

Statistical bulletin

Educational experiences of young people with special educational needs and disabilities in England: February to May 2022

Young people aged 11 to 16 years with special educational needs and disabilities, parents, carers, and school staff share their experiences with education and educational systems across England, including what they feel is going well and suggestions for improvements.

Contact:
Amber Jordan, Emma Jones,
Shona Horter and Dawn Snape
equalities@ons.gov.uk
+44 1633 455773

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1 . Main points

You can watch our video [What is education like for young people with special educational needs and disabilities](#), which covers the main findings.

A summary of this bulletin is also available in a [young person friendly version](#).

- Young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) reflected on their needs and difficulties at school and described the strategies they use to manage their learning and emotional well-being, which included wearing headphones or sunglasses, fidgeting, doodling and accessing sensory spaces.
- Unmet educational support needs were reported to result in a range of reactions from young people, including feeling angry or frustrated, and potentially distracting others, which was sometimes treated as "naughty" behaviour and met with punishment, such as isolation and exclusion.
- Young participants reflected on their unique learning preferences and support needs, highlighting the importance of consulting with individuals to understand and find appropriate ways to accommodate their needs, without them feeling labelled as different.
- Participants felt that schools could be more responsive to young people's needs through: providing more training to help staff identify needs and understand how best to meet them; ensuring support plans were appropriate, up to date and adhered to; being flexible around things like course load, access to safe spaces and uniforms; and ensuring teaching methods considered a range of learning styles and preferences.
- Good communication and relationships between staff and pupils and their families were said to have a positive impact on young people's experiences at school; staff who displayed empathy, respect and care were described as encouraging young people to feel comfortable about asking for help, as well as being better able to understand their individual needs and adapt lessons appropriately.
- Young participants, parents and carers reflected on how schools could promote inclusion, for example through school clubs and buddy systems to build friendship opportunities, recognising a range of achievements beyond academic grades, and raising awareness and understanding of needs and differences.
- Parents and carers shared difficulties with navigating systems to ensure their child's support needs were met, describing stressful, lengthy, complex and inconsistent processes to access appropriate schools and support plans, and calling for greater accountability to ensure guidelines are followed by local authorities.

In this bulletin "young participants" refers to children and young people with SEND aged 11 to 16 years who participated in this research. Pseudonyms that young participants suggested as an alternative code name have been used instead of names to protect participants' confidentiality. We aim to portray the views of participants and reflect their words as closely as possible. Some quotes have been edited for language and grammar to improve accessibility, without changing the content or meaning.

2 . Background to our research

In October 2021, [research and recommendations from the Inclusive Data Taskforce](#) (IDTF) highlighted gaps in existing data, with evidence about children and young people often reflecting proxy views rather than their own views about their lives. Additionally, the IDTF noted that further insights should be sought into the lived experiences of children and young people, including those who are disabled.

The Department for Education (DfE) is currently undertaking a review of the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and alternative provision system in England. [Following a SEND Green Paper consultation](#) on several proposals earlier in 2022, an implementation plan is expected to be published by the end of the year. As part of this, it is important to better understand the experiences of young people who will be affected by the SEND review. During early scoping work for this project, we spoke to a range of government stakeholders, academics, and disability and young people's civil society organisations. They identified the need for evidence and to hear directly from young people with SEND about their educational experiences.

School experiences may be worsening for children and young people generally, with [the Children's Society Good Childhood Report 2022 \(PDF, 48.4MB\)](#) noting a continued decline in 10- to 15-year-old's happiness with school. While the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has affected the education of all children and young people, those identified as having SEND may have been disproportionately negatively affected, with reduced or removed SEND support compared with pre-coronavirus pandemic provision ([Then There Was Silence, Disabled Children's Partnership, 2021 \(PDF, 11.196KB\)](#)). According to [DfE's 2021 COVID-19 Parent and Pupil Panel \(PDF, 1.094KB\)](#), 40% of parents or carers of pupils with SEND said they were unable to access support they felt their child needed. Taken together, these findings reinforce the importance of learning more about the educational experiences of young people with SEND today.

To address this evidence gap, we have undertaken qualitative research on the educational experiences, preferences and needs of young people with SEND between the ages of 11 and 16 years, including their suggestions for improvements. To understand a range of experiences, we spoke to young people attending different educational settings, including mainstream schools, special schools, residential schools, alternative provision and those in elective home education. The young people we spoke to either received Special Educational Needs (SEN) support or had an education, health and care plan (EHCP).

SEN support is provided for pupils who are identified as having SEND, whereby the school should take action to remove barriers to learning and put special educational provision in place. An EHCP is for pupils with SEND who need more special educational provision than is normally available with SEN support. EHCPs identify educational, health and social needs and set out the additional support required to meet those needs. [DfE's 2021 to 2022 figures](#) show that both the proportion of pupils receiving SEN support, as well as those with an EHCP, have continued to increase since 2016.

This research also considers experiences of parents, carers and education staff, and their interactions with broader SEND systems. Quote attributions in this release include alternative names selected by young participants, as well as their age group, current educational setting and support provision (EHCP or SEN support). While this research only included young people identified as having SEND, some experiences may reflect those common among all young people. For further information on methods and sample, please see [Section 9: Methodology](#).

3 . SEND awareness and self-management

Young participants reflected on their needs and difficulties within their educational setting and spoke in detail about the work they do to manage their learning and emotional well-being at school. Their examples suggested both resilience and self-reliance in overcoming difficulties they faced.

Awareness of self and others

Many of the young participants that we spoke to recognised and reflected on their own needs, identity and contexts, as well the needs of others. For some, disability could be both a source of frustration and a part of their identity.

They sort of bring you out of class just to do a PowerPoint saying like, what I like and what I could change. I used to put, 'I wish I could change my disability', but I don't put that anymore because why change it? You just learn how to live with it at the end of the day.

Andy, aged 14 to 16 years, EHCP, mainstream school

However, this sense of accepting special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and SEND identity was not universal among young participants. Some preferred not to be identified as different, as expanded in [Section 4: Belonging, inclusion and perceived social judgement](#).

Young participants demonstrated awareness of the contexts around them, which could raise challenging feelings when they believed their needs led to difficulties for others; a view parents and carers worked hard to counter.

She'll occasionally apologise for being in a wheelchair and for being born, which we go 'just don't say that'. We don't get upset, we just laugh and say 'don't be ridiculous, you are the most wonderful child'.

Parent or carer of 14- to 16-year-old, EHCP, special school

Awareness of their own needs also made some young people conscious that all pupils, as well as teachers, may be dealing with challenges in their own lives.

All students in school, even though they hide stuff that you can't really see, they are going through a lot. So, try to be aware, have awareness of them.

Zeiky Boy, aged 14 to 16 years, EHCP, mainstream school

They acknowledged that other pupils' needs and preferences could differ.

There is not a lot of people in the class. Some people don't like big crowds necessarily, so it's good for them to have that. I think that's better for some of the kids than it is for others.

