

Experiences of children with SEND: findings from a nationally representative survey

Annex to Beyond the Labels: A SEND system
which works for every child, every time

November 2022

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Executive summary	4
Health and wellbeing	4
School and education	4
Analysis and results.....	6
Health and wellbeing	6
Loneliness.....	7
Factors affecting wellbeing.....	8
Access to support and unmet need.....	10
Sources of worry.....	11
Education.....	12
School confidence & impact of COVID.....	12
Worries about school	14
Impact of COVID-19 on education	15
Methods.....	17

Introduction

This report presents key findings from a nationally representative survey of 3,019 children in England aged 8-17 commissioned by the Children's Commissioner for England. Data was collected in March 2021 and is weighted to be nationally representative by age, gender, SEND status, primary parent employment status and region.

March 2021 signalled change for schools and education providers as restrictions began to relax after the third national UK lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic. On March 8th 2021, primary and secondary schools reopened and recreation was allowed in outdoor public spaces between two people, but people were encouraged to stay at home where possible. On March 29th 2021, outdoor sports facilities also reopened and the 'Stay at home' order ended but people were encouraged to 'stay local'¹.

When referring to special schools this includes specialist, non-mainstream SEND schools. All percentages reported below exclude children answering don't know/don't want to say. All significance testing is reported at the 95% confidence level, therefore there is a 5% chance that a difference occurs by chance. For more information on methods and sample sizes please see the Methods section.

Executive summary

Health and wellbeing

More than 90% of all children thought that having good mental health would be important for their future happiness. However, only 75% of children with SEND were confident that they would have good mental health in 10 years' time, compared to 89% of children without SEND.

Nearly 40% of children with SEND had an overall wellbeing rating indicating possible depression, twice as many as those without SEND.

52% of children without SEND said that they felt lonely at least some of the time compared to 68% of children with SEND. Children with SEND aged 16-17 were the most likely to feel lonely often or some of the time (45%), higher than children aged 8-11 (33%) and 12-15 with SEND (38%).

Children with SEND were more likely to be affected by not knowing how to look after their mental health and not having someone to talk to when they felt worried or stressed (59% and 55% respectively) than children without SEND, only 38% of whom were affected by either of these things.

The majority of children (90% of children with SEND, 94% of non-SEND children) felt that they could talk to their parents or friends if they felt worried or stressed, regardless of SEND status. However, children with SEND in mainstream school had a higher level of unmet need for formal support, than non-SEND children.

School and education

75% of children with SEND were confident that they would have achieved the education they want in 10 years' time, seven percentage points less than children without SEND.

Children with SEND were more likely to be worried or stressed about not being able to go to school than children without SEND (65% compared to 58%), and children with SEND in special schools (71%)

were slightly more likely to be worried or stressed about not being able to go to school than those in mainstream education (64%).

Children with SEND were more likely to be worried or stressed due to not having support in school or when learning from home (66%) compared to 48% of children without SEND.

60% of children with SEND felt that their progress in school was worse than it was before the pandemic, ten percentage points more than children without SEND.

67% of children with SEND agreed with the statement 'I am worried that I will struggle more with my schoolwork this year' compared to only 44% of children without SEND.

67% of children with SEND agreed that they felt 'safe at school' compared to 81% of children without SEND.

Analysis and results

Health and wellbeing

Children were asked 'How important do you think the things below will be for your happiness and wellbeing in the future?' and were given a range of statements to assess. They were then asked how confident they were that the same statements would be true for them in 10 years' time.

Ninety five percent of non-SEND children overall said that they thought 'having good mental health' would be important for their future happiness and wellbeing. By comparison, 92% of children with SEND thought that having good mental health would be important for their future happiness. Children with SEND in mainstream provision were slightly more likely to agree that having good mental health was important than children in specialist provision (95% compared to 88%).

Eighty nine percent of non-SEND children were confident that they would be able to look after their mental health in 10 years' time, compared to 75% of children with SEND. Children with SEND in mainstream provision were slightly more likely to feel confident about this, compared to children with SEND in specialist provision (74% compared to 71%).

