

Equality Commission

FOR NORTHERN IRELAND



# Family and Community Engagement in Education

Learning from the pandemic

A collection of perspectives on how responses to the COVID-19 pandemic can inform actions to tackle educational inequalities.

March 2021

# Foreword



Education is a key to our future success - but over the last year due to the Covid-19 pandemic our children and young people and their educators have faced challenges never experienced before.

In March 2020 our schools closed, there was little time to plan the educational route ahead. Our principals, teachers and school staff worked hard to prepare home schooling packs and online teaching materials in order to minimise the disruption to children and young people's education.

Home schooling became the new norm, but for many children and young people it came with serious challenges. Despite their best efforts, and for a range of reasons many parents simply did not have the ability or resources to support their children's educational needs at home – they lacked confidence, skills, time, space, technology, faced language barriers and a host of other issues.

Thankfully a range of organisations stepped in to offer much needed support to our pupils and their families. We have learnt further valuable lessons regarding this over the last year and must use these important experiences going forward.

There is no doubt that the impact of the pandemic on education is and will continue to be significant. Through our work in 'Key Inequalities in Education' we already knew that a lack of family engagement is linked to poorer educational outcomes, and we understand the importance of collaboration between education providers, families and communities.

This publication provides a snapshot of time, when family and school and supporting organisations have had to be more reliant upon each other than ever before. It outlines their experiences, expertise and thoughts on what we all can learn from the pandemic about family and community engagement in education.

It contains a range of insights from educationalists, charities and community and voluntary sector organisations, setting out the challenges that they and their service users have faced, and how they have had to adapt. This document will prove to be a valuable resource for policy-makers, decision-makers and others committed to equality and education.



I thank each organisation and individual contributor not only for their valuable inputs to this publication but also for their commitment and dedication in their daily efforts to overcome inequalities and disadvantage faced by children and young people and their families.

**Geraldine McGahey OBE**  
Chief Commissioner

**For further information visit:** [www.equalityni.org/Education/Policy](http://www.equalityni.org/Education/Policy)



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## Moving forward together, learning from the past

As we fast approach the first anniversary of the first national lockdown and the start of remote learning and home-schooling for the vast majority of children in Northern Ireland, it is clear that there are lessons that can and should be learnt from our experiences. During the first lockdown, our research centre at Stranmillis carried out a survey among parents and carers which highlighted significant inequalities between experiences of home-schooling, mediated by educational background. We reported then that less well educated parents/carers spent less time home-schooling, were less directly involved in teaching their children, felt less confident in the process and were less likely to be working from home, leading to additional pressures of juggling work and home commitments. Many parents also reported that their children had limited access to devices (laptops, printers etc.) and many felt under enormous strain as the weeks and months of lockdown continued. It seemed beyond doubt that lockdown had exacerbated existing inequalities for those from socially disadvantaged contexts and on the wrong side of the digital divide (in terms of access to devices, data, broadband and competence).

Despite the very many negative experiences, there were however some significant positives to arise during lockdown which will, I hope, help to mitigate the risks we now face during this second extended period of home-schooling. First, I feel that schools and teachers have adapted much more quickly and easily to remote learning **on this occasion**, having invested time and effort into upskilling their staff teams since last March. Second, **the digital divide has not been 'deleted', but the community and voluntary sector (and the Education Authority) must be commended on providing thousands of devices as well as data to those most in need.** Third, there has been a widespread **recognition that our children's emotional health and wellbeing must be prioritised throughout the pandemic**, but I feel that the true test of this pastoral commitment will come only later as we emerge from the pandemic when it would be all too easy to try to go back to how things were in the past. The 'hard yards' have been hard won and it will be important not to lose this valuable ground. Fourth, I feel that **communication between school and home has generally improved during recent months, as we have all embraced the communicative benefits of technology** (emails, texts, video messages on social media, apps such as SeeSaw etc.). Finally, many parents reported that, while home-schooling is challenging in so many ways, in the best cases, it makes **parents/carers more aware of what their children are learning.** That's also a positive and something that we should seek to build on moving forward. So, in conclusion, let us all work hard to build on these often strengthened home-school-community links as we look forward with renewed hope to a re-focused, re-prioritised, more equitable post-COVID world.



## Impact of the pandemic on engagement in education

Barnardo's NI is a leading provider of schools-based support, reaching more than 25,000 children in schools across the UK and Ireland through our NI-managed social and emotional literacy programmes. We deliver a wide range of services across Northern Ireland, from providing family support and early intervention, to working directly with children and families who have experienced adversity and need our support. We have long promoted a 'whole school approach' to promoting wellbeing, which places the child at the centre. Barnardo's NI has continued to support the delivery of these programmes remotely throughout the pandemic and while schools have been closed.

Our 40+ services across Northern Ireland are using creative methods to ensure sustained support to families, for example, using digital technology to maintain contact with young people and providing pre-recorded resources for families to use at home. Our staff and volunteers are working to ensure the most vulnerable children are getting the support they need and that they are getting it quickly.

Our Family Connections service offers a range of support services for children and families in schools and communities across South and East Belfast and Newtownabbey, including early years play and learning, parenting programmes, family learning and community links. The Family Connections team also co-ordinates the THRiVE collaboration, a group of local parents, schools, community and voluntary organisations and statutory partners, working together to improve outcomes for children and young people.

The Family Connections team has provided continued support to children, young people and families throughout the pandemic and have witnessed first-hand the challenges that families are facing. Feedback from Family Connections highlights those challenges, but also the lessons we can learn on how to improve family support and parental engagement in education in the long term.

