-time (outside the home), 8% were unemployed, 3% were shielding for medical reasons and 2% had been made unemployed due to the pandemic. The sector in which employed parents were working is reported in Figure 3.

Figure 2. Parents education level

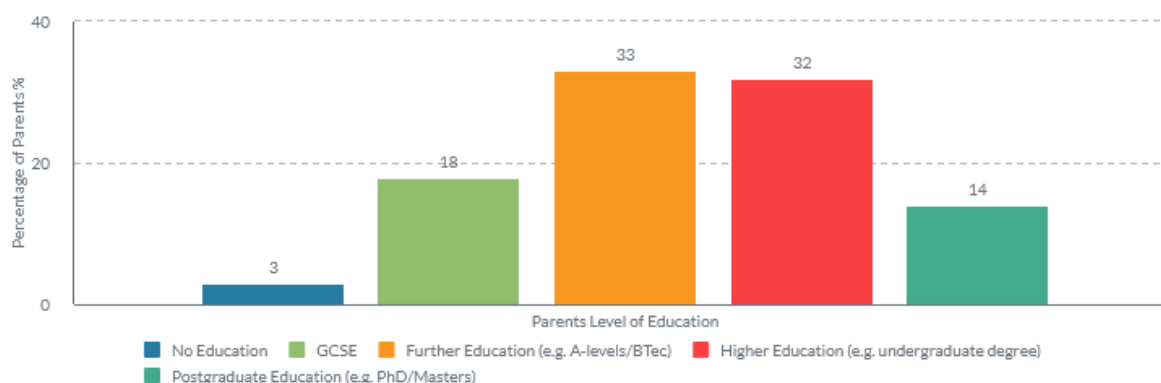


Figure 3. Parents employment



While 97% of parents reported that their child attended nursery before settings closed in spring 2020, this proportion dropped to only 18% during the first lockdown (23rd March 2020 – 1st June 2020). Prior

¹ Some schools reported larger cohorts when initially recruited than reported on the questionnaire.

to the first lockdown, children attended nursery for 4 days a week on average and for the majority of children (72%) attendance was for the whole day. Children that attended nursery during lockdown did so for 3 days a week on average, and a similar proportion (76%) attended for the whole day.

Results

School Reports

Schools were asked whether they felt that pupils needed additional support compared to pre-pandemic cohorts. Seventy-six percent of schools responded positively to this question (44 of 58 schools), 19% were 'unsure' (19 of 58 schools) and 5% answered 'no' (3 of 58 schools).

When asked how they intended to access additional support, 52% of schools indicated that they would use existing school-based resources (29 of 56 schools), 23% of schools said they would develop their own resources (13 of 56 schools) while only 2% (1 of 56 schools) said they would utilise the Government National Tutoring Programme (NTP). Eleven percent of schools (6 of 56 schools) indicated they would use some combination of the three options and 12% (7 of 56 schools) reported they would utilise other resources such as the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI)².

Examples of comments include:

"IT based resources to use at home and school, maths reasoning resources, books- resourcing new areas to use in class, LSA [Learning Support Assistant]/ CT support with identified groups, PSED/ circle time activities."

"Academic mentor in Reception from NTP, additional volunteers for daily readers, addition interventions for SEL [Social-emotional learning]."

General Concerns

We asked schools what their main concerns were. Eighty-four percent of respondents (47 out of 56 schools) highlighted concerns for pupils. For example, over two-thirds of respondents to this question (67%; 38 of 56 schools) referred to disruptions to education, including concerns about attainment, closing the gap and learning regression, for example,

"The learning they have missed during the lockdown. The gaps in children's learning and how we are going to catch them up."

"Getting pupils standards up. Noticeable drop in standard especially in the EYFS and KS1."

Thirty-nine percent of respondents (22 of 56 schools) to this question mentioned concerns about pupil mental health and wellbeing:

"Wellbeing of children and anxiety"

"Children's emotional wellbeing and being able to support them through this period"

Learning at home was a concern for 14% (8 of 56 schools) of respondents. Examples of comments included:

"The short notice switch to online teaching, managing remote and class teaching."

