

Not included, not engaged, not involved:

A report on the experiences of autistic children missing school

EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY



PARTNERS IN THE PROJECT

Children in Scotland is the leading national charity working to improve children's lives. Their vision is that all children have an equal chance to flourish. Children in Scotland manage Enquire, the Scottish advice service for additional support for learning.

www.childreninscotland.org.uk

Scottish Autism is an organisation dedicated to enriching the lives of autistic people. They are the largest provider of autism-specific services in Scotland, providing a wide range of innovative support for children and adults, including a day and residential school for autistic pupils in Alloa. Across all of their services there is a focus on improving quality of life.

www.scottishautism.org

The National Autistic Society Scotland is a leading charity for autistic people in Scotland and their families. They provide local specialist help, information and care across Scotland to autistic people, their families and carers. Their Education Rights Service provides impartial, confidential information, advice and support on education rights and entitlements.

www.autism.org.uk

Children in Scotland, the National Autistic Society Scotland and Scottish Autism wish to thank all the parents and carers who took time to share their children's experiences of missing school and the impact this had on their children and their families.

The full report is available to download at

www.notengaged.com

Note: Throughout this report, we will use identity-first language of 'autistic children/pupils' as standard, as this is the preferred terminology for many autistic people.

INTRODUCTION

This report is the result of Children in Scotland, the National Autistic Society Scotland and Scottish Autism's growing concerns about the educational experiences of pupils with additional support needs, and in particular of autistic children. A significant body of evidence suggests that some autistic children are not having their right to an education fulfilled and are missing a significant and concerning amount of school.

Our concerns led us to work together to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of these pupils and their families. We sought to understand the amount of time some autistic pupils are missing from school and the reasons why this has happened, whether alternative arrangements for their education have been put in place, what support has been offered to return to school, and importantly, what the impact on the children and young people and their families has been.

We carried out research with parents of autistic children who had missed school within the last two years. A total of 1,417 responses were received, with responses from every local authority in Scotland. We see this as a starting point to understanding autistic children's experience of missing school. We believe further research is needed with pupils and education staff themselves to build a better picture of the barriers to autistic children accessing their education.

"Excellence and equity for all" is the Scottish Government's vision for education in Scotland. There is an extensive programme of work happening to make this a reality, such as Included, Engaged and Involved Part 2, the Scottish Government's guidance on preventing and managing exclusions. However, for a significant minority of children, they are not included, not engaged and not involved in their education.

Autistic children's experience of missing school

A total of 1,417 responses were received, with responses from every local authority in Scotland. From these responses*;

- 185 parents (13%) said their children had been formally excluded from school in the last two years.
- 478 parents (34%) told us their child had been unlawfully excluded in the previous two years.
- 394 parents (28%) told us their child had been placed on a part-time timetable in the last two years.
- 1,004 parents (71%) said that their child had missed school for reasons other than common childhood illness in the last two years.

Half of parents (50%) told us their child had experienced more than one of these types of absence. 7% of parents told us that their children had experienced all four of the kinds of absence described in this report.

Regardless of the type of absence, the majority of children (85%) did not receive support to catch up on work they had missed.

Nearly three quarters (72%) felt that staff having a better understanding of how their child's autism affects them, including their communication needs, would have made a difference to their child. Adequate support for their child at school (68%), adjustments for a child's sensory needs (57%) and other pupils having a better understanding of autism (56%), were also popular responses.

*Results are of a self-selecting sample of parents whose children had experience of missing time from school within the last two years.
We are not claiming that the results are representative of the experiences of all autistic children in Scotland.

Formal exclusions

The Scottish Government's statistics on school exclusions and attendance show that the exclusion rate for pupils with additional support needs is almost five times higher than for those without additional support needs.

In our survey, 185 parents said their children had been formally excluded from school in the last two years.

Of those:

- Almost three quarters (74%) said their child had been formally excluded on more than one occasion.
- More than a quarter (27%) said their child had been excluded more than once in a month.
- Almost a quarter of children (21%) were excluded from a specialist base, unit or school.
- Almost half of parents (49%) said they did not have a discussion with the school about their child's support needs before they returned to school. The Scottish Government's guidance on exclusions states that this discussion should happen.
- Almost half of all exclusions (45%) took place in primary school.