Selena, aged 11 to 13 years, EHCP, special school

Self-management

To manage their emotional well-being at school and avoid or minimise negative emotions such as anger, frustration, anxiety, and aggression, young participants described efforts they made every day. They felt that this was not always recognised, and a lack of responsiveness to their emotional needs at school increased the need for self-management.

I get a bit angry in maths sometimes because the answers are hard. I usually bring something in with us, sometimes a Hot Wheels car. I just like looking at it, and that's what settles me.

Finley, aged 14 to 16 years, EHCP, special school

To improve their concentration, minimise difficult feelings and cope with aspects of the learning environment they found challenging, young participants developed a range of strategies. These included wearing headphones or sunglasses to reduce sensory overload and "doodling" to help with concentration.

I have ear defenders, but because my ears are really sensitive, it does get pretty noisy.

Fly Cloud, aged 11 to 13 years, EHCP, special school

"Fidgeting", often using tactile objects, was also viewed by young participants as a helpful strategy for improving concentration and maintaining calm, but it was felt that teachers could view this as distracting or disruptive.

If you know that you have to fidget with things to concentrate, tell the teacher that you have to do this certain thing. Because if you want me to do well in your class, I'm not going to do well if I'm just sat there staring at the board.

Jess, aged 11 to 13 years, Special Educational Needs (SEN) support, mainstream school

Some young participants felt their schools helped them to manage their emotions and feel more comfortable. When they felt teachers or support staff listened and understood their strategies to cope or self-regulate, this was seen to make a positive difference to their learning and well-being. It also made them more comfortable sharing their feelings and asking for help. Additionally, being able to access safe environments, such as sensory rooms, appeared particularly important for some young people. Such spaces helped them to relax and unwind, avoid noisy or busy breaktimes, and enabled them to study without distraction.

They have a sensory room upstairs and I love it, it's amazing. I say, it's easier to calm down in there because it's like dark. You can have fun lights on, it's not flashy, there's no noise, it's quiet. So, if I'm getting overwhelmed, or anyone's getting overwhelmed or anxious, it's easy just to go into the sensory room.

Spencer, aged 14 to 16 years, SEN support, mainstream school

4 . Belonging, inclusion and perceived social judgement

How young participants viewed their interactions with school staff and other pupils was important in shaping their perceptions of either fitting in and belonging at school or feeling judged, excluded and alone.

Impact of friendships

Having friends and feeling part of a friendship group was described by young participants as important and affected their overall enjoyment of their educational setting. They valued friendships offering mutual support through emotional and academic challenges, including adjusting to changes and transitions. Friendships helped them to feel they were "not alone" within their educational setting.

My school now has been the best so far because I've made the most friends ever. And some of my friends are really supportive.

Star, aged 11 to 13 years, education, health and care plan (EHCP), special school

By contrast, young participants who said they did not have friends at school described feeling like an "outsider", found breaktimes "depressing" and generally did not enjoy school. Some in both mainstream and special schools mentioned buddy systems, with buddies described as particularly supportive to those finding socialising and forming friendships challenging. However, buddy systems were not enjoyed by all, and some found being matched up with "strangers" awkward and uncomfortable. Young participants suggested participation should be voluntary and/or allowing pupils to select their buddies.

Buddies are just like best friends, like they got a lot of stuff in common and are really nice to each other. Because if one's upset, then the other will come and cheer him up. It's nice because you're like, well, I'm normally sad and he's normally there to help. And when he's sad, I'm normally there to help.

Kobe, aged 11 to 13 years, EHCP, residential school

Young participants also described other friendship building initiatives positively. These included coaching to improve social skills, summer schools for pupils to get to know one another in smaller groups, and lunchtime or after school clubs for sharing interests and making friends.

I just started going to the Friendship Club and I found it really nice.

Max, aged 11 to 13 years, Special Educational Needs (SEN) support, mainstream school

For many young participants across different educational settings, spending time with friends during lessons and breaktimes was their favourite part of the day. This may be particularly important for those who live far away from their educational setting, making it difficult to see school friends in their free time. Additionally, some young people, for example those living in a children's home, may not feel able to invite friends over to their home, emphasising the value associated with having time and space for friendships at school.

He doesn't really engage with peers from school outside of school, other than maybe, over the telephone. He definitely doesn't go out to meet them, he doesn't do any like after school activities. So, he's quite withdrawn in terms of that and making sure that he doesn't bring school into home and home into school.

Parent or carer of 14- to 16-year-old, EHCP, mainstream school

Difficult interactions with other young people

Among those who said they did not enjoy school, this was often linked to difficult interactions with other pupils, both in the school environment and online through social media. Instances of perceived bullying, meanness, gossiping, exclusion and judgement were recounted as having a profoundly negative effect on young people's learning and well-being.

I just hated the place. Not because I just hated school, but it's because the whole experience. So, this is what most of my anxiety comes from, primary school, unfortunately. I was bullied from reception all the way to year six, physically and mentally. And I tried to move school, nowhere would take me, everywhere was full.

Buttons, aged 14 to 16 years, SEN support, mainstream school

Young participants, parents and carers described strategies they found effective for handling bullying and conflict management. These included raising awareness of different types of bullying and its impact, as well as specific interventions, such as mediation between pupils to promote open discourse and making amends. However, a recurrent perception of both young participants, parents and carers is that bullying was too often ignored, or that staff responses were ineffective in deterring the behaviour. Additionally, it was noted that pupils may be reluctant to report negative experiences for fear of being labelled a "snitch" or "grass".

Differential treatment and labelling

Many of the young participants in mainstream settings and alternative provision felt they were treated differently to other pupils, which affected their learning and well-being. Young people in these settings may perceive differential treatment as a way in which their special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) status becomes known to others without their agreement, leading to a range of negative feelings. For example, some young participants described being assigned visibly different coursework to their classmates, which set them apart and labelled them as different. They often felt the "different" work they were given was not challenging enough to support their development.

My teacher just set me a textbook and I was there to work out of that, which again made me feel like an outsider because everyone was learning off the board, and I was learning off a book. I just felt dumb.

Andy, aged 14 to 16 years, EHCP, mainstream school

Young participants sometimes did not want "extra help" if it contradicted their perceptions of what it means to be treated as a "normal kid".

They don't treat me like a normal kid. They treat me like I need therapy or something. Then they're all like 'extra help' and I don't need the extra help. I just need to be left alone.

Karim, aged 11 to 13 years, EHCP, alternative provision

According to young participants, parents and carers, this could lead to young people totally refusing support if they felt it would identify them as being different. This included being taken out of, or separated during, lessons, having their own teaching assistant, and being given different materials, all of which sparked worries of being judged, excluded and a perceived loss of belonging.

They come round and they give out coloured paper, but I hate being singled out. So, I don't have coloured paper.

Jess, aged 11 to 13 years, SEN support, mainstream school

Although differential treatment was often received negatively by young participants in mainstream settings and alternative provision, a sense of being "different" and still accepted could be viewed positively. Some acknowledged that they learned differently to others and could embrace this in an environment in which difference was perceived as acceptable and supported.