Emotional wellbeing assessed using the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale

Children over the age of 13 in the survey were asked the short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS), a standardised tool for assessing overall levels of emotional wellbeing². 1,745 children were aged between 13 and 17 in the survey and answered the SWEMWBS scale.

The SWEMWBS scores have been grouped into lowest, low, average, and high according to the recommended cut points identified by Warwick Medical School via correlation testing with clinical diagnosis tools such as the 'General Health Questionnaire'. Lowest and low wellbeing in this case indicates possible depression³.

The distribution of wellbeing is markedly different between SEND and non-SEND children, where 37% of children with SEND had SWEMWBS scores indicating possible depression (lowest or low wellbeing)

compared to only 7% of non-SEND children. Conversely, non-SEND children were much more likely to have high wellbeing scores (27%) compared to only 13% of children with SEND (Table 1).

Table 1 - Distribution of emotional wellbeing ratings, SEND/Non-SEND.

Wellbeing rating	SEND	Non- SEND
Lowest wellbeing	20%	7%
Low wellbeing	17%	11%
Average wellbeing	50%	56%
High wellbeing	13%	27%

*split by school type not possible due to low cell counts meaning estimates would be unreliable.

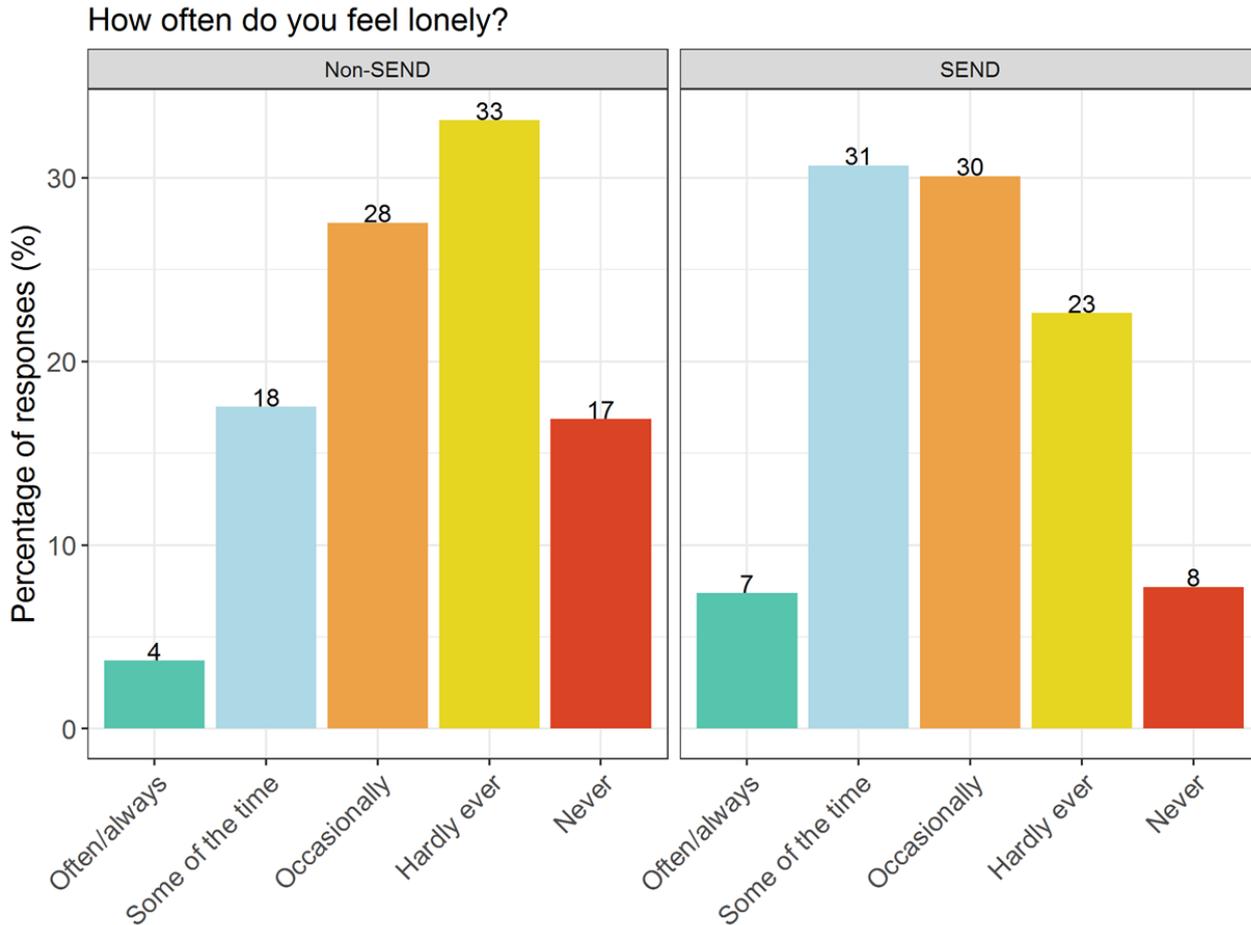
Loneliness

Children were then asked; 'how often do you feel lonely', taken from the ONS Community Life Survey (2016-17) and Good Childhood Index Survey (2018)⁴.

Overall, children with SEND were more likely to experience loneliness than non-SEND children. Half of children (52%) without SEND said that they felt lonely 'never' or 'hardly ever' compared to only 31% of children with SEND. Thirty one percent of children with SEND said that they felt lonely 'some of the time' compared to 18% of non-SEND children (Figure 1).

Children with SEND aged 16-17 were the most likely to be lonely often or some of the time (45%) compared to those aged 8-11 (33%) or 12-15 (38%). However, children aged 12-15 were slightly less likely to feel lonely never or hardly ever (25%) compared to 37% of children aged 8-11 and 28% of those aged 16-17.