“In the last two years my child has had five schools. He was excluded or asked to leave from three of them. [...] He got no support either when excluded or returning to schools. It was left to us to fight for places or find suggestions. And left to us to support him. All whilst trying to maintain full time employment to support our family and try and establish some sort of normality for our children. It affected my son's mental health as he felt the rejections and sense of giving up and exclusion from every one of the schools.”

Unlawful exclusions

Sending a child home from school without formally excluding them is against the law – all exclusions must be formally recorded. Scottish Government guidance on managing and preventing exclusions is clear on its position that unlawful exclusions should not happen.

478 parents told us their child had been unlawfully excluded in the previous two years.

Of those:

- The majority of parents (85%) told us that their child had been unlawfully excluded more than once.
- Almost a quarter (22%) said this happened multiple times per week.
- More than three quarters (78%) of unlawful exclusions took place in mainstream school.
- Almost half (49%) of unlawful exclusions were from primary school.

“I was called around two to three times a week to collect him from school as they could not cope with him. This went on for around two years.”

“This happens regularly. If they don’t have sufficient staffing levels, they can’t support him, so we are asked that he stays at home.”

“My child was not even in an hour in school, but school were phoning asking us to go pick him up.”

“I had to come and pick him up every day at 12 because they could not cope a full day with him it was like that for seven years.”

Part-time timetables

Our findings suggest that some children are being placed on a part-time timetable as a way of managing their support needs. Some children are also remaining on a reduced timetable for an inappropriate length of time.

394 parents told us their child had been placed on a part-time timetable in the last two years.

Of those:

- More than half of pupils (55%) were on a reduced timetable for more than six months.
- More than three quarters (80%) were not told how long their child would be on a part-time timetable.
- Nearly a third (35%) of children were in primary school.
- Most of the instances of reduced timetables took place in mainstream schools (75%) with a significant minority taking place in bases or units attached to mainstream schools (16%) and special schools (6%).

“Was reduced to an hour a day! Over a year later we are still on a part-time timetable. As parents we are unhappy with the situation. He is falling behind his peers massively.”

“She cannot cope with the stress of attending more than part-time at present because the environment of the mainstream school is just not suitable. However, as she is intelligent she does not qualify for any different learning environment - it has been turned down.”

“We did not agree to it. The headteacher said it would be best for the child. Little did I think a year later we would still be in the same position. It was awful for us as parents. The school reduced his timetable once the hospital suggested he may be on the spectrum.”

“I felt pressured into accepting reduced timetable as they kept repeating how much they couldn't cope with my son.”

Time out of school for reasons other than common childhood illnesses

We wanted to find out if there were reasons autistic children were missing school other than formal exclusions, unlawful exclusions, use of part-time timetables or reasons you might expect children to be absent from school for short periods of time (e.g. common childhood illnesses).

1,004 parents said that their child had missed school for reasons other than common childhood illness in the last two years.

Of those:

- Nearly a fifth of children were out of school for over six months (17%).
- Nearly two thirds of parents (63%) said their child missed school due to anxiety.
- Nearly half (47%) reported their child refused to attend school.
- Over a third (39%) said that they felt that due to lack of support or the school being an unsuitable placement, they felt they needed to keep their child at home.
- Approximately a third of the children (34%) who had missed time from school had experienced more than one absence of more than two weeks during the last two years.

NB Parents were able to choose multiple reasons why a child missed school.

“Anxiety, bullying, lack of proper consistent support, issues with inappropriate behaviour from other children, too many unknowns etc.”

“The thought of school can create anxiety and a violent meltdown. Can't enjoy the weekend because she is dreading the end. In general school is good but the smallest thing - teacher off ill, issue with friend causes problems. She also struggles academically and some subjects (maths) make her feel stupid (her words) and reinforce to her that she has a disability.”

Impact on children and families

Some of the most concerning findings from the survey can be found in the comments from parents about the impact their child missing school has had on their child's wellbeing and that of their families. Over 1,500 comments were received to the two questions addressing these issues.

The most common concern of parents related to their child's anxiety and stress levels.

“My son finds it difficult going to school and then being told not to come to school. It makes him very stressed.”

“My child had been part-time on and off since 2016 and it's still ongoing. He does get upset when having to leave school knowing his friends are still at school.”

“In her one and a half years of secondary school she has only had the first five months of education. She has no social circle. She has very high anxiety surrounding school.”