- A spotlight has been put on the pressures that families are facing, however many of these challenges are not new and have existed for many years. The impact of the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing issues and increased pressure on families.
- **The government response to the pandemic has highlighted how the system can be agile and flexible when it needs to be.** Resources have been made available at record speed; there is an understanding of the need for quick and direct impact. There is a sense of urgency with people pulling together to get the job done.



- The move to home learning both exposed challenges and highlighted opportunities for strengthening the education system. **Many parents have taken a more active role in their child's education, and teachers have begun working more closely with parents as genuine co-educators.** An appreciation by schools of the significance of parents in children's learning must be a cornerstone of education moving forward.

However, the move to home learning also highlighted a lack of confidence many parents felt in supporting their children's learning. Many parents have their own challenges when it comes to literacy and numeracy and are struggling with balancing home learning, work and stretched household finances. Parents report feeling isolated, disconnected and under pressure from schools, with a lack of confidence to talk about struggling with home learning and not being able to access the support of other parents, for example at the school gate.

- Local community networks are stepping up to provide support to parents and children. **Community and voluntary organisations are finding new, creative ways to support children, young people and families in a different context.** There is improved collaboration between organisations and the community sector is seen as a go-to for practical help and innovation. Schools are improving links with local services and organisations to ensure support for families.
- While the pandemic has presented many challenges and increased pressure, it has also demonstrated the potential for the system to respond quickly, flexibly and directly to the needs of children, young people and families when it is needed.

The pandemic and recovery present an ongoing challenge for pupils, teachers and the government. Our report ['New Term, New Challenges, New Opportunities'](#) found that the majority of education professionals surveyed believe the pandemic is likely to have an impact on the mental health and wellbeing of pupils. Furthermore, professionals are concerned that these challenges are exacerbated by a lack of face-to-face time with pupils during school closures. The added dimension of 'digital poverty' is also a concern given the reliance on digital devices for children and young people to access educational resources, as well as maintain friendships throughout this period.

This crisis will impact every young person differently; we need to make sure that the unique needs of every child are recognised so that vulnerable children and young people are not forgotten during this crucial time.



## Three key learnings from the COVID-19 pandemic

Save the Children has worked with schools and local community partners to support family and parental engagement. The schools and partners that we work with were working to support parents with their children's early learning before the pandemic, and we've seen some incredible support for parental engagement during the pandemic. From this work with schools, local community partners and with families, we've taken away three key learnings:

### **Schools have built and deepened relationships of trust with families and there's an opportunity to build on that after the pandemic**

Schools have been an anchor for families during the pandemic. We've seen schools facing massive challenges during the pandemic, particularly during the different lockdowns. During these times they've been operating two separate schools, one online and one in person. Throughout, the schools that we've worked with have used a variety of channels to support and engage with children and families, with families increasingly turning to them for support, and with schools also actively identifying families that need support and helping them. They've been a catalyst for support to families during the pandemic, acting like a community themselves, and their relationships with families have been strengthened.

**There is a real opportunity to build on that after the pandemic to maintain and strengthen the relationships schools and parents have built up.**

### **Supporting children's resilience and emotional wellbeing will be key to recovery**

From our work with schools and local community partners, we've seen how valuable their support has been for families, particularly where they had one to one contact, even when this is over the phone rather than in person. **Even actions as simple as asking how a parent is doing helped create connections and reduce isolation.** This has also helped to build trust with families and provide key support, even when schools and other partners had to close their doors because of the lockdown. Despite this support, it's still understood that children, particularly the most disadvantaged groups, have missed out and that they will need support to help their learning and development. What we've learnt is that, given the difficult times that children and families have experienced, the support they will need is about resilience and emotional well-being, and supporting them to transition back to school and create the conditions for learning.





## **Keeping the conversation going even when times are tough**

Because of the challenges we've all faced, there have been times when we couldn't deliver our usual programme support to families with schools. Despite this, what we learnt is that, even in difficult times, it's important to keep the conversation of parental engagement on the table. It helped us to understand the different challenges that schools were facing, what their needs were during a rapidly changing environment, and to offer support where we could. This included developing an online or blended version of our programme Families Connect in response to school requests. We recognise that school staff are busy and under immense pressure so we have sought to engage with schools at their own time of choosing and through a light touch supporting role rather than providing additional asks. This has meant that, whatever will happen in the coming months, we've continued discussing the best ways to support parental engagement. This has been important because we believe that **developing a supportive home learning environment, building parental skills and confidence and strengthening parent and school relationships will be central to recovering from the pandemic.**



## Use the equality duties more effectively to achieve positive outcomes for children and families

The Children's Law Centre (CLC) has dealt with continuous waves of major adverse equality impacts upon disadvantaged children and young people and their families during the ongoing pandemic. The impact of lockdown restrictions, largely (if not exclusively) imposed in the absence of full equality impact assessment and without properly consulting those affected to enable timely mitigation, has predictably been to expose shameful pre-existing levels of persistent disadvantage experienced by children and young people in Northern Ireland including because of who they are and where they come from, whether rural or urban areas and in socio-economic terms.

Since the first lockdown there has been a very significant uplift in the amount of live litigation being run by the CLC's legal team on behalf of children experiencing or at high risk of discrimination. This includes children with disabilities who require interdisciplinary cooperation between services to ensure that they are safe and well; to enable access to appropriate packages of social care and to ensure access to education.