"New initiatives and the prospect of teaching remotely, especially in the Early Years."

² 4% of respondents did not answer this question.

Teaching, Learning and Child Development

Schools were asked what areas of the EYFS curriculum they were most concerned that pupils would struggle with prior to the start of the Autumn term and once the term had started. All schools stated that they were 'quite concerned' or 'very concerned' about Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED) (100%; 57 of 57 schools) and Language and Communication (100%, 58 of 58 schools) before pupils returned to school (Figure 4). Literacy and maths were also areas of concern at 97% (55 of 57 schools) and 95% (53 of 56 schools), respectively. Once school started, Language and Communication (96%; 55 of 57 schools), PSED (91%; 53 of 58 schools), and Literacy (89%; 51 of 57 schools) were still areas of particular concern, although fewer schools reported maths being a concern (Figure 5). When asked what areas of the EYFS curriculum they were prioritising this year compared to pre-pandemic years 83% (48 of 58 schools) of schools stated that they were giving PSED a higher priority, 83% (48 of 58 schools) giving Communication and Language a higher priority and 57% (33 of 58 schools) giving Literacy a higher priority (Figure 6).

Figure 4. Areas of the EYFSP schools were concerned about before school started in September 2020

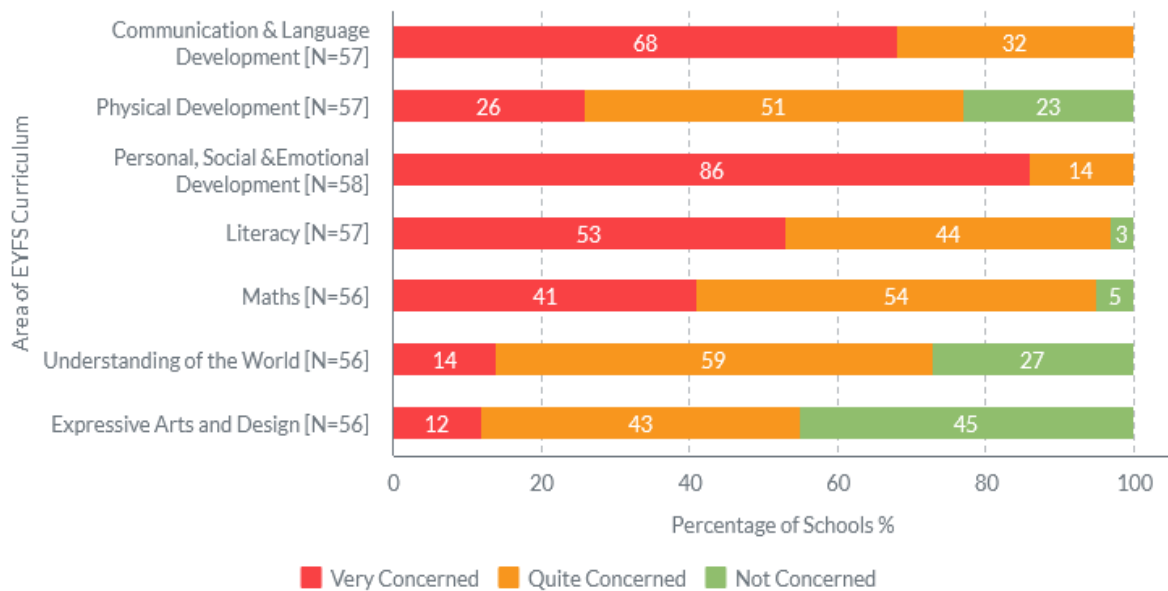


Figure 5. Areas of the EYFSP schools were concerned after schools reopened in September 2020

