

Senedd Cymru

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg

Absenoldeb Disgyblion

Ymateb gan Cymdeithas Genedlaethol
Awtistiaeth Cymru

Welsh Parliament

Children, Young People and Education Committee

Pupil absence

Evidence from National Autistic Society Cymru

Record your views against the inquiry's terms of reference, which have been grouped into 5 themes.

1. Reasons

The National Autistic Society is the UK's leading charity for autistic people. We are here to transform lives, change attitudes and create a society that works for autistic people. Our charity is deeply concerned about high levels of non-attendance among autistic young people, so we welcome the opportunity to respond to the committee's consultation.

Prevalence & Reasons

The reasons for absenteeism are complex and include reluctance to attend school, withdrawal, school exclusion, and illness and medical appointments. A study explored the school attendance rates of about 500 autistic students and found that a staggering 43% of these students were persistently absent from school. Researchers also found that autistic learners may be at a greater risk of missing days because mainstream schools are unable to provide appropriate support. Going to a mainstream school, rather than a specialist school, increased their chances of missing school by almost 100%.

Additional pressures

Autistic children and young people can often face extra pressures at school. They may:

- struggle with the school environment due to noises, strong smells or bright lights
- experience anxiety in social situations or find it hard to make friends
- get in trouble for unintentionally being rude or inappropriate
- find unstructured times such as lunch breaks hard
- struggle to cope with the demands of the school timetable or curriculum
- find transitions such as moving classrooms or school difficult
- take things literally or misunderstand a teacher's instructions
- find crowded assemblies or school transport too much
- become so overwhelmed they experience a 'meltdown' or 'shut down'

'School refusal'

Some autistic children find the demands of the school environment almost unbearable, leading to absence or 'school refusal'. It's a term some feel unfairly implies the child or young person has a choice, when they may be willing but unable to tolerate school.

Autistic learners may be reluctant to go to school because they are worried about something, experience conflict with peers or school staff, don't want to leave home, experience teasing or bullying, or are told off for 'disruptive behaviour'. It is important to note that 'disruptive behaviour' is often an indicator that an autistic child's support needs are not being met and they are overwhelmed. A Swansea University study found that more than half of autistic young people feel they do not receive enough help in school.

Researchers also found that over 75% of autistic pupils have been the victim of bullying, with one in four saying they do not feel safe in school. It comes as little surprise, therefore, that recent studies suggest a high rate of school absence among autistic pupils.

"I, like many other parents, was ignored or dismissed by staff until my child reached a crisis point. Early intervention and better accommodations might have meant that my son was able to continue in a mainstream environment."

—A parent explains the reason she withdrew her son from mainstream provision

School exclusion

Autistic children and young people are particularly vulnerable to being excluded from school. Behaviour associated with autism is sometimes confused with 'disruptive behaviour' due to a lack of understanding among pupils and staff. Nearly a quarter of parents say their autistic child has faced a school exclusion, either internally through isolation or externally through fixed-term or permanent exclusions.

Given growing concerns about non-attendance, we think we should be equally concerned about the impact of non-attendance due to enforced absence and exclusion. Nearly 80,000 school days were lost due to fixed-term exclusions in one academic year, so we would welcome plans to revise statutory guidance. This would provide an opportunity to look at how guidance can better reflect the concerns of autistic learners and their families.

2. Risks and consequences

Studies show that persistent absence can increase the risk of dropping out by up to 28% and have a negative impact on mental health as well as educational attainment. We need to see more early intervention and support tailored to the needs of autistic pupils.

"My son's mental health began to deteriorate as he felt misunderstood – he was suffering, he felt the lack of support meant he didn't deserve to be helped. It was heart-breaking to watch him fade before our eyes over the course of a school year, only to recover over the summer and repeat the process the following year. Each year placed a harder toll on him. The longer my son's needs went unmet, the more he struggled with anxiety and low mood. The harder it was for him to attend school, the harder it was to mix with his peers, to socialise, to make and maintain friendships."

—A parent describes the impact of a lack of mental health support

It has fallen to parents to home school or support their child's education, often while juggling work and other commitments. Two in five parents did not feel they could adequately support their child's education needs. Seven in 10 parents said their child had difficulty understanding or completing school work and about half said their child's academic progress was suffering.

"One of the side effects of my son's struggles to attend mainstream school has been that I have had to leave my own job as a teaching assistant to care for my son. He has not attended full-time schooling in over a year which made it impossible for me to continue working. In many ways my being at home benefits my son in the short term but there are long-term consequences for the entire family that will result from

having to leave my job. It is galling to be penalised in this way because the education system has failed my disabled son.”