The basis of legal arguments in the cases CLC have taken, is the failure of government departments to comply with the statutory equality duties within Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, including failure to create opportunities to consult with children and young people and their families at every process level. For example, when we sought supervised education placements for children with complex disabilities during the first phase of lockdown, the system put in place was not fit for purpose. This was largely because parents and carers, who could advocate best for their children's needs, were not an integral part of the decision-making process undertaken by schools, the EA and Social Services. The process itself had been formulated without their input. Open Democracy made a video with CLC and our client Tina about her daughter Lauryn which illustrates the impacts of failure to listen to parents and take into account the experiences of young people when formulating a policy around vulnerable children when schools closed. The evidence of potential and actual major adverse impacts was available, but had not been formally sought, collected or acted upon in policy formulation or implementation.

[Read the report and watch the video.](#)

On an ongoing basis, our legal advisers are hearing from families whose children have special educational needs and disabilities that their children have not been enabled to access education on an equal basis with their peers. **Schools and parents/carers have struggled on an ongoing basis to provide for children who have difficulties with remote learning due to special needs and disabilities or who have poor access because of lack of digital resources or poor internet connection.** Schools struggle



to maintain open communication and engagement with parents and families in an environment where significant policy decisions are announced via the media without prior consultation. Some parents tell us that children are regressing because of lost opportunity, and are showing signs of mental health difficulties, while peers without special needs and who benefit from relative digital and socio-economic wealth maintain learning, so that existing gaps are likely to continue to widen for the foreseeable future.

CLC are also dealing with the ongoing fallout from this year's transfer process for Primary 7 children. Parents/carers, families and young people have been cut adrift when decisions were being made about the process. They will be left to carry the cost of unfair processes which will inevitably ensue.

[View an open letter from CLC and 25 voluntary sector organisations detailing concerns.](#)

### **What have we learned from the pandemic?**

These issues are just a sample of the many issues arising in CLC's work. There is however a common feature across our casework which CLC believes identifies one solution and would guard against further breaches of children's rights. **That is the pressing need for duty bearers to fully adhere to the letter and the spirit of Section 75 equality duties in line with the ECNI's advice and for the ECNI to ensure compliance as part of its functions.** It is absolutely imperative in this time of emergency that Section 75 is enforced when there have been failures to comply, especially given the devastating magnification of pre-existing inequalities across society as a result of policies being introduced in the absence of the Section 75 duty having been discharged.

The processes needed going forward are not new but need to be effectively implemented, adhered to on a continuous basis, monitored and enforced if policies are to promote, enable and support family/community and school engagement in a way that ensures equality of opportunity and produces measurable positive outcomes for children and families:

- Failings to date in relation to Section 75 equality duties should be recognised and acknowledged, to enable appropriate learning to take place. Examination of the Vulnerable Child policy and process arising from school closures, which initially increased barriers to effective engagement between schools, families and communities, with predictable and devastating consequences, could be used to facilitate such learning. This will positively benefit future policy formulation across government.
- Section 75 should be proactively enforced by using existing provisions. In addition, strengthening of Section 75 to improve ease of enforceability would lead to greater compliance.



- Equality screening needs to be more than a tick box exercise. The ECNI should more actively enforce compliance with the statutory duty to carry out an effective screening exercise when the duty is engaged.
- Full and proper consultation with affected people, including parents/carers, children, young people, educators, health staff and other stakeholders is essential at the earliest stage of formulation of education policies and on an ongoing basis. This is one way in which barriers to engagement can be identified and removed.
- Undertaking full equality impact assessment upon policies when there is potential for differential adverse impact on children is likely to be required in most instances given the well-documented inequalities embedded within our education system.
- Consultation with experts who can advise of children's rights and equality implications of policy decisions is required, including for example ECNI, NICCY and CLC. Parents/carers and young people and schools tell such organisations about the inequality of opportunity they are facing which hinder effective engagement in education.
- Adequate human, financial, operational and digital resourcing is required from the Executive to support the Department, the EA, schools, parents/carers and HSCT staff to work together to meet policy objectives. An under-resourced school staff will be much less able to make space and time for engagement with parents, carers, children and young people and other interested parties on the issues that matter to them.
- Interdisciplinary cooperation, to support schools, parents and other interested parties in making informed decisions is critical to narrowing the inequalities faced in education. The provisions of the Children's Services Co-operation Act (NI) 2015 are engaged and should be complied with by all duty bearers.
- Parents/carers, children and young people, educators and other interested stakeholders need access to resources, practical support and advice to assist them to recognise and give effect to children's equality rights. **The shocking impacts of the pandemic have underlined the need for processes that have built in time and space to facilitate and enable meaningful consultation and collaboration with those who are affected, in particular children and young people and their families, before any decisions are made.**

CLC believes that in this way, we can move forwards from the pandemic and build back better using an open and accountable "lessons learned" approach to make constructive progress towards ensuring equality of opportunity in education for our children and young people.



## The impact of COVID-19 on Traveller and Roma family life, their engagement in community services and education

The Toybox programme was established by Early Years - the organisation for young children. It aims to work with Traveller/Roma families with children aged 0-4 years and has a focus on inclusion and combating educational under achievement. The programme arose in 2003 from the organisations value base and the well documented inequalities of Traveller families.

The Toybox early childhood programme is funded by the Department of Education and aims to improve the educational outcomes for Traveller and Roma families namely that children are healthy and eager and able to learn and make successful transitions into settings/school through an outreach home visiting service. The home visiting service creates effective partnerships with families and incorporates the following key components:

1. An outreach play based service aimed at empowering parents to support their children reach their optimal development.
2. A transition programme aimed at supporting the inclusion of Traveller / Roma children and parents in Sure Start, pre-school and primary school.
3. An advocacy programme including a partnership approach with families and agencies.

