



INCLUSION IRELAND

National Association for People with an Intellectual Disability

The Implications of COVID-19 on the Education of Pupils with Intellectual Disabilities and Autism

Supporting Children to Learn

May 2020

**This document is written in font 12 Verdana in line with Inclusion
Ireland plain English guidelines**

About Inclusion Ireland

Established in 1961, Inclusion Ireland is a national, rights-based advocacy organisation that works to promote the rights of people with an intellectual disability.

The vision of Inclusion Ireland is that of people with an intellectual disability living and participating in the community with equal rights.

Inclusion Ireland's work is underpinned by the values of dignity, inclusion, social justice, democracy and autonomy and we use the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) to guide our work.

Introduction

In March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the outbreak of the new Coronavirus, or COVID19, as a pandemic, due to its rapid spread around the globe.

Ireland, along with other countries around the world, is taking action and putting in place plans to curtail the COVID-19 virus. One such action, announced on March 12th was to close all schools in Ireland.

On May 1st, Government announced a 'roadmap' to opening Ireland up again, which indicates that schools will not reopen until September at the very earliest and even then, only with good social distancing in place.¹

The research tells us clearly that this lengthy closure of schools will impact on children with intellectual disabilities and autism more than any other group of children. However, the Department of Education and Skills has been silent on their support needs to date.

Inclusion Ireland conducted a survey of parents from April 30th to May 7th to inform this submission. In total, 733 people responded to the survey. The responses set out what educational supports parents feel their child needs at present, what they do not have and what is required to ease children back into school after such a long absence.

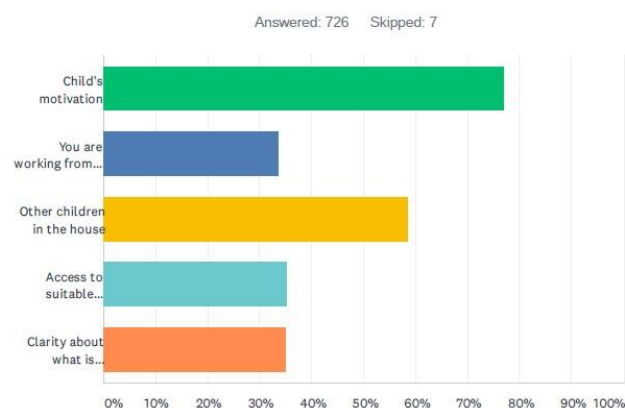
¹ Government published roadmap to ease Covid 19 restrictions and reopen Ireland's economy and society, accessed at www.merrionstreet.ie

The experience to date

On March 12th, teachers, pupils and parents were thrown into a very unusual situation as schools closed with almost immediate effect. Parents were advised to home educate and that support would be forthcoming. Teachers were told to send work home with children and to immediately prepare for a situation they had never faced before.

Educating at home is not working well for most respondents to Inclusion Ireland's survey. There are huge barriers to educating at home for parents, who are not teachers in most cases. Some parents state that their child presents with behaviours that can be a challenge or have poor attention skills that require the support of a skilled teacher and not a parent.

Q3 What barriers do you face in providing home education? Tick as many options as you like.



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Child's motivation	77.00%	559
You are working from home	33.75%	245
Other children in the house	58.68%	426
Access to suitable learning materials	35.12%	255
Clarity about what is expected/lack of guidance	34.99%	254
Total Respondents: 726		

One third of parents are trying to work from home which does not fit in well with the simultaneous demands of home educating. As well as the child with an intellectual disability and/or autism, 59% of families have at least one other child in the home to care for. This further complicates trying to home educate.

While not a direct question, many parents stated they are working on the frontline in COVID medical settings and in supermarkets. They are not at home to educate their children and are getting no support from the state on education.