Figure 1 - Percentage of responses that selected each loneliness category (from 'Often/always' to 'Never') by SEND status.



Factors affecting wellbeing

Children were given the following 10 statements which could be negatively impacting their life and asked to assess how often they were affected by each one from 'this doesn't affect me at all' to 'this affects me all of the time':

- Not having enough food or money
- Not knowing how to look after your mental health and wellbeing
- Not having good friends

- Not having someone to talk to when you feel worried or stressed
- Not having somewhere to go to play outside
- Not having a safe and comfortable home to live in
- Not being able to go to school
- Not being able to take part in work experience or career support, or having a job
- Not being healthy
- Not having support in school or when learning from home to help me do the best I can

Children with SEND were statistically significantly more likely to be affected by not knowing how to look after their mental health, compared to non-SEND children (59% of children with SEND vs. 38% of non-SEND children). For children with SEND, 68% of children in mainstream education were affected by this compared to only 58% of children in special schools.

When asked to think about not having someone to talk to when they felt worried or stressed, 59% of children with SEND in special provision said they would be affected by this compared to 55% in mainstream provision.

Table 2. Rates of what children think affects them and worries them, regarding wellbeing, by SEND status and place of education.

	Not knowing how to look after my mental health		Not having someone to talk to when I feel worried	
	% Affects them	% Doesn't affect them	% Affects them	% Doesn't affect them
All children with SEND	59%	29%	55%	38%
Children with SEND in mainstream education	58%	29%	55%	40%
Children with SEND in special schools	68%	25%	59%	33%
All non-SEND children	38%	51%	38%	57%

Table 3. Distribution of the number of statements children said they were affected by some or all of the time, by SEND status and school type.