We agreed with the Department of Education to include particular COVID support this year and the pandemic has required Toybox to use new working practices to engage with families including online activities, phone calls and socially distanced garden gate visits.

**Staff immediately used their strong relationships with families to find a way to link in with families and help support parents engage with their children through play.**

Staff also listened and informed parents of evidence-based information and advice about the pandemic and staff also encouraged families to send their children into the setting/ school environment as appropriate taking account of government COVID information.

From listening and engaging with families, it became apparent to staff that the depth of the stress and impact of the pandemic was unexplored among families and they must look at this information if they were to provide the correct supportive interventions.

Toybox parents and children were invited to complete a survey with staff and comment on issues they faced in their home life, health and children's education as consequences of the pandemic. 50% of families (55 families) contributed to this survey.



### **The results showed:**

#### **Parents speaking about their children**

67% of parents had spoken to their children about COVID-19.

32% of parents felt their children's behaviour changed during COVID-19.

16% of parents felt their children was anxious about returning/attending school.

#### **Parents about themselves**

84% felt anxious and stressed about COVID-19.

39% would like to be signposted to other support services e.g. Speech and Language Therapy, Health Visitor, SureStart, Social Services.

63% said their daily routine changed since COVID-19.

Majority of families linked into the radio, TV and internet for COVID -19 information.

#### **Children responses**

Playing and going outside for walks were the most important fun activities children liked to do.

90% said it was important to wash their hands.

69% said it was important to keep their distance from others outside school.

23% were afraid of people wearing masks.

59% said they spoke to their mum/dad if they felt sad.

**The results suggest that the pandemic affected the wellbeing of both parent and child; with parents demonstrating more stress and fear since the pandemic.** The results also indicated that parents were proactive in trying to support their children and educate themselves on the pandemic with many parents living with fear and anxiety while trying to balance home life. The lower uptake of Traveller and Roma children in settings/schools from September to Christmas 2020 would suggest that the issues with children returning to school were mainly parental concerns.

Toybox successfully applied to the Clear project for a grant to purchase additional COVID-related resources to help families address emotions, behaviours and routines as identified in the survey. The survey information was used to plan and evaluate the content of this support to families and as a result the following resources were purchased for parents including anti-bacterial wipes, hand sanitizer, soap and face masks and for children including feelings discs, story book, wooden people, sensory items, paper and crayons. Since November 2020 Toybox have delivered these resources via Garden Gate Visits and have provided families with clear information about the use of the protective sanitizing products and demonstrating effective ways the families can use the feeling disc and storybooks etc to express and manage emotions. Recent verbal feedback from families to Toybox staff indicate that embedding Government safety advice on COVID-19 and helping families to be aware of their emotions is having a positive impact. In the coming



weeks, staff are due to invite families to complete again their original survey so Toybox can evaluate the impact of this work.

In conclusion, in the life span of Toybox there have been many valuable lessons learnt.

**The pandemic has taught the project how important it is to deliver on family driven and culturally appropriate outcomes with the child remaining at the centre of all actions and decisions they take.**



## Making the return to school a success for children with autism

Autism NI remains concerned that the COVID-19 pandemic is having a significant impact on the autism community in Northern Ireland. Parents and carers have clearly articulated through our Helpline the effects that a lack of access to services is having on autistic people during the pandemic. **Social distancing and self-isolation means there are a lot of changes happening daily, routines and structures have disappeared, many support services have been withdrawn which is having a profound effect on emotional-well-being.**

Parents/carers remain clear that they want an education system that is ambitious for their autistic children and gives them similar opportunities to others. They want a system that understands and supports their child to reach their full potential, enabling them to enjoy positive emotional well-being and preparing them for life. Parents want to choose where their child is educated and to ensure the correct supports are available. However, during the pandemic parents have told us that getting support regarding education is not easy and that they have had to fight to try and get the help their children needed.

Education remains with the top reason that families contact the Autism NI Helpline for support. During 2019/20 we received over 5,100 calls. Many highlighted difficulties with the lack of preparation to support children to adjust to changes. The annual prevalence of autism in school aged children (4 -15 years) in Northern Ireland statistics were released in May 2020 by the Department of Health. 1 in 24 children are autistic, of which 86% have special educational needs.

During COVID-19 many have voiced concerns that autistic children, without the continuity of the school day, are regressing socially, emotionally, academically and behaviourally. Remote learning is not working successfully for all and worries that children are missing out on early supports that will create barriers to inclusion are at the fore. Parents note fears that as time goes on the gaps evident before the pandemic with non-autistic peers will have significantly widened further.

Autism NI understands many of our teachers in Northern Ireland feel overwhelmed with the lack of training and resources they are given to teach autistic children. Returning to school after a lengthy break, may be difficult for autistic children and intense preparation will be required regarding new and significant changes which could make a transition back even harder. For example, different routines, rules, peers, support staff and for some different environments if they have transitioned class or school provision. **Good communication is essential in working towards a smooth restart**, many parents and professionals did not find this was clear or consistent from Education Authority and/or the Department of Education. Short notice decisions caused unnecessary distress and had a detrimental impact on whole family units.





Autism NI want every autistic child to have the best possible start in life and the best educational outcomes. The school environment is ultimately where a child spends most of their day and therefore it needs to be fit for purpose to support that child. **If teachers are given the correct skills and strategies to understand autism, they can support autistic children to reach their full potential.** The vast majority of children with autism are within mainstream schools. Given the pandemic, the introduction of mandatory autism training for all teachers is imperative, to ensure our children get the support they need to take them into adult life.



