



Barnardos

Because childhood lasts a lifetime

Back to School Executive Summary 2021

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Introduction

For more than a decade Barnardos has been carrying out an online survey investigating the costs that parents incur when sending their children to school at the start of the school term. Last year the content and format of the survey was updated to reflect the effects of Covid-19. This year we further developed the survey to determine the adversities and difficulties families faced over the past twelve months.

In total 1,473 parents completed the survey; 1,023 with children in primary school, while the remaining 450 respondents' children attend secondary school. There were a further 121 respondents to the Children and Young People's Survey.

Our survey shows that children are largely happy and excited about returning to school in September and parents feel likewise. However, parents have concerns and worries about their children's development. Additionally, the past twelve months has presented their families with increased challenges and adversity.

Children happy to go back to school

The majority of children and parents feel positive or okay about going back to school in September underlying the great work of schools and teachers last year to manage to get them reopened.

"Happy to go back to school because home schooling was stressful."

- 88% of parents of primary school children and 73% of secondary school parents said their children felt happy, excited or okay.
- 17% of parents believed their children feel worried or sad about going back to school.

Educational support and development

The majority of parents believe their children are ready to move into the next year of school, however a significant proportion are still worried about their educational development.

- 74% of parents believe their children are ready to move into the next year of school. Despite this, over 60% of primary school parents and 69% of secondary school parents said they were concerned about the educational development of their child.

"The lockdown children have special needs now too. Environment wasn't conducive to learning it just helped them not go backwards. Extra time in school is needed to recover social, educational & personal skills."

- 23% of parents of primary school children and 9% of secondary school parents said their children spent less than an hour a day learning last year.

"Would prefer my children just repeat this year. My 7 year old has had a total of 18 months desk time in front of a teacher. They're behind 7 months of time and a year of actual learning. They need another year of catch up."

- Almost one in three parents (33%) stated they did not feel confident supporting their child's learning at home and a similar percentage did not believe they have the knowledge or skills to do so.
- Over 30% of parents stated they are concerned about children's behaviour and their ability to follow school rules and structure when returning to the classroom.
- 21% of primary school parents and 33% of secondary school parents said they were concerned their children may not want to return to school.

Emotional and social development

Parents are considerably worried about the emotional development, stress, anxiety and loneliness of their children as well as the development of their social skills.

- 61% of primary school and 67% of secondary school parents said they were worried about their children's emotional development how they feel, their coping skills and their ability to talk about their emotions.
- 53% of primary school and 67% of secondary school parents were worried about their children's stress while 53% of primary school parents and 64% of secondary school parents were worried about anxiety when they were asked about their children returning to school.

"My child suffers terribly with anxiety & doesn't like to leave the house for anything! It's like ww3 to go for a walk! On returning to school last April, his anxiety was manifesting in physical."

- 49% primary school and 56% secondary school parents stated they are concerned about their children's social skills when thinking about their return to school, their peer relationships and their ability to interact with others.

"Child does not mix as well as she use to, lives more in her own bubble, I worry about social skills and separation anxiety."

- 47% of primary school parents and 58% of secondary school parents were concerned about their child's loneliness and not having the level of social connections that the child themselves would like.

Help and support

It is clear that the majority of parents believe their children will need additional support on return to school but unfortunately, nearly half don't feel confident they will get it.

- 63% of primary school parents and 73% of secondary school parents stated that their children will need support on returning to school, with issues ranging from educational and psychological to general wellbeing.

“While my younger son does not have additional educational needs he has fallen significantly behind due to lockdowns and there does not seem to be any additional supports to help them catch up.”

- 49% of parents are not confident that these support needs will be met on return to school. One third of parents said that when they have worries about their children they don’t know where to go for help and support and how to access it.

Challenges faced by families

Families faced considerable hardship and difficulties over the last twelve months, in particular lone parents and unemployed parents.

- 52% of parents said that their families had experienced mental health difficulties over the past year
- 15% dealt with increased substance use
- 19% experienced job loss
- 50% of parents reported tensions at home
- 54% experienced financial concerns
- 59% of parents reported that they felt isolated over the course of the past year
- 48% stated they lacked social support

A substantial proportion of parents (29%) felt that these difficulties have had a negative impact on their child returning to school.

“Children adapt but they also soak everything in like little sponges. They see and hear everything at home, even when we try our best to shelter them from adult conversations etc. Then they carry this with them on top of their worries & the covid anxiety.”

Cost of school

The cost of sending children to school in September is still a considerable concern for parents, some of whom feel additional pressure due to Covid-19.

“Our education system is way too expensive, the back to school allowance definitely doesn't even half cover the expenses of primary school kids, even with a book rental scheme. I dread this time of year even more than I dread Christmas time.”

- Over 50% of parents said they were concerned about the cost of returning to school. One third of all parents said that meeting costs this year will be made more difficult as a result of Covid.

“Financially I’m barely making ends meet on a weekly basis and now I have to think about new uniforms books book rental lunches.”

- About 60% of parents pay for school costs out of regular budget, 35% by cutting back on or juggling household bills, 20% from savings and a further 20% take out some form of loan to do so.
- 52% of primary school parents and 65% of secondary school parents said the costs of uniforms had increased.

“He will have to return to school with a uniform that has stains as I can’t afford to buy a new one.”

- 53% of primary school parents and 48% of secondary school parents said the cost of their child’s books had increased since last year.

Recommendations

The best way of ensuring that children who have had struggles or difficulties achieve their developmental goals is to provide additional support and help, particularly targeting those who may have already been struggling to engage with education prior to the pandemic.

Covid-19 recovery

- Set out how the Department for Education is going to address the longer-term fall out of the pandemic on the educational development of children within this country must be published before schools return in September.
- Address additional support needs of children returning to school, providing schools the autonomy and flexibility to respond effectively to the individual level of need in their school and determine the support required. The plan must be effectively communicated to parents.
- Tackle increased anxiety and stress among school children. Schools should be given additional resources to access or provide emotional wellbeing and mental health supports.

Educational disadvantage

- Focus on children most impacted by school closures, particularly those living in disadvantaged communities and experiencing educational disadvantage prior to the pandemic.

- Concentrate on children at risk of disengaging from school, both in DEIS and non-DEIS schools.
- Support schools in the development of positive behaviour management policies in order to support children presenting challenging behaviour and help ease and encourage them back into education.

Family and parental support

- With more families facing challenges and difficulties over the past year there is a greater need for personalised family support. Enabling families to access this support will require significant government commitment and additional resources.

Back to school costs

- Equalise the threshold for Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance for one and two parent families and restore the amount paid to 2010 levels.
- Restore capitation rates to 2010 levels and end 'voluntary' contributions in non-fee paying primary and secondary schools.
- Ensure school's Board of Managements' adherence to the Department of Education circular re school uniform policy to take tangible measures to reduce the cost for parents.

Barnardos' vision is a country where no child has to suffer and every child is able to reach its full potential.

Barnardos' mission is to deliver services and work with families, communities, and our partners to transform the lives of vulnerable children who are affected by adverse childhood experiences

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