	Number of statements children said they were affected by, % of children				
	0	1-3	4-6	7-9	10
All children with SEND	4%	23%	37%	27%	8%
Children with SEND in mainstream education	4%	28%	42%	22%	7%
Children with SEND in specialist education	3%	16%	29%	38%	13%
All non-SEND children	13%	40%	31%	13%	3%

Children with SEND were slightly less likely to be unaffected by any of the given statements than children without SEND (4% vs 13%). Children with SEND in mainstream education were affected by fewer of the statements overall than children in specialist provision, 42% of children in mainstream were affected by 4-6 statements, compared to 29% in special schools. Thirty eight percent of children in special schools were affected by 7-9 statements compared to only 22% of children in mainstream.

Access to support and unmet need

Children were given a list of possible sources for support and asked who they would like to be able to talk to, even if they weren't able to talk to them at the time of the survey.

The results show that for all children, their preferred sources of support were parents, friends and siblings. The majority who said they would like to talk to that person felt that they would be able to talk to them if they needed to. Children with SEND in mainstream education were the most likely to select a teacher as someone that they would like to talk to (56%) but were the least likely to feel they would be able to talk to a teacher if they needed to (55%). Fewer than 20% of children said that they would like to talk to a counsellor at school, therapist or youth worker. However, for the 17% of children with SEND in mainstream school who would like to talk to a counsellor in school, only 45% of them could talk to an in-school counsellor if they needed to, compared to 55% of non-SEND children.

Table 4 – Who children would like to talk to and who they felt they could talk to if they needed to, by SEND status and school type.

Source of support	Would like to talk to (% of all children)			Can talk to if needed (% of children who selected this option as someone they would like to talk to)		
	SEND mainstream (%)	SEND special (%)	Non-SEND (%)	SEND mainstream (%)	SEND special (%)	Non-SEND (%)
Parents	75%	63%	82%	90%	89%	94%
Friends	44%	27%	53%	70%	64%	71%
Siblings	33%	28%	27%	60%	66%	65%
Teacher	46%	37%	40%	55%	67%	64%
Counsellor at school	17%	17%	12%	45%	56%	55%
Therapist	9%	13%	4%	33%	57%	44%
Youth worker	4%	5%	2%	**	**	41%
Social worker	5%	10%	2%	61%	**	25%

** percentages have not been provided where they have been based on very small counts (<5)

Sources of worry

Children were asked to tell us in their own words what they were worried about for the coming year. The findings are presented by the most mentioned topics in the responses; the COVID-19 pandemic, education, health, family and friendships. Other topics included activities, money, community, job opportunities, safety, support and the environment.

The most mentioned source of worry was the COVID-19 pandemic, mentioned by 40% of children with SEND. In their responses, children mentioned terms such as 'covid', 'lockdown', 'virus' or 'pandemic'. Many of the children voiced fears of their family members catching coronavirus, catching it themselves or giving it to someone else:

'Catching covid and giving it to someone.' - Girl, 13, Mainstream school

'Catching the virus or my mum getting sick. That I will fall behind with my work' - Boy, 15, Special school

Worries about the COVID-19 pandemic often linked to worries about school or education, which was the second most mentioned worry. Twenty two percent of children mentioned education, for example:

'Another lockdown and not finishing the school year. Also, some of my class mates left the school - I don't want any more to leave.' - Girl, 8, Mainstream school

'Not getting good grade to get into college' - Boy, 15, Special school

Health (not related to the COVID-19 pandemic) was mentioned by 36 children, including any words or terms such as 'mental health', 'anxiety', 'weight' or 'sick', and including any reference to their own health or the people around them.

'I'm scared my mum will get more poorly' - Boy, 16, Special school

Family was mentioned by 7% of children with SEND, and often overlapped with mentions of health and the COVID-19 pandemic as can be seen in the previous quotes. Likewise, responses with words relating to friendship often also related to health and loneliness.

'I'm a bit worried about how my friends are feeling' – Girl, 13, Mainstream school

'Not having friends and putting on weight.' - Girl, 12, Mainstream school

Education

School confidence & impact of COVID

Children were asked 'How important do you think the things below will be for your happiness and wellbeing in the future?' They were given a range of statements across health, education and wellbeing, including 'having a good job and be able to live comfortably', 'achieving the education I want' and 'being healthy and active'.