## Education: school engagement, family, and community in COVID-19

As we quickly approach March 2021, it seems appropriate to pause and reflect on our experiences over the past year, living in a pandemic, and shouldering the weight of three lockdowns. How have education, families and communities responded to the impact of school closures, and what has been the effect on our children and young people? Most notably, how have some of our most vulnerable children been supported in this ‘new normal?’

Angel Eyes NI (AENI) is a registered charity supporting over 700 families of children and young people (CYP) with vision impairment, across the province. CYP with vision impairment make up a small, discrete group under the SEN umbrella. Consequently, it is important their voice is captured to promote equal life opportunities and equity in education. Therefore, in July 2020, AENI surveyed and reported on 116 of their families, to ascertain how this cohort of CYP were accessing education, during the first lockdown. [The report, Widening Inequalities for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment in Education](#) revealed three main areas of challenge: resources (including technology), communication with schools and the Education Authority, and the devastating feelings of isolation CYP were experiencing.

For many CYP with vision impairment, learning resources need adapting to make them visually accessible, meeting their individual needs. This can include changes to font size, typeface, line spacing, decluttering etc., and is normally undertaken by the classroom assistant, under the class teacher’s supervision. Unfortunately, 60% of families surveyed, in July 2020, reported their CYP did not receive accessible resources, with 62% of parents reporting they had to make the necessary adaptations (retyping work etc.), for their children to access the learning materials. Further to this, only 27% of respondents reported having access to printed books that were visually accessible to their children. This was further compounded by a lack of appropriate technology through which to access learning.

The term ‘Technology Poverty’ was coined during the first lockdown, relating to the lack of access to electronic devices and broadband, experienced by many throughout the province. **However, for CYP with SEN there is an extra layer of accessibility to be considered (visual, physical needs etc.), but when supported correctly the positive outcomes are indisputable.** Research has shown the many positive benefits that technology can have on SEN pupil attainment. Assistive Technology and the acquisition of the skills and knowledge for its effective use, can be a ‘game changer’ for persons with a vision impairment, but especially for children in their vital, and irreplaceable, developmental years. Proficient use assists with curriculum access, mobility, and



independence. Unfortunately, many pupils with vision impairment in NI schools do not have the appropriate technology and trained personal support to help them reach their educational potential. A Freedom of Information (FOI) request by AENI to the Education Authority (EA), August 2020, revealed that 1001 pupils with vision impairment in schools across the province are currently being supported by the EA's Specialist Teaching/ Support service. Of this number, only 13% are in receipt of assistive technology (either laptop or iPad). AENI would consider this to be an exceptionally low percentage for this group of CYP.

**The pandemic has highlighted the need for this cohort of CYP to be appropriately resourced, enabling their curriculum access and development of skills for independent learning and living.** Recent discussions between AENI's Education Advocate and families would indicate, in January 2021, the picture is not improving. Many parents are either resigned to accepting inaccessible resources as part of the home learning experience or are making a tough decision, sending their children into schools as vulnerable pupils, measuring educational gain over risk to family health.

As blended learning continues to be the normal way of working for the months ahead, it is vital the above issues have redress. AENI welcome the statement made by the Minister of Education (10 Jan 2021), reporting a £7 million investment into remote learning. The charity is keen to ascertain how this has impacted technology access for CYP with vision impairment. The Education Endowment, Rapid Evidence Assessment, Distance Learning Report (April 2020), clearly identifies that whilst teaching quality is more important than how lessons are delivered (using both asynchronous and synchronous teaching), ensuring access to technology is key, particularly for disadvantaged pupils.

It is imperative that schools actively engage and communicate with families to ensure that all learning resources (both print and digital) are provided in an accessible format, and through an accessible platform. Furthermore, **there must be engagement between home, school, and the Education Authority's (EA) Specialist Services; consistency and high standards being set and adhered to by all.** It is imperative that dialogue must take place between these three stakeholders, home, school, and Specialist teacher/ service, to support meaningful engagement and pupil progress. AENI's Report (July 2020) revealed that only 20% of those surveyed were in communication with the EA's Specialist Vision Support Service.

Engagement between home and school can also help alleviate 'parent guilt,' and promote wellbeing for CYP. Many parents are diligently juggling parenting and homeworking with home-learning (or what is now home-teaching and, for many with a child with vision impairment, resource making), with feelings of inadequacy. Some CYP (especially those with additional needs) are struggling to recognise the home environment as a place for



school learning, and many more are feeling fatigued by longer screen hours in the school day coupled with homework. Some CYP have expressed their experiences of lockdown as a 'loop,' with little to no social interactions breaking up the endless repetition, with growing anxieties over academic competencies. AENI, like many voluntary organisations, has experienced an increase in service engagement (92%) from both parents and CYP during lockdown. **There is a desire and need for connection; people want to link with others they cannot visit nor see at events.** The voluntary community, like AENI, are striving hard to reach and support their service users, in a flexible manner to support their needs, be that through zoom sessions, telephone calls, email etc.; linking parents and CYP together, to help mitigate feelings of isolation, and effectively breaking the loop.

AENI advocate for a similar, agile, and flexible approach be adopted by all statutory bodies. **Despite the many challenges highlighted and created by the pandemic, it has also provided many positive opportunities for collaborative working, encouraging meaningful engagement and discussion between stakeholders.** The Children's Services Co-operation Act legislates the transdisciplinary working of statutory bodies and the voluntary sector for the benefit of our CYP. The pandemic has provided the perfect arena for this legislation to be realised effectively, pooling resources and ideas, looking outward to models of good practice within the voluntary sector. The Department of Education and Education Authority must scrutinise and evaluate what has worked well during school closures, both within Northern Ireland and globally. This includes looking at the experiences of all CYP, including the advantaged, such as those who are excelling in a more flexible working environment, and the disadvantaged, with many CYP experiencing a loss in learning and developmental progress, compounded by declining emotional wellbeing.