“The anxiety levels have increased due to the length of time she has been off. She's become withdrawn.”

Many comments mentioned a lack of support making school difficult for their children. Particular issues mentioned include lack of funding, unsuitable placements or lack of skills or knowledge to support a child.

“The school not supporting my child has been the main cause of school refusal. She is happy not to go to school. School itself is making her physically ill.”

“My son has become disaffected many times over the last five years. He thinks he is stupid as a result of no support for four years to allow him alternative strategies and approaches to his learning. Each time he is absent I build him back up to return to school but then nothing changes, and he gets angry and frustrated.”

A significant concern for parents was the impact missing school had on their child's learning.

“My daughter is very behind on her work and is in P6 working at P3 level due to her eight months off school. We ended up moving schools which has helped her progress dramatically. When she started there in P5 she was on P1 work.”

“He’s content and feels safe at home but he’s clearly missing out on education, social life and achievements in key areas. He’s had mental health issues to cope with, extremely agitated, horrendous sleep patterns not helped by a lack of routine. He missed out on his P4 trips to the swimming pool for lessons, something he’d have loved as he loves the pool.”

“Huge impact, she really struggled with not being able to do National 5s at same time as peers as a result of missing so much schooling.”

When asked about the impact on their families, the findings make for concerning reading. Stress and anxiety again featured highly along with the negative impact on family dynamics.

“The whole situation has caused me major stress and anxiety and feeling depressed. My other children have suffered.”

“My son is with me all the time. My own mental health is being badly affected as is my physical health.”

“He didn’t have any routine because we didn’t know when school would phone me to pick him up. It caused us a huge amount of stress worrying how behind he is.”

It is concerning that a significant number of parents highlighted in their responses, that due to requests to pick up their child from school or stay at home to look after them, they were unable to work, had to reduce their hours or give up work all together. Children being out of school is having a direct impact on family’s financial situations.

“I have had to leave my job and if I’m at college and they phone I have to leave and pick him up. Because of this my mum doesn’t go out so that I can go back to college and he stays with her.”

“Devastating. I have had to take two months off work to care for him. When he was on part-time timetable I had to reduce working hours and I’m a single parent with another child.”

“I have severe anxiety caused by the stress of him not going to school. I can’t go out to work as I need to be at home for him. This causes us extreme financial pressure.”

Calls for action

The evidence in this report shows that autistic children are facing significant barriers to accessing their rights to education and support, and that these are not isolated problems. Responses were received from every local authority area in Scotland, indicating that the issues are not unique to a handful of places, but occurring across the country, to children of all ages, in both special and mainstream provision. The frequency of absences and the length of time some children are out of school should also be a warning flag that the education system is not working for all children. The fact that so few children receive support when they are off school or when they are returning to school highlights the need for immediate action.

Many of the children had been diagnosed with autism at an early age and it is concerning that having their needs recognised early does not seem to have been a protective factor for these children in experiencing issues at school.

Findings from our work should not be viewed in isolation. The data contributes to the growing body of evidence that there are systemic issues in the provision of education in Scotland impacting on outcomes for children with additional support needs on a daily basis. It is clear that whilst Scotland's approach to policy and legislation is one of inclusion and equality, these laudable principles are not reflected in the educational experiences of many autistic children.

We have identified nine calls to action that, if listened to and implemented, will have a positive impact on the educational experiences of not only autistic children but all children with additional support needs.

Call 1: Stop the use of unlawful exclusions and inappropriate use of part-time timetables

- The Scottish Government should make sure that the different types of absences are recorded accurately, avoiding the use of a catch-all category of “authorised absences”. This can be done by amending SEEMIS, (the Education Management Information System (MIS) system in Scotland). The resulting information should be included in the annual exclusions data published by the Scottish Government.
- Local authorities’ staged intervention processes should be enhanced to build in trigger points where further action must be taken should a child be out of school. For example, children sent home more than twice a term would trigger a review of support.
- The school inspection process should require schools to evidence that they are regularly monitoring all children out of school, the hours of education missed and the support that is being provided to learn, and to return to school. Schools should be evaluated on the strength of their practice in preventing and managing avoidable absence from school.
- As part of the review of Included, Engaged, Involved Part 1: Attendance at Scottish schools, clear parameters for the use of part-time timetables should be developed, including agreed procedures should a child be on a reduced timetable for longer than an agreed period.