I had a really nice teacher who understood my autism and how I need to fiddle and do things a bit differently to everyone else.

Frost, aged 11 to 13 years, SEN support, elective home education

Some young participants used diagnostic labels themselves such as "dyslexia", "autism" or "ADHD" to help explain their learning and support needs. However, they did not want these labels to be used as justification for lower expectations, less favourable treatment or fewer opportunities. Additionally, some young people rejected being labelled by a diagnosis altogether.

I haven't told my teachers I'm autistic because I want to be treated like everyone else. But I think they know I'm different, they know I'm different to the other kids. I think in a different way and well, I'm just different.

Cobra, aged 11 to 13 years, SEN support, mainstream school

A similar issue emerged in relation to the word "special" used in the SEND context. School staff felt that parents and carers may see negative connotations and stigma associated with the term. While mainstream schools were referred to as "normal", "real" or "proper" schools by young participants, parents, carers and staff, this potentially rendered specialist settings "abnormal". The term was also associated with difference, which some young participants did not want, as well as framing difference negatively. It could also lead to a perception that non-mainstream settings may prepare young people less well for future success.

[It's hard for me because] I think it's just knowing that it's not a proper schooling or that it's not a real proper High School. That's basically it.

Selena, aged 11 to 13 years, EHCP, special school

Staff also gave examples of how this perceived stigma could lead parents or carers to enrol their child in a mainstream setting to avoid them becoming marginalised, while recognising that this was not always in their best interests. Staff felt more could be done to de-stigmatise non-mainstream settings, enabling more young people to access provision best suited to their educational needs.

What we see is a lot of the parents want their children to be in mainstream education, where maybe the professionals around them don't feel that that's necessarily the most appropriate provision. But there is a stigma around special educational needs schools. A lot of it is just about educating that this isn't stigmatising your child, this is a great opportunity for your child to help them reach their potential. And that's a big job.

Teacher, multiple educational settings

Some young participants with experience of both mainstream and special schools described a greater sense of inclusion and overall more positive experience at the special school.

I didn't like [previous mainstream school]. Probably the children over there. Sometimes they never used to want to play with me in the playground.

Superman, aged 11 to 13 years, EHCP, special school

The "naughty child" and "difficult parent or carer" narratives

Young participants, parents and carers discussed a belief that some teachers and other educational staff misunderstood young people with SEND and held unjust and inaccurate preconceptions of them.

Teachers were like 'yeah, I explained that once I'm not explaining that again, because you weren't listening.' But they don't really realise that you got to have it repeated for you to maybe understand a little bit more. It's quite annoying really, because they think you're a bad impression when you're actually not, you just struggle really.

Chris, aged 14 to 16 years, SEN support, mainstream school

They described negative emotional and behavioural consequences of young people not having their needs understood or met, which included "messaging around", distracting others, shouting or ignoring teachers. They described some staff as focusing on these symptoms, labelling pupils with SEND as "bad" or "naughty", rather than trying to understand the underlying problem. Focusing on the behaviour rather than the issue causing it was seen as exacerbating emotional and behavioural difficulties, creating a vicious cycle.

My son couldn't cope with being in a physical classroom for six hours a day, and he started self-harming. When he went into year two, we had a teacher who was more concerned with him not causing any disruption in the class, rather than giving him the support he needed. And he became extremely withdrawn and started talking about wanting to die. Things that were very, very disturbing to be coming from a 7-year-old.

Parent or carer of 11- to 13-year-old, SEN support, elective home education

Young participants felt the onus was more on them to change their behaviour or face being punished with isolation or exclusion, rather than on schools to identify and address individual needs. While young participants acknowledged the need to remove disruptive pupils, this also excluded them from learning, hindering their progress. Young participants also described how feeling branded as "naughty" could become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

If they think I'm going to be naughty, then I do be naughty because I think to myself, 'what's the point of being good if they are not going to pay any interest in me or if they think I'm going to be like that?'

Andy, aged 14 to 16 years, EHCP, mainstream school

Staff also acknowledged that while this labelling young people with SEND as "naughty children" still happens, schools and teachers are beginning to recognise that behaviours may result from unmet needs. They suggested more training is required to help staff identify needs and understand how best to meet them.

A student isn't naughty, they have a need. And I think all those years ago, those needs were just seen as 'he's just disruptive' or 'she's just chatty', and it wasn't addressed. Whereas now, I think we're finally coming to a time that, you know, we have mental health issues, we have needs. These things are being challenged and seen and met. And I think it's always been there, but nothing was ever done about it.

Teaching assistant, mainstream school

For their part, parents and carers also described feeling blamed by schools for their child's support needs, which was attributed to things like being a single parent, their parenting style or coming from a "problematic family".

I did have quite a fight with that school about it because they were saying like he wasn't autistic, he was just naughty. And with me being a single parent, that school does like to label single parents.

Parent or carer of 11- to 13-year-old, EHCP, special school

Parents and carers, especially those whose children have less visible disabilities, also spoke about feeling branded as "difficult", having to "fight" for their child to be supported at school and needing to contest decisions.

There was also a sense that as well as children being punished for behaviour that may arise from unmet needs, parents and carers can be penalised, such as being fined for their low attendance.

He hated school from the day he started. And the problem is that I've paid like £160 a day fine. Because of my son's low attendance, the council has sent me and my husband a fine.

Parent or carer of 11- to 13-year-old, SEN support, mainstream school

Promoting inclusion

All participants discussed how to help pupils feel included at school, particularly within a mainstream setting. A perceived hallmark of an inclusive school was staff who are friendly, understanding and accommodating, and showed they cared by asking how pupils are. Young participants described this as helping them to feel accepted as they are within the setting.

Some mainstream schools were described by parents and carers as having an open, accepting attitude towards SEND, with all staff members considering themselves to be part of SEND provision.

They have a good understanding and all of the staff are involved, if that makes sense. They are all teachers of SEND in a way. So, it's not 'the SEND department looks after children with autism and then I'm his class teacher', everybody is aware.

Parent or carer of 11- to 13-year-old, SEN support, mainstream school

Parents, carers and staff felt that open discussions around SEND encouraged an inclusive culture by raising awareness among all pupils and staff, and building understanding of individual differences and needs as part of the curriculum.

For me, I think probably being a bit more open in school about, you know, about people's differences and how people are different.

Parent or carer of 11- to 13-year-old, SEN support, mainstream school

Young participants suggested that opportunities for involvement in extracurricular activities helped them to feel included. Some young participants described ways of increasing accessibility of school trips and events.

When I was in year one, I just thought 'Wow, the year twos are having a nice camping trip at the school.' That would be really nice, especially since if I get worried, I could just ask the teachers if I could go home. And because it's close to my house, they could just walk me home.