## Mental health and well-being support should be a priority

During 2020 Parenting NI has seen a surge in parents contacting them needing mental health and wellbeing support for their child and themselves. In a recent survey with 262 parents from across Northern Ireland in November 2020, 88% of parents reported that the pandemic had negatively affected their wellbeing and 71% reported that the pandemic was taking a toll on their children's emotional health and wellbeing. **The majority of families surveyed stated that the pandemic has had a negative impact on their family especially with regard to educational challenges.**

**One parent stated:** *"My son, who has always been a little bit different has really struggled without structure. He went from a 'perfect' student to having behavioural problems, and the breakdown of structure is definitely the cause."*

However for some parents they did experience some positive effects from the pandemic, namely spending more time at home as a family.

**One parent stated:** *"The change of pace has been positive for our family. The extra time spent together has boosted all our mental and emotional well-being"*

Parents expressed a desire for more support around emotional health and wellbeing, both for themselves and for their children. 53% of families told us they were not aware what help or support was available to them. There has been an increased number of issues experienced by parents in regards to mental health provision and intervention services. Some of the parents surveyed wanted there to be more help offered in this area.

**One parent stated:** *"Support for children should be given in schools. Parents should be made aware of mental health support before something happens. CAHMS is doing its best, but it is too one-size fits all"*

Numerous parents reported that they had experienced difficulties finding help for themselves and their families. Many families have been unaware that support does exist, and due to this have struggled. Parents told us that they felt communication from the authorities was confusing or lacking detail, which led to a lack of awareness of the support available. **Signposting between organisations could be capitalised to fill a need here to better support families.**

Parenting NI value the important role parents play in supporting their children's emotional health and wellbeing. But with the pandemic creating difficult circumstances for families **support needs to be provided now through the provision of proactive interventions rather than a reactive approach.**



### Is net working not working? *Lessons learnt during a pandemic*

‘A well-connected community recognises the value of informal networking as an active and strategic intervention.’ Having effective strong community networks and the ability to network has never been more important than during the current pandemic.

Our project which was set up to provide educational support to schools within two of the most economically disadvantaged areas in the North of Ireland and we have continued to provide educational support by using our networks and networking actively.

**Community based projects such as Full Service Community Network (FSCN) occupy a unique space in civic society**, a space between statutory and voluntary ‘worlds’ a position which enables and facilitates networking and collaborative working to ensure children, families and school communities can tap into and benefit from each of these often parallel worlds. For example

- networking with local groups and schools to provide computer technology to families in need during lockdown.
- networking with Conway Education Centre to provide online homework support for newcomer children.
- networking with Relate NI provide online counselling to families and children in need during lockdown.
- networking with Save the Children and local schools to target much needed Emergency response funding to families in need.
- networking with local family support hubs to support families needing education support and guidance during lockdown.

This is all possible because organisations like ourselves build positive networking relationships with and between voluntary and statutory groups and organisations and put children at the centre of what we do.

Despite the multitude of research papers highlighting the links between early intervention and educational underachievement, and the fact that since 2008 the project has proven year after year that services like ours form a key component in overcoming the challenges of educational inequality, projects like ours continue to be funded on piecemeal short term basis ‘year by year’ offering short term solutions for long term problems.

The community and voluntary sector which is often best placed to respond imaginatively and creatively to community needs has been has suffered ‘death by a thousand cuts’. Networks and the strategic intervention of Networking which is recognised as the cornerstone of a ‘well connected community’ have been specifically impacted by the austerity related cuts within recent years.

Literacy and numeracy deficits are common place in communities experiencing multiple disadvantage and **it is only by valuing and resourcing networks and strategic networking interventions that we can truly make a difference to this long term challenge.**



# Childcare sector: enabling parents to access work and supporting the social and educational development of children

## About Employers For Childcare

Employers For Childcare is a charity and social enterprise which support parents with dependent children to get into and stay in work. Our charity's activities include campaigning, lobbying on, and researching childcare and work-related issues which impact on families. We provide a free, confidential and impartial helpline helping families across the UK identify what financial support they may be entitled to. Last year, our Advisors helped 8,000 people directly and carried out over 5,000 personalised benefit and childcare support calculations for parents.

## Research findings

In 2020, we carried out two surveys examining issues in relation to childcare, exploring the views of parents and childcare providers:

- Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (February-March 2020): Northern Ireland Childcare Survey with parents and childcare providers
- During the COVID-19 pandemic (September 2020): Follow up survey with parents focused on access to childcare during COVID-19 and how this impacted their ability to work.

Across the two surveys, we received more than 5,000 responses and the findings provide vital insight into the childcare challenges of 2020 – many of which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic but not created by it. The full research report is available [here](#).

