

# Autistic children left behind during pandemic school closures

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Many children with autism or intellectual disability had poor attendance or even deregistered from school, often due to unmet needs, after their schools switched to online learning, reports a study and associated policy briefing led by a UCL researcher.

The researchers surveyed roughly 1,200 parents of children aged 5-15 with neurodevelopmental conditions, exploring absenteeism in May 2021 and its contributing factors.

The findings of the study, part of UK Research and Innovation's rapid response to COVID-19, have fed into a round table hosted by the National Children's Bureau.

The researchers found that COVID-19 itself only had a limited impact on school attendance, as physical health risks overall were not a major barrier to school attendance. Instead, up to 31% of school attendance barriers were linked to unmet need.

Mental health was also an important barrier, as anxiety was significantly linked to more days absent, more likely persistent absence, and more days of school refusal.

Satisfaction with school support for learning from home averaged only 5.5 on a scale of 1-10.

Lead author of the research, Dr. Vaso Totsika (UCL Psychiatry) says that "in our survey, we found that blanket school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic likely exacerbated existing difficulties with [school attendance](#) for [autistic children](#) and children with an [intellectual](#)

[disability](#). Among such families who de-registered from school, we found that the primary reason was dissatisfaction with schools for not meeting the additional needs of their children."

"Children with neurodevelopmental conditions often wind up in 'Elective Home Education' after a period of low attendance after their needs weren't met by their school—for a lot of these families, it wasn't entirely an elective choice, so governments should acknowledge that in how they discuss home-educated children."

The researchers found that poor parent-teacher relationships also predicted higher numbers of school absences.

In the policy roundtable, the researchers were joined by parent advisers, other academics, and representatives from education departments of the England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland education departments.

Some of their [policy recommendations](#) included:

- National policy should focus on preventing the root causes of school absence that lie within the system, which should involve work to remove barriers to attendance such as unmet special education needs, lack of flexibility, mental health and well-being difficulties, and bullying.
- Trusting relationships between children, families and schools are of paramount importance for supporting high levels of attendance, so guidance should emphasize working with parents as partners, and that schools should be transparent about the support they offer.
- Improving attendance is best supported by multi-agency teams in place around the school and the family.
- Anxiety and mental health difficulties are a leading cause of low attendance, so more should be done to address barriers to

accessing [mental health](#) support.

- Flexible schooling options should be considered when this is the best interests of the child.

The research was published in *Frontiers in Education*.

**More information:** Athanasia Kouroupa et al, Home schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United Kingdom: The experience of families of children with neurodevelopmental conditions, *Frontiers in Education* (2022). [DOI: 10.3389/feduc.2022.974558](https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.974558)

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