Frost, aged 11 to 13 years, SEN support, elective home education

A primary focus on academic attainment can undermine perceived inclusiveness. Some young participants attending mainstream schools reported feeling unwelcome because they achieved lower grades, and perceptions that the school's academic reputation was prioritised over needs-based support. Participants felt it should be recognised that achievement looks different for everyone. Awards and recognition assemblies involving all pupils were suggested to encourage inclusion and provide opportunities for young participants to champion one another and celebrate their successes. Assemblies were also said to provide opportunities for pupils to learn about different needs and disabilities.

Many assemblies and social events were moved to online platforms because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which had differing impacts on young people with SEND in terms of inclusivity. While some young people found it difficult to engage or stay focused when interacting online, others felt more comfortable participating.

He started to make more friends with the online assemblies. I think he was more relaxed because he was the only person in the room. And they did a dance-off once, I think him and another boy were the two best ones at the end so they both had to do a dance on Zoom, and this girl, one of the girls who had a broken arm, was the judge. And I thought 'she'll pick the other kid', you know, but she didn't she picked my son. It really boosted him that he'd been picked the winner by another kid. That boosted his confidence.

Parent or carer of 11- to 13-year-old, SEN support, mainstream school

Staff members also saw online assemblies as more accessible for pupils at risk of sensory overload.

Reports relating to online learning during the coronavirus pandemic were similar. While some young people found it easier to participate during lessons, others did not, and parents and carers flagged that using online platforms was particularly challenging for young people with profound and multiple learning difficulties, who could not engage in this way.

I genuinely don't think there would be any way this group of kids can be educated at home. And they just can't. These last two years, kids like my son, they've just been forgotten about or certainly been forgotten about by the government. They've just massively missed out.

Parent or carer of 11- to 13-year-old, EHCP, special school

5 . Flexibility and responsiveness to needs

Young participants identified what they felt was going well or less well in relation to their needs being met in their educational setting. Educational needs, wants and preferences varied from one young person to the next. All participant groups felt that understanding and flexibly meeting individual young people's needs were important for them to be able to thrive within their educational setting, as was involving them in decisions relating to their educational experience. The extent to which these needs were met appeared to relate to the type of provision received, either Special Educational Needs (SEN) support or education, health and care plan (EHCP), as is discussed further in the following subsections.

Educational preferences

Young participants described different favourite subjects, with those involving creativity and/or practical skills viewed favourably, such as art, drama, cooking, music, computing and physical education. These lessons were seen as fun, relaxing, and an opportunity for self-expression.

Young participants referred to a range of preferred learning styles, including tactile or practical, audio, and visual styles. For example, self-reported visual learners said that they preferred to learn from pictures, videos or diagrams, while others reported that more "hands on" techniques work best for them, such as doing practical lessons, learning outside or playing games. Young participants described disliking certain subjects, struggling to learn and feeling frustrated and confused when the approach to teaching a lesson and the workload did not align well with their learning style. This included too much reading and writing.

Maybe like do tasks around the classroom. You can stick stuff up on the walls in like English and find the missing quote or something. It'll be more fun for students to want to learn. Instead of just sat there for an hour, just looking at the board and writing down stuff, which, if I'm being honest, it doesn't really get along well with me.

Chris, aged 14 to 16 years, SEN support, mainstream school

Understanding needs and adapting accordingly

Young participants described their individual learning preferences and support needs in varying detail. They appreciated flexible staff and educational settings, with time invested in understanding and adapting to individual needs. Young participants felt when this did not happen, their learning could suffer.

I have, with ADHD, I can get easily distracted and stuff. So, I asked the teacher if I could please have a little sheet with the times-tables on, because I couldn't read it from where I was sitting, I was sitting at the front of the classroom. But you know what she said? She said 'no, the other children don't get that.' Then I got quite upset.

Frost, aged 11 to 13 years, SEN support, elective home education

Learning and classroom support

When discussing ideas to make learning more accessible for pupils, the use of fun and engaging teaching methods appeared to be an important part of accommodating different learning styles and enabling learning across subjects.

Instead of giving you word on word of random stuff you need to learn, Miss will like act it out. And she'll get pictures on the board so you can remember. Like we're doing the biomes at the moment, and I could probably name three of them. Like tropical rainforest and then Sahara is because we look at Disney films that are set in the different biomes. Sahara Desert is where the Lion King is, so we all do the Lion King. So, it just sticks in my brain.

Jess, aged 11 to 13 years, SEN support, mainstream school

Some young participants reported having additional support from teaching or learning assistants, which helped them learn at their own pace. Similarly, some described group support sessions or interventions as helpful in improving specific skills and subjects. Other forms of support mentioned by young participants included pastoral support and support from therapy animals.

We have a dog that comes into school, it listens to everybody read. It's a really nice dog as well.

Dan, aged 14 to 16 years, EHCP, special school

Having small classes, or more staff, was seen by young participants as enabling the pace of work to be better adapted to their needs.

It helps me way more because it's a smaller group, and there's usually two teachers in there, so you'll get extra help. Anyway, I just like being in there because it's small and it's not rushed. Just take your time and stuff.

Carrie, aged 14 to 16 years, SEN support, mainstream school

This was reiterated by staff and parent and carer participants, who felt a higher staff to pupil ratio was useful for providing more tailored support. However, this was described as often not possible in mainstream schools.

When describing their hypothetical ideal school, some young participants wanted different support or "extra help" and felt the support they currently receive was not sufficient or appropriate for them. When support sessions were not perceived as appropriately tailored, some were described as repetitive and "soul crushing".

A recurrent theme from young participants, parents, carers and staff was that a "one-size-fits-all" approach to support does not work when young people's needs and preferences are so varied.

Facilities and physical spaces

Young participants spoke about the value of having access to supportive physical spaces. Flexible access to "hubs" and chill-out spaces enabled pupils to take breaks when needed or access additional support. "Timeout cards" were used in some settings to enable flexible and pupil-led access to these spaces.

The timeout card, lots of people have it and then during lessons, you showed it to the teacher and you're like allowed to like, some time outside of the classroom to like calm down and stuff. So, it's really good.

Ghostly, aged 11 to 13 years, SEN support, mainstream school

Young participants spoke positively about accessible facilities on-site to support their educational experiences, including lifts, ramps, swimming pools, trampolines and gyms. However, it seemed these facilities were more often available in special schools. Young participants also noted the importance of school facilities being comfortable, including comfortable chairs and controlled temperatures.

In the swimming pool, just out back, there's a hoist. I go down into the water and can get out, and into the changing room.

Lighthouse, aged 14 to 16 years, EHCP, special school

Parents and carers of young people with sensory and physical needs noted the importance of equipment being readily and freely available to meet their child's medical needs at school, such as tube feeding and toileting. Parents, carers and staff also described how having multi-disciplinary teams, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, nurses and mental health services available within a school setting made them better equipped to provide more tailored, individual support to children. Schools offering flexible timetables were described as better able to accommodate educational and medical support needs without pupils missing work.

His care needs will take a lot of his time, like feeding, changing his nappy, putting him in the right position and changing him over from one equipment to another. He needs to be supported to get that education. Those types of equipment need to be in place. It needs to be freely available for them, which child needs it, for them to have it straight away, not to be waiting around. That puts a delay in the education.