Our research found that many parents faced significant childcare challenges during the pandemic. The closure of registered childcare provision to all but the children of key workers (as defined by the Department of Health), alongside a lockdown restriction on inter-household interactions and school closures, meant that access to childcare was a real challenge. Almost three quarters of parents reported that, from April to August 2020, they were not able to access any childcare for some or all of this time, while 19% had to use a different form of childcare. In some cases, parents who had not previously used childcare had to source it for the first time, due to school closures and lockdown rules. They also reported challenges around managing childcare, while home schooling and working, and the negative impact this had on their own physical and mental health, their work and their family's wellbeing. Where access to childcare was impacted, one in five parents had to use annual or unpaid leave to manage childcare, while **over a quarter were working outside of normal hours, early in the morning or late at night, to provide childcare during the day. Concerningly, some parents had no choice but to leave work altogether.**



In the context of research on educational barriers experienced by children due to extended periods of time out of schools and childcare, perhaps more than ever, the importance of the childcare sector in enabling parents to access work, but also in supporting the social and educational development of children, has been highlighted. Parents reported their concerns about the prolonged negative impact on the social and emotional development of their children during this time. For many parents, their concerns about an inability to access childcare were based on the impact that this was having on their children, whether in terms of their social interaction, education and developmental enrichment, or concerns about mental health and well-being where children have anxieties related the pandemic.

“Childcare should be assessed as much on the needs of the children as the working parents - children need structure and routine AND education and socialisation AND assurance that they are safe and well and not a threat to adults/ grandparents.”

“It is not healthy for children to be at home without any social interactions that children receive at childcare providers.”

This echoes [research](#) carried out in England with childcare providers who reported concerns about the impact of the pandemic on children who had stopped attending childcare, particularly in relation to children’s personal, social and emotional development.

**Families who have a child with a disability reported specific challenges in accessing and affording the childcare they need.** Our research identified how the specific needs of a child have a significant influence on the form of childcare they use. One third of parents who have a child with a disability said they had chosen their childcare arrangements because no other options are available to them. These parents also reported difficulties in accessing suitable childcare both in terms of finding the best support for them and in affording it. However, these challenges were exacerbated during the pandemic and 61% of parents said they were unable to access any childcare for some or all of this time, while 22% had to use a different form of childcare. This is of particular concern for families who have a child with a disability as our research findings emphasised how important routine and stability is for families, and parents shared their experiences:

“It nearly broke me. I have never been more upset and in as bad a state. I was struggling really badly due to being a single parent, having a child with a disability and two primary school kids to home school with no back up support at all.”

“Need to be as flexible as possible and changes of routine are especially difficult for children with a disability.”

“Child with special needs now aged over 12 - it has been difficult to access childcare at all in my area from age of 3. Now can’t even manage school as so mentally unwell after 6 months of no access to education therapies or support and this remains the case post lockdown.”





While childcare providers have been able to re-open to all families since June 2020, temporary closures of settings, pods or years groups can happen due to COVID-19. In this context, it is deeply concerning that 65% of parents reported that, if their childcare was temporarily unavailable, they would not have access to back up childcare to enable them to work, rising to 70% of parents who have a child with a disability. However, as pre-school settings and primary and post-primary schools move to remote learning (January 2021), it is important that families are kept up to date with policy decisions in education to enable them to make arrangements for work and childcare. As our research has identified, parents felt stressed and under pressure balancing work, childcare and home-schooling – it is important that policy makers learn from this and ensure parental engagement and support is considered.

### **Lessons going forward**

Looking forward, there is a clear consensus that any further restrictions must consider the availability of childcare provision and for the vital role of childcare to be recognised both in supporting parents to work but also, critically, in assisting the educational, social and mental well-being of children and also parents. One key theme which emerged from our research was parental frustration at the lack of communication from decision-makers on childcare and many parents said they felt there was a lack of timely public information to allow them to plan their childcare or work arrangements. To limit negative experiences for parents, children and childcare providers, **it is vital that going forward the Executive ensures communication is key, in particular to mitigate the disruption of school, pod or setting closures due to COVID-19.**

We strongly advocate that the value of our vital childcare sector is reflected with a fully costed Childcare Strategy that is informed by parental engagement and the experiences of childcare providers. The importance of accessing high-quality early education and care must be central to a Strategy that can work for parents and providers. Through parental engagement within childcare settings parents can access support, information on financial entitlements and parenting support.

This is also vital for tackling educational inequalities, and to ensure childcare are supported in the first 1,000 days – a critical period in child development. Access to childcare also plays a critical role in lifting children and families out of poverty, helping to narrow the early learning gap and supporting more children to experience good physical and mental health. Much of this investment is required before school, and even before pre-school. Childcare is key to this investment yet it is often overlooked as a tool in giving children the best start in life and in encouraging parental engagement.

**It is imperative that we learn from these experiences to inform ongoing and future policy-making and to mitigate any potential negative impact on children, particularly those with disabilities, from minority ethnic communities and new residents.** It is also vital that childcare provision is given full and careful consideration in any further decisions on restrictions.



## Effective two-way communication between parents, schools and decision-makers

Since lockdown March 2020, Parentkind have provided multiple platforms for parents to share their experience of supporting learning from home and to discuss both the challenges and opportunities that this brought. This included creating the opportunity for parents to engage directly with the policy-makers where they discussed a wide variety of topics including Transfer Test, Awarding of GCSE, AS/A Levels, mental health and more. **Communication is key at all levels, parents want to engage with the policy-makers, they want to have their say and hear directly from the decision makers.**

Parentkind supported a group of parents from across the province with a young person in Key Stage 4 to work alongside the Department of Education examining the proposals for the awarding of grades for Summer 2021 and to be part of the design for the GCSEs, AS/A Levels Summer 2022.

Parentkind have also organised numerous parent panels to engage with the Education Authority to discuss the current SEN consultations. Despite parents of a child with SEN struggling with reduced respite and other strains of the lockdown imposed upon them, they have engaged with boundless energy with the officials, so keen to put across their views and experiences

Parentkind further supported the Department by organising five panels of parents from across Northern Ireland to provide feedback to the DE Expert Panel on Education Underachievement.