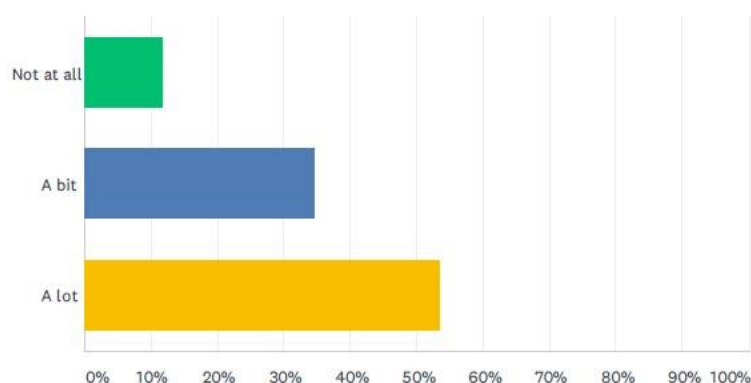
Education support to children from the school/teacher is variable with 35% of parents reporting both a lack of access to suitable educational materials and a lack of clarity of what is expected/lack of guidance as a barrier to home education. The experience for children varies widely with some having daily class lessons via 'virtual means' to other children who have had no contact from their teacher.

Almost 4 in 5 (77%) parents report that their child is not motivated to learn at home. Children are associating school with education and not home.

Just over 88% of respondents reported their child is missing school either, a lot (53.4%) or a bit (34.8%), with the remaining 11.76% not missing school at all.

Q1 Is your child missing school?

Answered: 731 Skipped: 2



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Not at all	11.76%	86
A bit	34.75%	254
A lot	53.49%	391
TOTAL		731

Survey respondents told us:

"We are both working out of home. It is impossible to home school."

"Child has difficult behaviour, poor focus. Needs a teacher."

"Child has challenging behaviour as he misses routine. Child needs somewhere to go".

"I am a nurse in a COVID unit. 4 children. Husband working from home. I am self-isolating. Husband doing his best"

"I am on the front line and minding granny with dementia. Nothing has been done for the children of frontline workers".

"He does not want me to teach him as I cannot teach the way his teacher does, and this frustrates us both".

"I have 5 kids, 2 with special needs, 3 need help with homework. I spend from 9am to 11pm doing homework. My own mental health will suffer. We have 2 laptops between 5 and the internet keeps breaking down".

For a significant amount of families, home education is not working for a variety of reasons. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) must carefully examine how it is supporting families at this time.

Case study of a child with complex needs

"My son requires and receives one-to-one support in school, sometimes more.

My son has had zero support since March 12th when his home became his school. He came home with a single page, a drawing. Clearly, a school caught unawares.

He attends a special school for children with autism and complex needs, code for mainstream cannot cope, special classes cannot cope.

He is autistic (level 3 or 'severe' in more common terms), has a moderate intellectual disability, is not verbal, and is arguably most in need of an education. Like all children, his education will pave his fate.

His education demands a focus on his independence as well as academic and behavioural (well-being) needs. He has had a battery of services to facilitate him in life, at least weekly, for close on a decade (mainly funded by us). All now gone.

He requires structure, routine and predictability. He requires face-to-face instruction.

The support from his school is nil. Staff outnumber pupils.

Sum total of two emails from the teacher. No thought, instruction or advice. He has an Individual Education Plan, but nothing forthcoming about this or how to deliver on any of the goals.

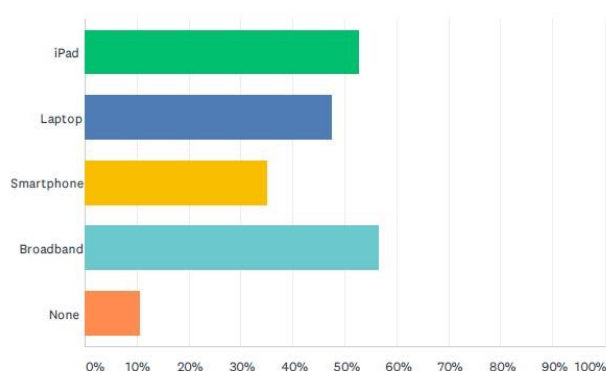
We (mainly his dad) are now teacher, SNA, speech therapist, occupational therapist, behaviour psychologist, psychiatrist, advocate and parent (and employee) rolled into one clumsy muddle.