Parent or carer of 11- to 13-year-old, EHCP, special school

Staff empathy, understanding needs and adapting practices

The quality of relationships with school staff was important to young people in describing their ideal school. They wanted to work with staff who were "nice", "respectful" and "friendly", who found a balance between being strict, encouraging and fun.

In an ideal school, teachers will be more friendly. Yeah, I would say respect you for who you are, accepts who you are, knows and understands you well. Because you can't just put me in a room with a different teacher that doesn't know me. And yeah, all the teachers that you know you can trust.

Abey, aged 14 to 16 years, EHCP, special school

Familiarity and connection between staff and pupils were also valued, with young participants explaining how good communication and positive relationships with staff can have a positive impact on their experience at school.

I think this school is managed much better than my old school. I'd say it's just the school isn't all strict and that makes it much better to communicate with teachers. You don't have to call them Mr, Miss, Mrs. You call them on a first name basis, which then makes it feel like you're all people.

Finley, aged 14 to 16 years, EHCP, special school

Young participants further highlighted examples of how staff "show they care", "understand" their individual needs and make pupils feel "comfortable" at school. This was particularly noticeable when young participants spoke about requesting help from staff. Young people felt that the onus was on them to ask for help when they did not understand something, yet some said they felt "too nervous" to put their hand up. They found it easier if teachers understood this, checking in regularly and being approachable, empathetic, and encouraging.

Because I'm very shy, I don't like to talk in front of other people. My math teacher, he knows that I don't ask for help. So, he comes up to me and he starts explaining it just so I do get to start to understand then.

Clio, aged 14 to 16 years, EHCP, mainstream school

Young participants found it challenging when teachers "cold-called" pupils, something particularly described in mainstream settings. This made them feel singled out and embarrassed, fearing judgement and bullying from other pupils if they could not answer correctly. Young participants suggested it would help if teachers told them in advance if they were planning to ask questions, giving them time to think and prepare.

If the teacher picks on me, and I don't know the answer, then there's those people like listening and waiting for you to answer and it's embarrassing if we don't know the answer.

Michaela, aged 14 to 16 years, SEN support, mainstream school

Good communication between members of staff and home was also said to promote positive relationship building and improve mutual understanding, resulting in a more positive educational experience.

Miss is my first contact if there's something not right. So, she's very helpful. I mean, whenever I have an issue, I can email her or give her a ring. Now my daughter has been told that 'if you have any issues, you know, Where's Miss? You can go and tell her your worries. So, she is going to sort out the problem straight away', I do believe she does.

Parent or carer of 14- to 16-year-old, EHCP, mainstream school

Regular communication of lesson content with parents and carers was described as crucial to enable them to help their child to stay caught up with coursework following school absences because of medical appointments or illness.

Parents and carers also praised help received from school staff with the EHCP or secondary school allocation processes and for contacting them to celebrate their child's achievements.

Understanding during changes and transitions

When discussing secondary school transitions, some young participants felt apprehensive about possible changes to their support. There were concerns as to whether staff at the new school would understand their needs, especially if they did not have an EHCP or more formalised support plan in place.

I think my main worry is the support continuing because the EHCP was denied.

Spencer, aged 14 to 16 years, SEN support, mainstream school

Opportunities to build rapport and ask staff questions were seen as important in building familiarity and confidence in moving to a new school. Young participants, parents and carers appreciated staff who made tailored arrangements for visiting and provided resources that would help aid familiarity with the new setting.

That transition was good. It was done gradually. It was one lesson, maybe half lesson filtered in, to then trying to do full days or even doing up to 1:30.

Zeiky Boy, aged 14 to 16 years, EHCP, mainstream school

Those who moved to a new school during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic discussed missing out on usual transition activities, such as leavers' assemblies and summer holiday visits. However, some described personal arrangements that individual staff made, enabling pupils to get used to the school despite the restrictions.

Because it was the height of the pandemic, the deputy head let us in. We were able to run around the school, go to the gym. And we probably did that every three weeks during the summer holidays before he started properly with all the other kids. So those sorts of things really make a huge difference to his well-being.

Parent or carer of 11- to 13-year-old, EHCP, mainstream school

The curriculum and flexibility

In discussing the curriculum across different settings, young participants, parents and carers perceived mainstream schools as offering more academic subjects linked to the national curriculum than special schools and alternative provision. This was felt by some young participants to be important for securing post-secondary opportunities. However, mainstream schools were also said to offer fewer options for practical subjects, life skills and vocational courses, which some pupils saw as more appealing and relevant to their future.

Teach kids how to pay taxes and mortgages and all that. Cause that's more useful than like Pythagoras' theory. I'm not gonna need that to pay my mortgage.

Karim, aged 11 to 13 years, EHCP, alternative provision

Regarding GCSE options, some young participants in mainstream schools felt forced to take subjects they did not like because of timetabling restrictions. Others felt unable to change their options after a course started, even if they struggled or had doubts about their selection. Having greater flexibility within the curriculum to cater for different needs and preferences was seen as important, and some parent and carers felt this was better accommodated in special schools.

Some staff in special schools also spoke about having more flexibility to focus on skills development, rather than having to follow the national curriculum.

Choice and involvement in decision-making

Young participants wanted to feel involved, or listened to, in decision-making around their education and were more negative about experiences when this did not happen.

They say one thing and I say, 'Uhm, why don't we do this? Because it would make my writing better'. But they refer to theirs cuz they think it's better than mine.

Max, aged 11 to 13 years, SEN support, mainstream school

Where pupils reported having choice, they felt that school was more versatile and relaxed.

Yes, giving students an opportunity; they can take it, or they can leave it. Just try not to force it on them, like pop it there next to them and they'll do it if they need to do it.

Zeiky Boy, aged 14 to 16 years, EHCP, mainstream school

All participant groups discussed ways in which pupils can be involved in decisions about their support. This included annual review meetings for those with EHCPs, and "Pupil Passport" or "My Plan" meetings for pupils receiving SEN support (see [Section 8: Glossary](#)). These meetings received mixed reviews from young participants, with some saying they found them helpful to reflect on progress and express their feelings. Others felt that they were still not heard by those making decisions about their education, support and subject options.

You haven't really got the rights to say 'yes' or 'no'. Like, no, you don't really want to do some of your GCSEs like your Maths, English and Sciences. And that's what I want. That's what I want to change for young students like us.

Adele, aged 14 to 16, EHCP, mainstream school

Young participants also discussed the importance of choice and flexibility in relation to school uniforms. Some felt there was too much regulation of personal appearance, such as rules about acceptable haircuts, coats and hats, which could restrict choice, comfort and create conflict between pupils and staff. Some young people felt that being able to choose their uniform would help them to learn better. Others, particularly those attending special schools, spoke positively about having uniform flexibility, perceived as enabling pupils to "learn better".

One thing that's really good is that you're able to adjust your uniform so you feel comfortable. So, if you don't feel comfortable wearing uniform, wear something but at least it needs to have certain colour restrictions.