Call 2: Reduce the number of formal exclusions of children with additional support needs

- The Scottish Government should revisit Regulation 4 of the Schools General (Scotland) Regulations 1975 which gives the power to exclude and sets out the circumstances under which a pupil may be excluded. Regulation 4 currently does not mention children with additional support needs and is not in line with the exclusions guidance Included, Engaged and Involved Part 2. Nor does it take into consideration the issues noted in the recent Upper Tribunal decision in England that distressed behaviour may not be a choice for autistic children and is often an indication that a child’s needs are not being met.
- The Department for Further Education has funded resources designed to support schools in England to avoid formal exclusions of autistic children. The Scottish Government should fund the replication of these resources for use in Scottish Schools.

Call 3: Improve the availability of specialist teachers

- The Scottish Government should commission a short-term working group to develop a plan for the additional support for learning workforce published within one year of this report. The plan should include a commitment to increase trained additional support for learning teachers to 2010 levels (as a minimum) within two years.
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Call 4: Review the availability of appropriate placements for autistic children

- The Scottish Government should make adequate investment in education to enable local authorities to make school placement decisions based on individual needs, rather than what resources are available. We support recent increases in monies made available but further investment is needed.
- Local authorities must review their approach to planning specialist provision for autistic children. Data from the improved recording of children out of school (as outlined in our first call) should be used to inform whether a child's current school placement is suitable to meet their needs. Specific consideration should be given to provision for autistic pupils who are academically able but find that mainstream school is not a suitable learning environment.

Call 5: Enhance programmes of initial teacher training and Continual Professional Development to improve understanding of autism

- The General Teaching Council for Scotland should ensure all trainee teachers receive training on additional support for learning which includes a compulsory element on supporting autistic children.
- The Scottish Government should implement a model of continuous professional development in autism understanding for education staff, similar to the Autism Education Trust which is funded in England by the Department for Education and has trained over 150,000 staff.
- Local authorities should actively promote the Autism Toolbox to education professionals in their schools, and the Scottish Government should explore how the Toolbox can be developed further in order for it to fully support the inclusion of autistic children and young people in mainstream education.

Resources available:

The Autism Toolbox: www.autismtoolbox.co.uk

The National Autistic Society's MyWorld teaching resources: www.autism.org.uk/myworld

Call 6: Reinstate a minimum number of hours of education for children out of school

- The Scottish Government should set a minimum number of hours of education support for children out of school. An agreed framework for when this support should start should be developed.
 - The Scottish Government should allocate funding for local authorities to recruit staff to provide educational support to children missing school.
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Call 7: Improve access to online learning

- Education Scotland should commit to improve current digital educational resources to support the remote teaching of Curriculum for Excellence, including identifying any specific gaps in the current offer.

Call 8: Use of whole school approaches to raise awareness and understanding of pupils with additional support needs, including autism

- Schools must build in awareness of additional support needs in general and autism in particular into the health and wellbeing aspect of the curriculum to support inclusive school environments, where everyone feels their individual needs are understood and respected.

Resources available:

The Autism Toolbox: www.autismtoolbox.co.uk

The National Autistic Society's MyWorld teaching resources: www.autism.org.uk/myworld

Call 9: Awareness raising of children's rights to additional support for learning with children, young people and families

- The Scottish Government must make sure that local authorities adhere to Section 26 of the ASL Act and the accompanying Additional Support for Learning Ministerial Information Order which place duties on local authorities to publish information about their additional support for learning policies and provide details of Enquire, the Scottish advice service for additional support for learning, the Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance and the Govan Law Centre.

Support available:

Enquire helpline **0345 123 2303** and websites www.enquire.org.uk www.reach.scot

National Autistic Society's Education Rights Service, **0808 800 4102**

www.autism.org.uk/services/helplines/education-rights.aspx

Scottish Autism Advice line **01259 222022** www.scottishautism.org

Further actions needed

- Improved access to mental health services for autistic children.
- Improved access to support for families of autistic children out of school.
- Research with autistic children and young people to understand the impact on them of missing school.
- Research to explore the perspectives of the education workforce.
- Research to explore unlawful exclusions for children and young people with other additional support needs.
- Research into the impact of early diagnosis on experience of school.

For additional information about our calls and the further action we believe is required can be found in the full report, which is available to view here: **www.notengaged.com**

This document and the full report is available online at www.notengaged.com



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