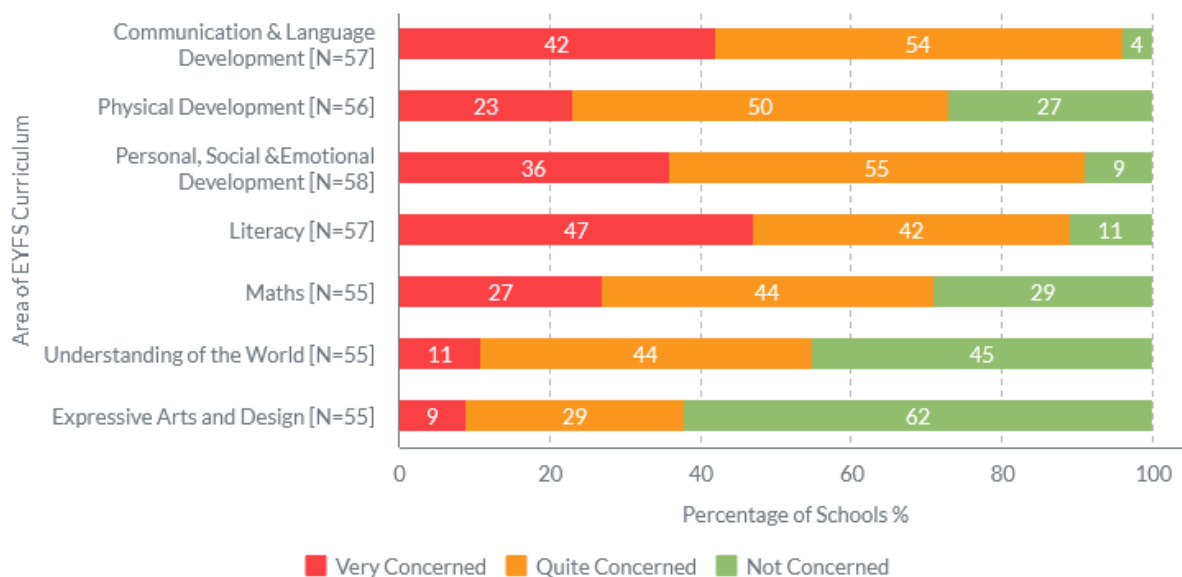
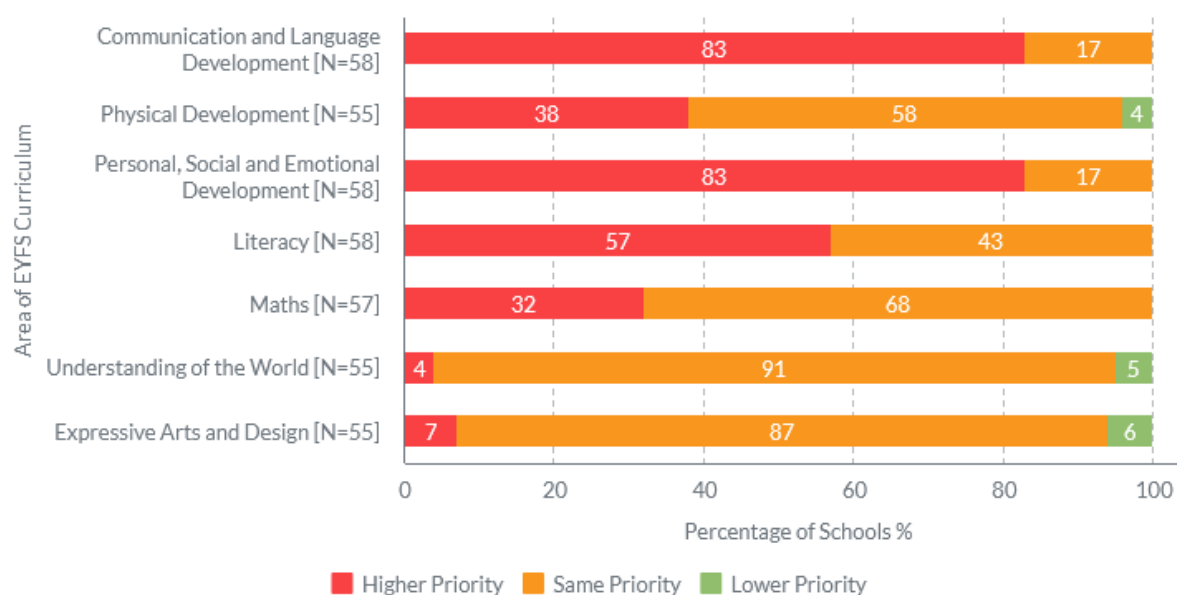