Spinosaurus, aged 11 to 13 years, EHCP, special school

Young participants in elective home education spoke about this setting as offering more choice and flexibility around their education to suit their preferences. This included subjects they choose to study, what they wear and extracurricular activities they engage in. They described greater flexibility over where, when and how they learn, including being able to structure timetables around when they concentrate best and taking fewer GCSEs at a time. Parents and carers of those in elective home education described moving from a school setting in search of this greater flexibility and responsiveness to needs, and for many it was seen as the "only option left". It was noted that the decision to home-educate was not taken lightly, as it required significant time and resources from the family.

The secondary school were actually quite good, but they weren't able to be flexible enough. For example, in year nine, we wanted to reduce the number of subjects he was doing because he was finding it a bit overwhelming. We just thought, 'Why are we doing this? why are we trying to force him through the sausage machine at a certain pace, when actually that doesn't meet his needs?' So, what we can do is do two or three GCSEs at the right time, and then maybe a couple more the following year, we don't have to fit to the completely rigid timescale. So that realisation made us go, actually, we'll just keep him out. We won't send him back in September, and we didn't.

Parent or carer of 14- to 16-year-old, EHCP, elective home education

Experiences with EHCPs and SEN support

There was a sense among participants, particularly parents and carers, that having an EHCP ensured prioritisation of support and funding compared with those only receiving SEN support. Several young participants without EHCPs recalled being told they would receive support which never materialised, such as extra time in exams or one-to-one support in lessons. Parents and carers also noted that recommendations in diagnostic reports, "Pupil Passports" or "My Plans" were not always implemented.

I'm supposed to have extra time for tests, but I don't always. Our last assessment was one in religious studies, and I was supposed to have extra time, but they didn't give me it.

Stitch, aged 14 to 16 years, SEN support, mainstream school

Participants felt that this lack of support was linked to a poor understanding of pupils' needs, lack of communication from and within schools and lack of resource to implement recommendations. In some cases, those receiving SEN support described themselves as doing "OK" or "muddling through", rather than being fully supported to reach their potential and this view was shared by parents and carers.

Where staff noted funding and resources as barriers to adequate support, they also noted that pupils with EHCPs were often prioritised over pupils with SEN support.

The children with just SEND and no actual EHCP, if there's no teaching assistants available, then they're the first ones to lose that support. Priority is always given to the EHCP students.

Well-being officer, mainstream school

6 . SEND systems and processes

Parents, carers and staff shared their views and experiences of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) systems and processes and made suggestions for improvements. Although not necessarily part of young people's direct experiences, some young participants also perceived the system as complex.

Navigating access to support

Early identification of SEND, including through formal diagnosis and obtaining a formalised support plan, were seen as important for accessing the right support at the right time.

That is the foundation to everything that he's achieving now. He wouldn't be achieving that now if he hadn't had the support that he did back in the early years.

Parent or carer of 14- to 16-year-old, education, health and care plan (EHCP), mainstream school

However, these did not always ensure young people received the support they needed. Furthermore, the process for obtaining a diagnosis and access to SEND support was described as complex, lengthy and variable across local authorities, particularly in relation to obtaining an EHCP.

Now, an EHCP referral, takes about 56 weeks. It's a ridiculous amount of time for parents to have to wait, and children aren't getting the support that they need. Although the teachers may be able to see that they need the teaching assistant or the extra support or something, until they get the funding for it, they can't physically afford to give them the extra work they need. And they're just falling further and further behind. We have students coming to us in year 10 now with a reading age of five to six years with SEND needs, and they're still not diagnosed. So, we can put interventions in place, which the teaching assistants do have a morning while registration is going on. But then when lessons start, the teaching assistants are already allocated to students with EHCPs.

Teacher, mainstream school

Staff support was described by parents and carers as integral for successfully navigating the EHCP process. Parents and carers also described extensive efforts to ensure their child's needs were recognised, and actively advocating for their child to receive the appropriate diagnosis or EHCP. In some cases, parents and carers described developing specialist skills or knowledge to navigate the system and saw this as essential to securing the right support for their child. This required time, resources and energy, which not all parents and carers could manage.

The process of getting the EHCP was awful, interminable, adversarial, hideous, time consuming, emotionally exhausting. But our local authority is particularly bad, 'the answer's no, now, what's the question?' They've noticed they've had a significant increase in requests, so they are trying to push back as much as they can and just say, 'oh, no, you don't need one', you have to fight tooth and claw. So, we kind of circumvented the system. Rather than rely on the local authority to go and get reports from [young person]'s paediatrician. We did it all ourselves because we didn't trust [the] local authorities to do it. So, we kind of made it difficult for [them] to say no, by just presenting them with this massive package of data

Parent or carer of 14- to 16-year-old, EHCP, elective home education

Staff perceived that, despite increased demand for Special Educational Needs (SEN) support, funding and resource challenges meant that this was often deprioritised. In their view, this led to reduced access to EHCPs for some, and meant staff were unable to meaningfully engage in annual EHCP reviews for others, resulting in provision which was not necessarily appropriately tailored to young people's needs.

I'll be honest with you; I used to just copy and paste on most of the EHCP responses that I'm given. Because quite often, there's not really much thought into the time when they're asking us for feedback. And for me in particular, I'm a head of department. And a lot of the time when I'm getting asked for updates, it's just at really difficult times of the year.

Teacher, mainstream school

Staff described difficulties relating to the use of different EHCP formats by different local authorities, and poor quality of information provided. Additionally, particularly for pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties, the EHCP process was seen as too inflexible to accommodate some young people's needs. The use of attainment targets was viewed by some as inappropriate. Parents and carers emphasised the need to focus on goals relevant to the individual, such as the degree of choice and control young people have over their environment and enrichment, rather than educational attainment.

For this cohort of kids, school isn't just about meeting targets, it's about quality of life and experiences. You want to kind of focus on the other things that you get out of in school, the social contact, the friends, the experiences and things like that. You go into the education and healthcare plan meetings, and it's kind of like, 'well, we need to set a target around this'. And it's like, that's not really relevant to my child. And then it's like, 'but we need one'.

Parent or carer of 11- to 13-year-old, EHCP, special school

"Proving" SEND

Parents and carers described experiences of justifying and proving the need for support with SEND. Where children have more visible impairments, this was perceived as aiding access to an EHCP and other support.

Some parents and carers described having their request for an EHCP refused. This was linked to the need to prove eligibility, and not feeling heard or believed, as well as some appearing to fall outside of the system, such as parents and carers educating their child at home.

We had two refusals during the whole process, because the information that we were sharing with the local authority was not as comprehensive as it was supposed to be. Like, she's 11 and she can't write her name properly. You know, it's very difficult and they don't always listen to what parents have got to say and what the child's got to say at all. A lot of it is what the professionals have got to say, and they forget that parents are the professionals of their child.