He has a right to an education. At present this is gone.”

A digital divide?

Q4 Has your child access to technology for school work? Tick as many options as you like

Answered: 728 Skipped: 5



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
iPad	52.75%	384
Laptop	47.53%	346
Smartphone	35.03%	255
Broadband	56.46%	411
None	10.44%	76
Total Respondents: 728		

At present the only method for teachers to contact their students is via technology.

Most families have access to some form of technology such as a laptop, smartphone or iPad to access schoolwork but slightly more than 10% (or 76 respondents) have no access to any technology at all for schoolwork². These children need to be supported immediately by the DES with a technology solution or direct access to teaching as they have no access to education at present.

² This number is likely an underestimate as the survey was conducted online.

Also, 45% of respondents do not have access to high speed broadband meaning no access to the internet or access only through costly 4G.

A small amount of comments indicates that in some families' technology must be shared between children and parents working creating challenges and difficulties in home education.

Survey respondents told us:

"I am a teacher. My child is trying to use our device to learn and I am trying to use it to teach my pupils".

"Lack of tech equipment".

"No stable internet connection".

"We need an iPad sent home with textbooks and activities loaded up. It can be used for school after"

"We have 2 laptops between 5 and the internet keeps breaking down".

Supports required now

Parents and pupils need access to a range of supports with immediate effect. Respondents to Inclusion Ireland's survey said that until school reopens, they would benefit from virtual lessons delivered through Zoom or Skype (46.6%), a lesson plan developed from the child's individual education plan (IEP) and virtual access to a special needs assistant (SNA). Some schools are already hosting virtual classes, which works very well for some children. However, the experience is variable.

Respondents told us:

"Currently have zoom classes 9-11 each school day. It's invaluable."

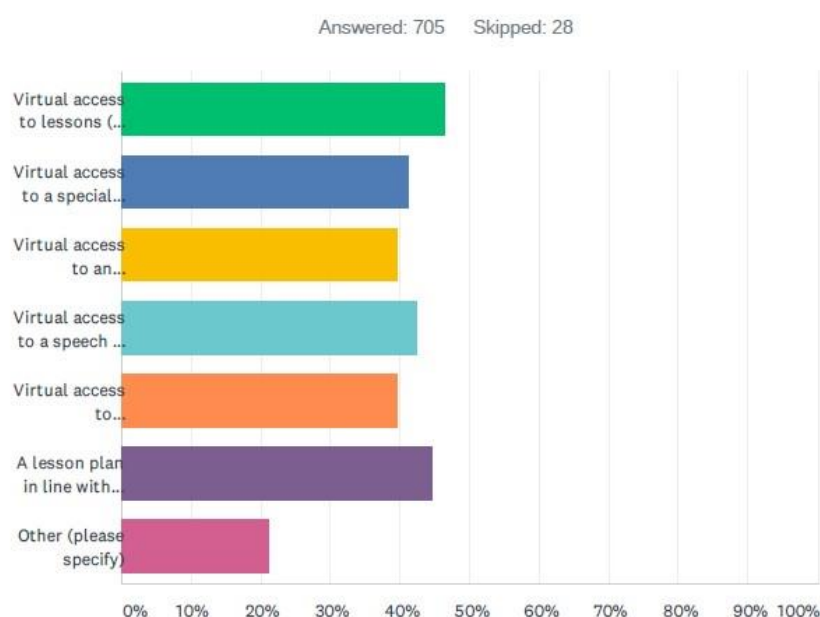
"Missed a call from the school on day 1 and haven't been able to contact them since".

"We are getting very good supports".

In recent years, the DES and the National Council for Special Education have begun to deploy allied health therapists such as behavioural psychologists, speech therapists and occupational therapists in schools in

partnership with the Health Service Executive (HSE). Since COVID 19 restrictions have been put in place, virtually all therapy appointments in the HSE have ceased.