Figure 6. Areas of the EYFSP schools and level of priority for schools



These figures are reflected in comments from schools, for example:

“Many children have entered reception at a much lower level than previous years, particularly in number, mark making and speech, focus and attention and behaviour.”

“Reading and social skills have taken the largest hit; fitness levels and eating habits of children as more children are overweight than before so we are adding physical activity to as many lessons as possible.”

“Basic skills, language development, establishing a baseline, behaviour for learning, personal and social skills, activity levels.”

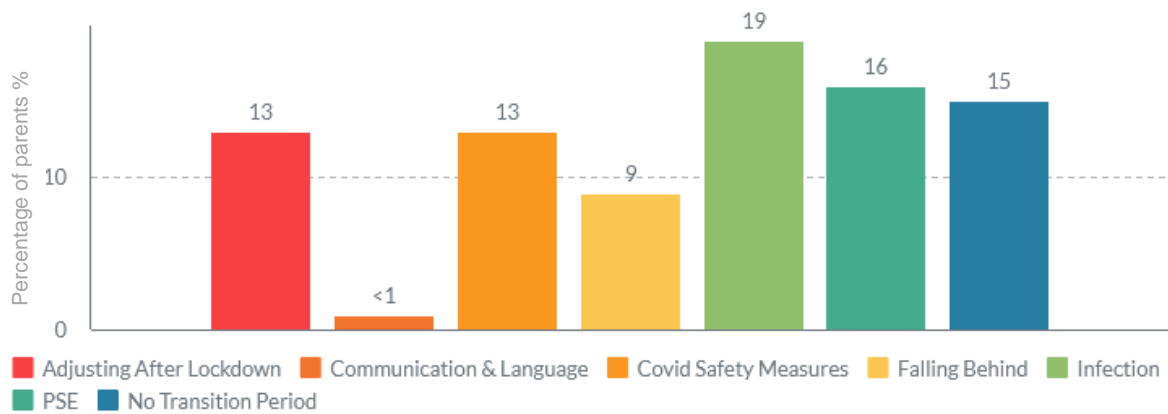
Parent Reports

Similarly, we asked parents if they had concerns about their children starting school in September 2020. Fifty-six percent of parents reported that they did have concerns. Of these responses 69% of parents listed at least one concern that was COVID-related and 40% of parents listed at least one concern that was not related to COVID³. The COVID-related concerns were categorised into 7 areas: 1) exposure to infection at school (19% of parents who expressed concerns); 2) concerns about the impact of lockdown on personal, social and emotional skills (16%); 3) not having a proper transition to school (e.g., lost transition days) (15%); 4) adjusting to school after spending too much time at home during lockdown (13%); 5) the effect COVID safety measures would have on a “normal” school experience, for example social distancing (13%); 6) falling behind peers due to missed education during lockdown (9%); and concerns around communication and language due to COVID (less than 1%) (Figure 7)⁴.

³ N=372 as 7 parents did not stipulate their concerns.

⁴ Some respondents listed more than one concern.

Figure 7. Percentage of parent responses falling into each COVID-related category



Examples of comments include:

“She became withdrawn and lacked confidence after lockdown. It was like starting from scratch.”