Parent or carer of 11- to 13-year-old, EHCP, special school

Demonstrating eligibility for a diagnosis or for additional support was said by parents and carers to be based upon children's educational attainment rather than other markers, such as poor mental health or absenteeism. Where pupils' attainment was not deemed to be sufficiently behind their classmates, parents and carers felt their child was considered not to have sufficient needs for support, despite sometimes having an official diagnosis. Parents and carers shared their frustrations with this process, with accounts reflecting support needs extending beyond educational attainment outcomes.

He doesn't have an educational health care plan, although we've been pushing that, myself and the school, for quite a while. I know that once you have that plan, it does open more provision in terms of extra funding, but we were always told in primary school that he wasn't severe enough. One of the criteria was that he had to be two years below in certain subjects, which he wasn't. I mean, he's not top of the classes, you know, he does struggle education-wise, but he's not as far behind as what they said that he should be to get that provision.

Parent or carer of 11- to 13-year-old, SEN support, mainstream school

Diagnostic experiences beyond the EHCP

Participants described working with different agencies and services to access formal diagnoses and additional forms of support. Mental health services for children and young people were mentioned as being particularly complex and lengthy to navigate, with extensive waiting lists described.

The waiting lists with CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services] and the NHS [National Health Service] in general are ridiculously long. So, in terms of the school helping, they've been really good, but the process itself is extremely long and stressful.

Parent or carer of 14- to 16-year-old, SEN support, mainstream school

Some parents and carers found workarounds to these systemic challenges, such as paying for assessments to obtain a diagnosis that could support the case for adaptations and provisions. Again, parents and carers noted that not all will have the time or resources to do this, leading to further inequalities for those without.

Recently, because I was going to high school, I went to go get a test, which was really expensive for my parents. And it did say that I did have dyslexia. The reason why we did that is so hopefully I could get extra time in tests so I could do better.

Connie, aged 11 to 13 years, SEN support, mainstream school

School allocation and options

For parents and carers, accessing a school that was a good fit for their child's needs was seen as crucial to helping them thrive. Obtaining an EHCP was often seen as necessary for access to the most appropriate school, with some parents and carers experiencing difficulties in accessing a school suitable for their child's needs.

Additionally, some described how local authorities made school allocations contrary to the preferences and needs identified by young people, parents and carers and/or school staff. For example, some had been allocated a school in their catchment area or linked to their child's primary school, with few appropriate options nearby, particularly in rural areas.

The issues came when we were trying to get him into the right school. And because the local authority was very much 'this is the school he's going to', even though it was blatantly not appropriate, and they couldn't give the level of support that was required. It was a case of 'that's where people in our area go, he's got to go there.' And you weren't really encouraged to look. There wasn't a choice, there wasn't. They didn't place out of area, which is if the needs need to be met, regardless of where the school is. So that was the biggest challenge, trying to get sort of people who are kind of office based, and not necessarily really well versed in the profound nature of my son's needs to understand how highly supported he needed to be.

Parent or carer of 11- to 13-year-old, EHCP, special school

For those who were unhappy with the school allocation, appealing the decision was said to be stressful and draining for young people and their families. Some had to rely on support from charities, other parents and carers and developing knowledge of the system to try to "fight" school allocation decisions.

But I would say in terms of the appeal process, I think it can be quite upsetting for both, because it's quite an uncertain time. I found it quite stressful, draining, you know. The last appeal meeting, I had to sit in front of a board of people, you know, pleading really, that this is the best place for him. So even now, looking back, that was, you know, quite upsetting.

Parent or carer of 11- to 13-year-old, SEN support, mainstream school

Towards systemic solutions

Parent, carer and staff participants suggested systemic changes they felt may enable greater flexibility and more effective support to meet diverse needs.

Participants felt that the EHCP process would benefit from greater accountability to ensure local authorities follow guidelines, and improved inter-agency communication.

I'd like someone to hold local authorities to account for doing the job properly, that would be cool. It doesn't really happen at the moment, local authorities just kind of decide on their own. Local authorities ask for things from home educators that aren't lawful, and no one pulls them up on it. They break the deadlines in terms of assessing for and issuing EHCPs after annual reviews. And they don't just break them by 'Oh, sorry, it was a day late'. They break them by weeks and months, and no one pulls them up on it. And individual parents can't because we are utterly powerless.

Parent or carer of 14- to 16-year-old, EHCP, elective home education

Staff suggested that the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) could set more appropriate criteria and standards of practice for SEND provision to ensure greater consistency and compliance. Mainstream school staff also suggested that the SEND department and pupils with SEND should be included in Ofsted school inspections, and that criteria to achieve a "good" or "outstanding" assessment must include strategies for SEND provision.

Ofsted could play a bigger role, to be honest. Because if they set a criteria that you need to meet this for these kinds of students, it shows the evidence, and of course the schools will have to comply to that. So, Ofsted could fix the problem easily.

Teacher, mainstream school

Staff participants felt it important to have access to regular specialist training relevant to their work, such as communicating using signs and symbols. They described limited availability and funding for training and limited time to complete it. Some suggested mandatory training for all staff and improving networks across SEND provisions to facilitate knowledge sharing and skills development.

But I think with mainstream, it would be good to maybe have some consistency around some training that is always offered to potentially mainstream schools, and maybe special schools as well. But it's consistent, something that is offered as mandatory for all staff to complete.

Intervener, multiple educational settings

Parent, carer and staff participants felt additional staff could ease the burden on a stretched workforce, while noting the lack of resource to realise this ambition. Challenges with staff retention and burnout were also described. Some staff suggested that higher salaries for teaching assistants and SEND support staff could boost recruitment and morale, which they felt would improve the services provided to children and young people.

I do feel like the teaching assistant salaries are really low. And they're not necessarily indicative of the specialisms that they provide.

Teacher, mainstream school

Concluding statement

This research has provided a snapshot of the educational experiences of young people with SEND, and highlighted what participants found helpful and positive within current provision, as well their own suggestions for improvements. Young people with SEND have a diverse range of individual educational experiences, needs and preferences. Understanding and flexibly accommodating young people's needs and preferences within their educational setting could optimise their learning and overall well-being.

7 . Data

[Educational experiences of young people with special educational needs and disabilities in England: Sample information](#)

Dataset | Released 7 November 2022

Sample information for qualitative research on the educational experiences of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities in England.

8 . Glossary

Participants

In this research, we use the terms young participants to refer to the 11- to-16-year-olds with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) who took part in the research.

We use the term "parents and/or carers" to refer to participants who are aged 18 years and over and provide care for an 11- to 16-year-old who has been identified as having SEND. We use the term "staff" to refer to participants who work with young people with SEND aged 11 to 16 years in some educational capacity in their day-to-day employment.

Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

According to the Department for Education's (DfE's) [2015 SEND Code of Practice \(PDF, 3.2MB\)](#), SEND refers to a child or young person who has a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for them. The code of practice outlines four broad areas of need which are:

- communication and interaction
- cognition and learning
- social, emotional and mental health difficulties
- sensory and/or physical needs

We aimed to speak with young people identified across the broad areas of need to ensure we were speaking to participants with a wide range of views and experiences. In practice, many young participants had been identified as having multiple areas of need.