Q2 Is there any educational support you feel would help until schools re-open? Tick as many options as you like.



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Virtual access to lessons (via Zoom or Skype, etc.)	46.52%	328
Virtual access to a special needs assistant	41.13%	290
Virtual access to an occupational therapist	39.72%	280
Virtual access to a speech and language therapist	42.55%	300
Virtual access to psychology/behaviour therapist	39.72%	280
A lesson plan in line with your child's IEP	44.82%	316
Other (please specify)	21.13%	149
Total Respondents: 705		

Respondents to the survey state that access to speech therapy (43%), occupational therapy (40%) and behavioural psychologist (40%) would support them through their home education journey.

In the free response to this section parents stated that they require technology, textbooks and workbooks to assist them in home education. A small number of parents asked that a small grant be made available to purchase materials for arts and crafts.

For a cohort of children with disabilities, direct access to teachers, SNAs and a structured lesson plan derived from the IEP is what is required.

While this may not be in line with public health guidelines at present, these children need to be top of the priority list of children returning to school. These children generally fall into the category of those with the highest support needs, traditionally referred to as 'moderate, severe and profound intellectual disability' and 'severe autism'. This is not a very large cohort of children and many are already educated in small class groups of 6 in school. The DES must also look at the home tuition/July Provision model or in school provision to see if it can be safely rolled out for an extended duration to these children.

A very small group of pupils (emerging in free responses to this survey) in the Irish education system will not be able to attend face to face education for some time. These are medically fragile pupils to whom the DES needs to pay particular attention. These children need regular access to their teacher via remote or 1:1 in home means which may require the DES to supply technology into homes as these children may not be back at school again for a significant period. One such comment that gives an insight into this group is: "my son has a chromosome disorder that affects his immune system. My mam who is 83 also lives with us".

Respondents told us theses supports would help now:

"My daughter has complex needs, I need a teacher or SNA to the house as I have 3 other children".

"One to one home tuition. My child could not work through Zoom".

A help would be "video calls with his peers from school".

"Reopen schools".

"Home support".

"Work in hard copy, lessons online especially for my kid".

"Send hard copy materials as we have no printer at home".

"Broadband that works and funding for educational supplies at home".

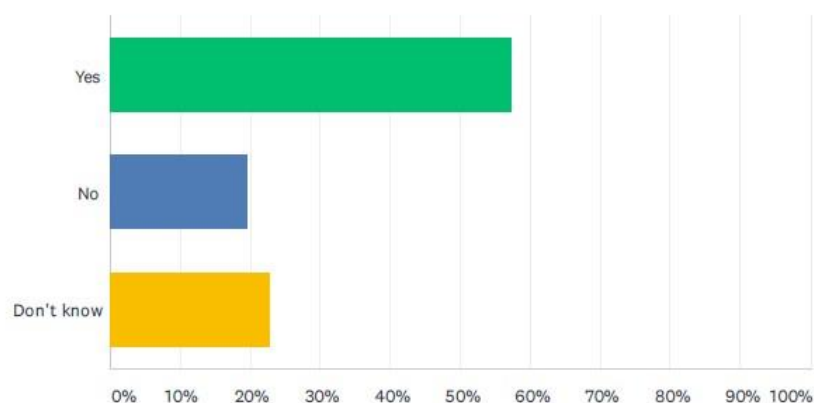
"An IEP please".

Supports required to get back to school

For many children with disabilities getting back to school will be a difficult transition, as the transition to home was also difficult.

Q5 Do you think it will be difficult for your child to return to school?

Answered: 730 Skipped: 3



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	57.40%	419
No	19.73%	144
Don't know	22.88%	167
TOTAL		730

We asked parents to rank the support that would help to ease their child back into school, now that we are facing schools remaining closed until September.