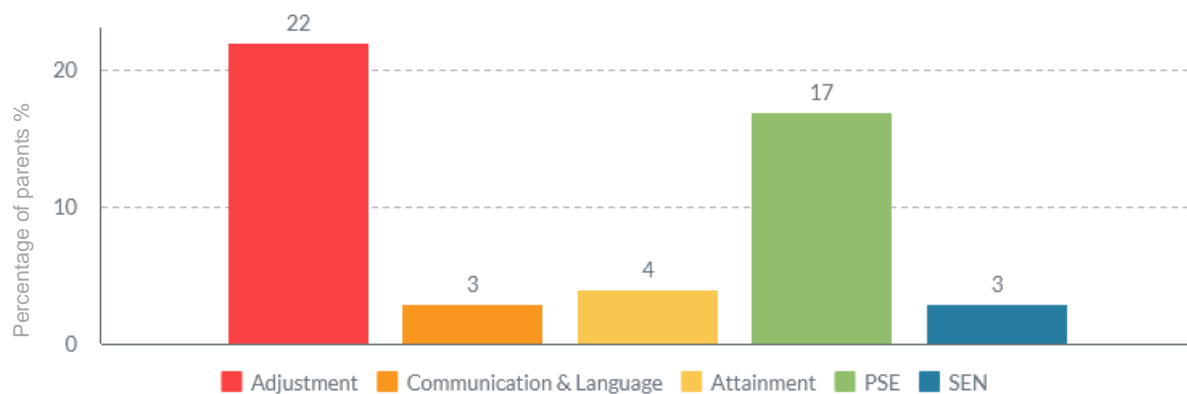
“How well he’ll transition from home life to school life and how well socially he will be given the reduced interaction with other children.”

“Separation anxiety and her not being where she would have been education wise if lockdown had not happened.”

Interestingly, for those children that did not attend nursery during lockdown, parents were slightly more concerned about infection, loss of social skills and excessive time at home, compared to parents whose children had attended nursery during lockdown. However, parents that did send their child to nursery during lockdown were more concerned about the loss of transition days, social distancing and falling behind, than parents whose children stayed at home.

Non-COVID-related concerns were categorised into 5 areas: 1) adjusting to school (22%); 2) concerns about personal, social and emotional skills and development (17%); 3) not reaching expected levels of attainment (4%); 4) concerns around communication and language (3%); and 5) concerns due to the child’s special educational needs (3%) (Figure 8)⁵.

Figure 8. Percentage of parent responses falling into each non-COVID category



⁵ Some respondents listed more than one concern.

Example of comments include:

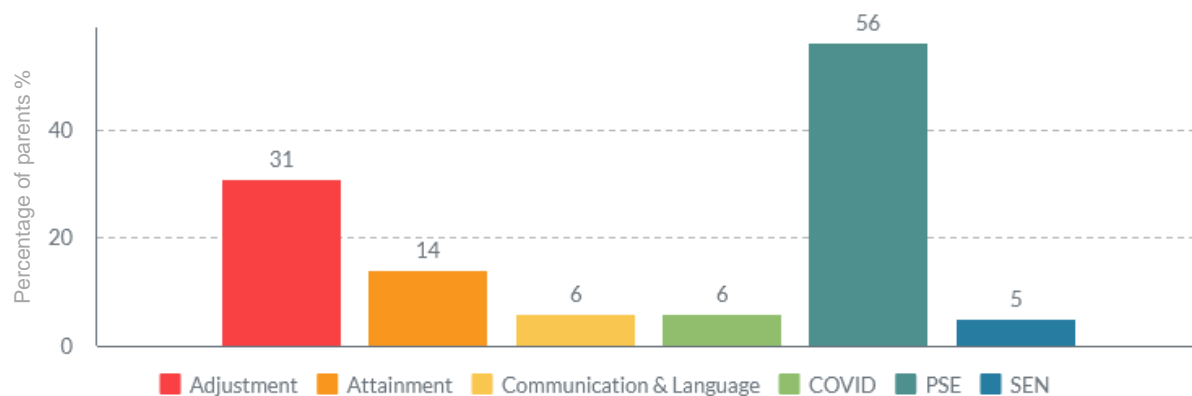
“Whether or not my child will cope full days.”