Special educational needs (SEN) support

If a child or young person has been identified as having SEND, SEN support should provide reasonable adjustments relating to their broad area(s) of need. Schools are expected to provide the child or young person with support through the SEN support system outlined in [the SEND Code of Practice](#), and to put in place reasonable adjustments and take positive steps to ensure pupils can fully participate in the education provided.

Pupil Passport or My Plan

Some local authorities and schools use the terms Pupil Passport, My Plan or Pupil Profile to identify and share vital information about pupils and their needs where an education, health and care plan (EHCP) is not in place. Their purpose is to provide a summary of reasonable adjustments for pupils receiving SEN support that should be reviewed together with young people.

Education, health and care plan (EHCP)

Where the needs of children and young people with SEND cannot be met by SEN support, they may require an education, health and care plan (EHCP), which will be decided by the local authority. The purpose of the EHCP is to identify educational, health and social needs and set out the additional support to meet those needs.

Educational setting

In this research, we refer to education setting as the location where young people receive their education. This includes mainstream schools, special schools, alternative provision, residential schools and those in elective home education.

9 . Methodology

From February to May 2022, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) conducted 62 in-depth interviews with 11- to 16-year-olds with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and with 64 parents and carers, as well as focus groups with 23 members of staff across England with the support of the National Association for Special Educational Needs (nasen). nasen is an independent charity that exists to connect and support those working with children and young people with SEND.

Interviews with parents and carers took place on the telephone and lasted approximately 30 minutes. Interviews with young participants lasted approximately 60 minutes and mostly took place in schools, with some interviews held online through Microsoft Teams. Staff took part in one of four online focus groups lasting 90 minutes.

Approach to sampling and recruitment

Staff participants were recruited by a professional independent recruitment agency and were purposively selected to ensure participants in a range of roles, educational settings and regions were included. Gatekeepers included 20 schools and three parent and carer networks across England. Gatekeepers were approached to support with the recruitment of young people with SEND and their parents and carers.

A maximum variation purposive sampling approach was used to include a wide range of young people and parent and carer perspectives and experiences relating to education. The sampling criteria used for the selection of young people in this research included the following:

- educational settings
- areas of SEND
- sex
- support provisions (EHCP or SEN support)
- age ranges (11 to 13 years and 14 to 16 years)

This approach was used to enable exploration of how different characteristics and circumstances may shape the educational experiences of young people. Further details of the planned and achieved samples can be found in our [accompanying dataset](#).

Design and materials

We consulted a steering group of expert academics, disability and children's civil society organisations and parents and carers to develop the research design and materials. Methods and materials for young participant interviews were designed by nasen with feedback from a Youth Expert Panel of 13 young people with SEND aged 11 to 16 years attending a range of educational settings.

A flexible approach to data collection was taken to suit the needs of individual young people, using a toolbox of creative methods, including drawings, timelines and Lego play. This enabled young people to freely discuss what was most important to them, including what is going well, areas for improvement and suggestions for their ideal school.

An ongoing assent process was followed, which included reaffirming young people were happy to participate and using "traffic light" cards, which could be presented freely if young participants wanted to pause or terminate the interview. At the end of the interviews, all young participants were asked to indicate which alternative name, or pseudonym they would like to represent them, which have been used throughout the bulletin.

Approach to analysis

Interviews and focus groups were audio recorded with participant and parent or carer consent and then transcribed verbatim. Where participants did not want to be recorded, detailed notes were taken. Transcripts were analysed thematically using coding to identify themes, patterns and concepts within participants' accounts. Initial interview transcripts were coded using open, descriptive coding, with initial codes being organised into a coding framework. Young participant, parent, carer, and staff transcripts were initially coded separately, then the coding was combined under the same thematic framework. This formed the basis of continued analysis in NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software, with codes being further developed and adapted as analysis developed. Findings were constantly compared within and between cases to test and explore initial themes, and differences were actively sought.

10 . Strengths and limitations

The main strengths of this research are:

- qualitative research design enabled a more detailed understanding of how young people experience their education, what is important to them and what they feel could be improved to help them in future
- including parents, carers and staff in the research ensured a better understanding of the broader context within which young people's views are situated
- parents, carers and staff could also provide views and experiences of processes that they were involved in that were not necessarily part of young people's direct experiences but had a bearing on their education
- interview approaches were tailored by offering the use of creative methods, and fidget or stimulatory tools, to better meet young people's preferences, and to try to maximise accessibility, rapport-building and participant comfort during interviews in this one-encounter approach
- the recruitment and sampling strategy achieved a spread of participants from local authorities across England, and from different types of educational setting, which enabled a breadth of participant experiences and accounts
- support from the Youth Expert Panel on the design of the research materials and questions, and from the steering group throughout, ensured appropriacy and relevance, maximising the potential benefit and minimising potential risk of harm

The main limitations of this research are:

- there were limited opportunities for some young people with sensory and/or physical disabilities to engage in some of the creative methods, such as drawing or building Lego
- while we actively sought to include children and young people with a wide range of support needs, we encountered challenges of involving those with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD) and those who are minimally verbal in this one-encounter, time-limited approach; we recognise that more work needs to be done to ensure greater accessibility of research to all
- although the recruitment approach achieved the desired sample, as with a lot of research with children and young people, it was heavily reliant on gatekeepers such as schools and other networks to identify and recruit eligible participants, which will unintentionally have excluded some from participating
- generalisability of the research findings are limited to the concepts presented by participants, which may be specific to contexts or settings, and may change over time

11 . Acknowledgements

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12 . Related links

[Disabled people's experiences with activities, goods and services. UK: February to March 2022](#)

Bulletin | Released 18 July 2022

Qualitative research exploring disabled people's experiences with private sector activities, goods and services across the UK. In-depth interviews were conducted with disabled people aged 18 years and over, with a range of characteristics. Building upon recommendations from the Inclusive Data Taskforce, this research aimed to address a knowledge gap and inform policy and practice.

[Children's views on well-being and what makes a happy life. UK: 2020](#)

Article | Released 2 October 2020

A qualitative analysis of children's perspectives on their well-being and what makes a happy life for a child using UK wide focus groups.

[Young people's well-being in the UK: 2020](#)

Bulletin | Released 2 October 2020

This headline release reflects the circumstances, views and well-being of young people aged 16 to 24 years in the UK prior to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

[Children's and young people's experiences of loneliness: 2018](#)

Article | Released 5 December 2018

Analysis of children's and young people's views, experiences and suggestions to overcome loneliness, using in-depth interviews, the Community Life Survey 2016 to 2017 and Good Childhood Index Survey, 2018.

[Children's well-being and social relationships. UK: 2018](#)

Article | Released 26 March 2018

How children aged 0 to 15 years in the UK are coping in a range of areas that matter to their quality of life, reflecting the circumstances of their lives and their own perspectives.

13 . Cite this statistical bulletin section

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