At school level, throughout all the Parentkind coronavirus surveys, **parents have repeatedly cited their desire for two-way communication between home and school plus feedback to children.**

The pandemic has shone a light on many areas in need of improvement or re-design regarding family engagement in education, but the most pronounced, is effective two-way communication with schools and policy-makers. Parents want to be part of the co-design of all policies and procedures relating to education and they want to be heard and their voice listened to.

[Parentkind's Blueprint for Parent Friendly schools was published recently.](#) It has been developed in partnership with education partners in NI and currently a Masters student is being recruited who will undertake action-based research in the roll-out of the Blueprint. Communication is one of the five pillars of the Blueprint and learnings from periods of lockdown, school closures and restricted access to schools, has been fed into the guidance and training for this pillar.



## Outreach – learning from the pandemic

The Integrated Education Fund (IEF) is a charity that supports and promotes the growth of integrated education across Northern Ireland. It regularly engages with key stakeholders, including communities, parents, schools, political and statutory representatives, to encourage conversation, raise awareness and increase support for integrated education. Through its Integrate My School campaign, the IEF aims to empower parents to support their child's/children's school becoming integrated through a process called Transformation.

As for most other organisations, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on the work we do, not least our parental/community engagement and outreach. This contribution reflects our experience as well as feedback received from other organisations working with communities, parents and young people at a recent event organised to share best practice, potential issues and experiences regarding engagement activities in this new context.

During the current pandemic, we have found that some forms of engagement work better than others. While all activities have had to move online, the following have been effective in terms of engaging parents and local communities:

- Providing participants with materials ahead of (and/or after) online engagement, for instance sending craft/activity packs, sweet treats ahead of meetings and posting hard copy materials and welcome/information packs
- Providing resources and activities for families on social media channels
- Holding informal online coffee mornings
- Pre-recording events where questions are invited before to help shape the discussions, offering flexibility as the event can be watched at a time that suits people
- **Online engagement has enabled people to take part even though they are further away**, for instance contributors from other countries
- Online events/meeting have the potential to reach parents and others who wouldn't otherwise have engaged as it allows **more flexibility in terms of distance and time**
- Organising virtual exhibitions (website or YouTube etc.)
- Online/Virtual space is considered a shared space by many
- Using a mix of 'serious' online content with 'lighter' content, such as new resources, video clips, activities and increased social medial content and engagement
- Offering a phone 'support line' and one-to-one phone meetings in addition to online engagement
- Ensuring that online safety procedures are implemented; incl. GDPR, confidentiality, group contract etc; due to potential privacy and confidentiality issues, seminar style events may work better online (with a presentation and less engagement)
- There are however several downsides to online engagement in the current context:



- **Broadband/connectivity issues/access to devices are a problem for many, in particular in rural areas and/or areas with high levels of deprivation**
- Pastoral care is difficult in relation online engagement; for instance, difficult conversations are harder to manage in a virtual space and more contentious issues tend to be avoided as it's difficult to offer the necessary pastoral care to participants online
- A balance is needed – there is a sense of 'zoom fatigue' as many people are getting bored with engagement through online platforms
- Reaching 'new' parents and communities can be more difficult online (while connecting with already established contacts is more straightforward through online engagement)
- Informal chat can be difficult using online engagement
- Meeting management, setting expectations and facilitation skills are essential to handle any challenging situations that may arise during online engagement
- Privacy and confidentiality may be difficult to ensure; for instance, someone else can be listening in the room who isn't part of the meeting etc.

It can be concluded that the ideal scenario moving forward, in a post-pandemic context, is to combine the use of virtual space with face-to-face meetings as both have clear advantages. Ultimately, **the focus should be on ensuring that as many people as possible are enabled to take part** in conversations, and have a say, regarding issues that are relevant to them, their local community/area as well as society as a whole.



## An opportunity to improve lifelong outcomes for children

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in far reaching impacts on all aspects of NI society, not least education. Most pupils have been withdrawn from school for weeks at a time due to the strict lockdown periods both this year and last resulting in as of yet untold consequences for their overall well-being and development. **The diverse needs of pupils must be taken into consideration as we navigate through these difficult times;** it is crucial that those who were already disadvantaged before the onset of the pandemic do not simply continue to become more disadvantaged. Every pupil must continue to receive an adequate standard of teaching, including those with Special Educational Needs (SEN), or those who speak English as a second language. **It is also imperative that the needs of staff are taken into account,** with mitigating measures put in place to better promote equality where either staff or pupils are differentially adversely impacted by changes in policy.

The pandemic and eventual recovery present a new challenge for pupils, teachers, and the government. However, there is also an opportunity to change education to improve lifelong outcomes for children. **We must put children's mental health at the heart of education.** In order to support schools to prioritise mental health and wellbeing, it is critical that the Department of Education increases funding and investment in mental health and wellbeing so schools can meet the likely increased demand as a direct result of the pandemic.

When children and young people once again begin returning to schools, we must ensure that this is done in a safe and measured way, which protects pupils and staff from harm - with all decisions subjected to the proper assessment processes to ensure they promote equality of opportunity under Section 75. Going forward, it is imperative that the Department of Education complies with its own equality scheme, including through direct consultation with affected groups, and conducts proper assessment of policies via screening and/or conducting Equality Impact Assessments. Doing so will ensure appropriate evidence is gathered to enable the promotion of equality of opportunity and to identify every instance where mitigations or alternative policies are required.