“Was not sure if [name] was at same level as other kids considering fact that English wasn’t first language.”

“The transition, change of the routine because my son is with autism.”

Once the school year started, most parents (96%) thought that their child had settled in well and 85% of parents did not report any concerns about how their child was coping in school. When parents did express concerns, they did not always explicitly link these to lockdown, and therefore they may reflect common concerns that would also occur in pre-pandemic cohorts (see above for non-COVID-related concerns). Nevertheless, certain concerns such as socio-emotional issues are likely to have been intensified by the lockdown. Several parents commented that teachers and school staff did an amazing job of helping their children settle in well and also in reassuring the parents. Of the parents [N=94] who did express concerns, we coded 114 responses into 6 areas: 1) concerns about personal, social and emotional skills and development (56% of parents who expressed concerns); 2) adjusting to school (31%); 3) not reaching expected levels of attainment (14%); 4) concerns around communication and language (6%); 5) concerns about COVID 19 (6%); and 6) concerns due to the child’s special educational needs (5%) (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Percentage of parent responses falling into each identified category



Examples of comments include;

“She is suffering separation anxiety and going to school has really changed her home life...She does calm down in school and the teachers have been amazing with her and make her feel extremely comfortable.”

“He has tantrums after school and not quite sure if it’s driven by something happening at school. He loves being at home with us very much.”

“Reduced school hours due to staggered start times and end times, no whole school assemblies to get him used to the hall, no hot meals provided by school meal provider.”

Conclusion

Key Findings

- 76% of schools (44 out of 58 schools) reported that children who started school in Autumn 2020 needed more support than children in previous cohorts.
- According to schools, children are struggling particularly with three areas of development: 1) communication and language development (96%; 55 of 57 schools) of schools reported being 'very concerned' or 'quite concerned'); 2) personal, social and emotional development (91%; 53 of 58 schools) 'very concerned' or 'quite concerned'); and 3) literacy (89%; 51 of 57 schools) 'very concerned' or 'quite concerned').
- 56% of parents were concerned about their children starting school following the lockdown.
- A large proportion of parents who expressed concerns about their children's transition to school were particularly concerned about children's social and emotional development (33%) while far fewer were concerned about language and communication (3%).
- Once the school year started, most parents (96%) thought that their child had settled in well and 85% of parents did not report any concerns about how their child was coping in school.

The main areas of need highlighted by both parents and teachers are socio-emotional wellbeing and language and communication. These areas are key to children's longer-term development and attainment. There has been an ongoing concern about children's language development (e.g. ICAN, 2018), particularly in areas of disadvantage. Our findings reflect teacher perceptions as reported by Ofsted (2020) which suggest that children in the early years have lower language skills than expected. We know that language is vital for children's literacy development (e.g. Hulme, et al, 2012; Ricketts et al, 2007). However, language is also vital for children's socioemotional development (e.g. Botting & Conti-Ramsden, 2008) and behaviour (e.g. Chow & Wehby, 2019). It would appear that the pandemic has exacerbated existing issues in oral language development, and this will need to be a key focus for any education recovery plans. The good news is it appears that teacher's steps to manage the transition have largely ameliorated parental concerns. This does not, however, make them invalid or the wider concerns of teachers relating to longer-term impacts of the pandemic.

Since this research was conducted, there have been further partial school closures and teachers have been balancing on-line and face-to-face learning. Our next steps in this research are to capture parents and teachers experiences during the lockdown that began in January 2021. In Summer 2021 we intend to also collect data relating to pupil's literacy, numeracy and socio-emotional well-being using the Early Years Toolbox (Howard & Melhuish, 2017) and, where possible, school-collected EYFSP data. This data will be used to understand to what extent socio-emotional wellbeing and attainment vary according to school- and individual-level socio-demographic circumstances, as well as to investigate significant differences in outcomes between the 2020/21 cohort and the pre-pandemic cohort of Reception Year children (2018/19). We hope that these findings will be of use to schools, parents and policy-makers in moving forwards to support parents, schools and children.

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