

Some sort of normal: What children want from schools now

Introduction and background

The 6 months spent out of school this year was the biggest disruption to children's right to education since the Second World War. Most children in England did not attend school for most or all of lockdown. To understand how children have experienced the return to school, the Children's Commissioner commissioned Opinium to run a survey of 1,500 children who had been back in school in some way since the start of September. The survey ran between the 5th and 11th October. The survey is provided in the Annex to the full report, along with the underlying data tables. The data were weighted prior to reporting to generate nationally representative figures.

Key findings

Being back in school

- Pupils were given several statements about being back in school and asked whether they agreed or disagreed.
- Seventy-one per cent of all children surveyed agreed with the statement that they were excited to be back at school. This was highest amongst primary school students, with 80 per cent agreeing they were excited to be back, compared to 65 per cent of secondary school pupils. Girls were more likely to agree than boys (75% compared to 66%).
- Children with 2 parents/guardians living in the household with them were more likely to agree that they were excited to be back than children with one parent/guardian (72% compared to 66%).
- Ninety-three per cent of children agreed with the statement 'I am happy to see my school friends again'. This was slightly higher among primary school pupils (95% vs 92% of secondary pupils).
- Children were also asked to report in their own words what (if anything) they were happy about when thinking about going back to school. Sixty-seven per cent of responses mentioned 'friend' or 'mate' - this was by far the most popular topic mentioned.
- When asked which 3 words best described how they feel about being back at school, 59 per cent of all children chose 'happy' and 45 per cent selected 'excited'. Among primary school pupils, 66% selected 'happy', compared to 54 per cent of secondary pupils, and 59% selected 'excited', compared to just 36 per cent of secondary school pupils.
- One in 4 secondary school pupils selected 'nervous', 1 in 5 selected 'worried' and a similar number selected 'stressed'. These figures were statistically significantly higher than for primary school children.
- Seventy-one per cent of children agreed with the statement 'I feel safe at school'. Here again, primary school students were more likely to agree than children at secondary school (78% compared to 66%), and girls agreed that they felt safe more than boys did (74% compared to 67%).
- Ninety-one per cent of children agreed with the statement 'I understand what the coronavirus guidelines are and how to follow them'. Children who disagreed with the statement raised issues such as lack of consistency, keeping track of what they were supposed to be doing and not knowing what the guidelines were.
- Seventy-one per cent of children agreed that 'students have been following the coronavirus guidelines at school'. This was higher amongst primary school children (78% agreeing vs 66% of secondary pupils).

Worries and concerns

- Children were invited to report in their own words what they were concerned about when thinking about going back to school. Out of 601 responses, 33 per cent mentioned either 'Covid' or 'virus' in their response. They were particularly concerned about bringing the virus home to their families.
- One third of children in the survey agreed with the statement 'I find it stressful to be back at school', although 47 per cent disagreed with this statement. Fifty-four per cent of primary school pupils disagreed with the statement, compared to 42 per cent of secondary school pupils.
- Children with one parent/guardian living in the household with them were the more likely to feel stressed about being



back at school than children with 2 parents/guardians living in the household (44% compared to 30%).

- Catching up with schoolwork was a significant concern for pupils. Fifty per cent of children agreed with the statement 'I am worried that I will struggle to catch up with my schoolwork this year', whereas 29 per cent disagreed. This concern was more prevalent amongst secondary school pupils with agreement at 54 per cent, compared to 44 per cent of primary school pupils.
- In the qualitative answers to the question 'thinking about going back to school, what (if anything) are you concerned about?', 5 per cent of children mentioned 'enough time' or 'catching up' and 6 per cent mentioned 'exams'.
- Sixty-three per cent of children agreed with the statement 'I am worried about not being able to go to school if my class has to self-isolate, or there is a local lockdown and my school closes'. Girls were more worried about this than boys (68% agreement compared to 58% of boys). There was no difference between primary and secondary age children, but children living in London were the most likely to agree with this statement (74%).
- Sixty-six per cent of children agreed with the statement 'I have everything I need to learn effectively from home if I need to' and 16 per cent disagreed. Although there were no significant differences by age or gender, agreement dropped to 52 per cent for children who had at least one unemployed parent or guardian.

Exams

- Children aged 14-17 were given a list of possible adaptations which could be made to exams next year to mitigate the impact of coronavirus on schools. They were asked to select any which they would wish to see.
- Forty-two per cent of children selected 'I think the exams should be adapted so I am only assessed on the themes that we have covered in class', 29 per cent selected 'doing exams in a socially-distanced way' and 24 per cent selected 'I think exams should be delayed'. Twelve per cent of children selected 'I think it should be the same as in previous years before coronavirus, nothing needs to change'. There was no significant difference by gender or age.
- Eight GCSE students at 2 different schools were asked in more detail for their views about exams next year. They agreed that the thought of losing more educational time was worrying. One boy said the last few months had made him realise how important school is. The pupils also cited mental stress linked to uncertainty about whether exams were going to take place. At one school a pupil reported a desire to take exams to 'use our full potential'. However, in the other school, another boy felt that the situation this year was different and that it would be better to be assessed by teachers who know them and who are aware of the extent to which they have fallen behind.
- The pupils felt worried about their futures. There were specific concerns about not being able to get into a college of their choice and about the fact that mock exams have been delayed till February, meaning that reports accompanying college applications could be based on those from October 2019 – a time when they had only just embarked on their GCSE courses.

How pupils feel things are going

- Children were asked to report how they felt things were going now they are back at school; they ranked a list of aspects from 1 ('things are not going well at all') to 5 ('things are going really well').
- Amongst the list for 'things which are not going well', the mostly highly ranked response was 'my levels of stress' chosen by 26 per cent of pupils.
- Amongst the things listed as going well, the most highly ranked aspects were 'my relationships with my family' (83%), my friendships (79%), my relationships with my teachers (71%) and 'my learning overall' (71%).
- Children who came from homes with 2 parents were more likely to feel that their progress in class and their learning overall was going well.
- Although 68 per cent of children overall felt that their mental health was going well, 14 per cent felt that their mental health was not going well. This increased to 16 per cent of girls, compared to 12 per cent of boys.

The help children want from their schools

- Children were presented with a list of things which schools could potentially do to help them and asked to select all those which they would like their school to offer.
- Thirty-three per cent of children said they would like additional education opportunities to help them catch up. Thirty-two per cent (predominantly primary pupils) selected 'making break time more fun' and 26 per cent selected 'being able to study at home via remote learning even if my school is open'. One quarter selected 'having more hygiene measures in place at school'. Nineteen per cent chose having a free school meal and the same number chose mental health support, such as a counsellor.
- There were few significant differences by gender or by the number of parents in the household. However, 23 per cent of children from single parent households said felt that the school should offer more in terms of mental health support compared to 18 per cent of those from 2 parent households. Fourteen per cent of children from single parent households did not think that the school needed to do anything more; the figure for those from 2 parent households was 20 per cent.
- Children were given the option of selecting 'other'. They gave several suggestions including opening after school clubs, providing a quiet place to go and provision of a 'decent laptop'.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/cco-some-sort-of-normal.pdf>