—A key worker describes how she had to give up her job

3. Impact

Education is vital for all young people to build a future but for autistic children, schooling must meet many needs. Although academic attainment is important, they also gain the skills they need to transition to adulthood, build relationships and cope with future challenges. Sticking to established routines is one way that autistic children make sense of the world around them and avoid anxiety each day. Without the routine of going to school due to the pandemic, life for many autistic children has been severely disrupted.

Home education

Some autistic young people are home-schooled because their parents feel their educational needs are not being met at school. Home education has increased by around a third in some parts of Wales. We are concerned this is being driven by unmet support needs in mainstream school settings.

Parents often tell us they felt like they have been left with no choice but to home school due to a lack of support when they would rather their child was educated alongside their peers to develop the skills they will need to navigate the world as an autistic adult. If parents decide to educate their child at home, this should be a positive choice based on how the child’s needs can be best met.

4. Effectiveness of policies

Autism understanding

Many autistic children and young people tell us school would be much better if school staff understood autism but research shows that only 28% of autistic learners in Wales feel their teachers understand autism. Better understanding of autism would improve learning experiences, lower incidents of bullying at school and boost employment prospects.

All teachers will work with autistic pupils during their career – yet many aren’t given training to understand their autistic pupils’ needs, or what they can do to help. We need to make sure the people teaching autistic children have an appropriate understanding.

During the fifth Senedd, the health committee agreed with us. It recommended that Welsh Government ensures all school staff receive training in understanding of autism during their initial teacher training and as part of their continuing learning.

Promoting autism understanding will support greater inclusion and acceptance. Schools need to know their learners better: only by doing this will they be able to create an environment to fit learners’ needs. High-quality training – which is designed and delivered by people with lived experiences – is key to improving attendance rates.

“I felt staff lacked an understanding of autism and how it presents and judged the situation on my son’s masked appearance – he had the classic presentation of ‘fine in school’ and experiencing meltdowns as soon as he felt safe, sometimes this was as soon as he left the school grounds. As a family, we were exhausted – there was no support. Feedback from the school left me many times feeling isolated, alone, and in tears. At one point I was signed off work due to stress. My son was traumatised over and over because the expectation was not that school should meet his needs but that he should learn to act like they were being met.”

—A family criticises a lack of understanding and support from their child’s school

Blended learning

We believe blended learning should be made available on a continuing basis in some circumstances. Autistic young people have reported positive experiences of online learning, with some excelling after struggling in traditional classrooms. We would welcome greater flexibility on attendance which could prevent learners withdrawing from school.

“During the second lockdown when online lessons were provided for each subject, my son thrived. He much preferred this style of teaching although there were still some challenges. In particular, he thrived on the reduction in social interaction – there was less pressure to be sociable and he could focus on the work. For the first time we saw him become passionate about learning.”

—A family told us their child benefitted greatly from online learning

Strategies to support attendance

Non-attendance is a complex phenomenon that involves the child, family and school as well as factors like education policies and mental health services. Positive teacher-child and parent-teacher relationships reduce the likelihood of school absence, persistent absence, refusal and exclusion. It is important to maintain open, positive lines of communications. The views, feelings and wishes of families must be considered. Too often, we hear from parents frustrated at being excluded from the process.

Schools should try to proactively reduce anxiety levels by identifying and addressing needs. This will help to re-engage the autistic child or young person with their education as they will feel safer in the classroom and accepted by those who support them. Periods of transition, including returning to school, can cause anxiety so careful preparation will be needed to help an autistic child or young person to manage this change.

Flexi-schooling can be a way of providing education in school, with social interaction with peers, learning vital skills and direct teaching from teachers, combined with learning in the less stressful home environment.

5. Other

Learner travel

Travel can be a key barrier to school attendance and autistic people may find public transport overwhelming due to sensory difficulties. We believe the Welsh Government’s should bring forward the overdue review of the Learner Travel (Wales) Measure 2008 to consider how school attendance can be further encouraged.

Fixed-penalty notices

We believe fixed-penalty notices should only ever be used as a last resort and we would question their effectiveness as a measure to tackle absence. If the family is engaging with an intervention but it’s not working, it’s not necessarily the fault of the family and they should not be penalised. We also think children should be encouraged, rather than incentivised, to attend school because the latter can stigmatise non-attendance.

Additional funding

We welcome Welsh Government’s announcement of an extra £18m to support for pupils with additional learning needs. We agree that mental health support and tailored help with attendance are the right

priorities, however we want to see robust monitoring to ensure this funding reaches the children most impacted by the pandemic.

“My son is a different person away from school, he is lighter, brighter, happier. He is enthusiastic. His grin is infectious. When he was in school, he frequently expressed thoughts of suicidal ideation. Article 23 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states a child with a disability ‘should enjoy a full and decent life’ – not just during the summer holidays. My son has not had effective access to education because his needs were disregarded, minimised or wilfully unmet.”

—The mother of an autistic secondary school pupil