July provision or some form of home tuition and direct contact with the teacher are the highest ranked supports parents believe their child requires. The DES must examine the possibility of providing home tuition to children with complex needs without delay. Obviously, this needs to have a public health dimension but early, limited studies show there is a less risk of children passing COVID-19 to each other than adults.³

When schools are to reopen this will be a very difficult transition for many children, especially those for whom routine is very important. Transitions must be well planned to ensure these children return to full time education at the same time as their peers. Respondents have told us how this could be planned to support the child by having contact from the teacher, by communicating a planned return date at least one week in

³ Evidence summary of the spread of COVID 19 by children, HIQA, April 2020.

advance and having a number of arranged visits to the school in advance of the reopening date.

The supports required to ease a return to school ranked:

1. Contact with the teacher (4.03/6 score)
2. July provision/home tuition (3.88 score but highest 1st pref. 34%)
3. Advance visits to the school in advance of reopening (3.67 score)
4. Advance notice of a return date (3.64 score)
5. Support from a SNA (3.27 score)
6. Social story for returning to school (2.76 score)

When children are to return to school the DES must ensure that children with disabilities are not left behind. Almost 90% of parents surveyed believe that children with disabilities should return to school at the same time as other children or before.

Respondents told us:

".... Government has to take responsibility if children return to school blame should not rest with schools or service providers otherwise schools will not open for fear of reprisal"

"Return when it is safe to do so"

The United Nations view

While reliable figures on students with disabilities are not yet available it is likely that the current crisis has exacerbated their exclusion from education. As detailed in the policy brief on the impact of COVID-19 on children, students with disabilities are least likely to benefit from distance learning solutions. Lack of support, access to the internet, accessible software and learning materials is likely to deepen the gap for students with disabilities.⁴

Recommendations

⁴ Policy brief, A disability-inclusive response to COVID-19, United Nations, May 2020.

1. Schools must contact parents of children with disabilities to conduct a technology audit. The DES must then respond by providing technology and materials that is accessible to engage in virtual online classes immediately.
2. Any distance learning provision must be accessible.
3. The DES must resource schools to send out books, workbooks, iPads with educational materials preloaded and arts materials to children with disabilities as a matter of urgency. An alternative is to make a grant available to parents to purchase such materials as required.
4. The DES must determine best practice in virtual education of what is working well and ensure all schools have the capacity and resources to implement as a matter of urgency.
5. The DES must make therapy resources available through existing resources used for the pilot inclusion model, NCSE resources and in partnership with the HSE. This must be done swiftly using virtual or remote technology to support children with disabilities.
6. The DES needs to examine the possibility of home tuition/July provision in the home or school in line with public health guidelines. This is a particular need for children with complex learning or behaviour needs who are unable to interact with education in a remote manner.
7. The DES needs to assess and plan for children with complex medical needs. It is unlikely these children will be in school in 2020 so longer-term planning for accessible home education is required. This may be required for all children if there is a second wave of COVID-19.
8. When schools begin to reopen, children with disabilities must not be discriminated against, and must return to school at the same time as their classmates. In certain cases, an early staged return may be needed in advance to allow the child to re-engage in education.

Conclusion

Children with intellectual disabilities and autism are missing school a lot. For children with complex behaviour and medical needs home education is very difficult, despite the best efforts of parents and teachers. The experience of parents across the country varies widely with some children having daily class via Zoom and access to educational materials and smart applications from their teacher but some other children are having little or no contact or education provision.

Parents are struggling to provide any form of education to disabled children while also trying to work from home, work on the front line and isolate at home, or minding other children or elderly adults.

There is a small group of children who have no access to any form of technology to engage in virtual/online schoolwork. There is also a group of children with complex needs who cannot access education unless it is provided in person. For these children education has stopped.

Without access to school and therapy supports some children and their families are struggling to cope with the impact of the change the closing of schools has had on their lives and routines. They are finding it hard to adapt.

The DES needs to treat the COVID 19 crisis in special education as the crisis it is. There has been virtually no action from the DES to date to support children with intellectual disabilities and/or autism who may now be without school for 6 months or more.