Table 5. Rates of what children think is most important for their future wellbeing by SEND status and place of education.

	Achieving the education I want		Learning useful skills to help me live a good life	
	% Important	% Not important	% Important	% Not important
All children with SEND	86%	12%	90%	8%
Children with SEND in mainstream education	89%	10%	94%	5%
Children with SEND in special schools	83%	15%	84%	13%
All non-SEND children	94%	5%	96%	3%

The vast majority (86%) of all children with SEND said that ‘achieving the education I want’ would be important for their happiness and wellbeing in the future, however, this number was still significantly less than the proportion of children without SEND (94%).

Similarly, 90% of children with SEND thought that ‘learning useful skills to help me live a good life’ would be important for their future, only slightly lower than the 96% of non-SEND children who said this would be important. Children were then asked, ‘In 10 years’ time, how confident are you that you that the below statements will be true for you?’ The statements provided were the same list as in the question above.

Table 6. Rates of children’s confidence about their future education by SEND status and place of education.

	I will have the education that I want		I will have learned useful skills to help me live a good life	
	% Confident	% Not confident	% Confident	% Not confident
All children with SEND	75%	24%	83%	16%
Children with SEND in mainstream education	75%	24%	84%	15%
Children with SEND in special schools	72%	28%	83%	17%

All non-SEND children	88%	11%	90%	9%
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In response to the statement, 'I will have achieved the education that I want', 75% of children with SEND were confident that they would have achieved this, compared 88% of children without SEND who were confident. There was no significant difference in confidence between children with SEND and children without SEND, or children with SEND in mainstream and special schools.

Overall, all children were more confident that they would 'learn useful skills to help them live a good life in the next decade' than their confidence in achieving the education they want. Eighty three percent of children with SEND were confident that they would have learned useful skills to help them live a good life in the next decade, similar to the percentage of children without SEND that were confident they would learn useful skills (90%).

Worries about school

Children were asked about worries regarding their school life: 'Sometimes things make us feel worried or stressed or can make us sad. Below are some things that might be affecting you negatively at the moment.' The statements they were then shown included 'not having enough food or money', 'not having good friends' and 'not having someone to talk to' and they were asked to rate each statement from 'this affects me all of the time' through to 'this affects me none of the time'.

Table 7. Rates of what children think affects them and worries them, regarding school and education, by SEND status and place of education.

	Not being able to go to school		Not having support in school or when learning from home to help me do the best I can	
	% Affects them	% Doesn't affect them	% Affects them	% Doesn't affect them
All children with SEND	65%	32%	66%	29%
Children with SEND in mainstream education	64%	34%	66%	29%
Children with SEND in special schools	71%	27%	67%	28%

All non-SEND children	58%	38%	48%	48%
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Children with SEND were more likely to be worried or stressed about not being able to go to school than children without SEND (65% compared to 58%). Children with SEND in special schools (71%) were slightly more likely to be worried or stressed than those in mainstream education (64%).

Similarly, children with SEND were more likely to be worried or stressed due to not having support in school or when learning from home, 66% were affected by this compared to 48% of children without SEND. There was no significant difference in the likelihood of SEND children reporting stress or worry between special (67%) and mainstream schools (66%).

Impact of COVID-19 on education

Children were asked 'How much do you think Coronavirus has changed these aspects of your life since last year?' for a range of statements, including 'my progress in school'. Responses were on a scale from 'this is much worse now' to 'this is much better now'.

Children with SEND were as likely as children without SEND to feel that their progress at school was better now since the start of the pandemic (17% of children with SEND, 16% of non-SEND). However, 60% of children with SEND felt that their progress in school was worse than it was before the pandemic, 10 percentage points more than children without SEND (50%).

Children who had returned to school since 8th March 2021 (n = 2,691) were then asked how much they agreed or disagreed with a set of statements about going back to school.

Overall, the majority of children, both with and without SEND agreed that they were excited to be back at school (71% and 76% respectively).

Across all statements children with SEND were slightly less likely to agree with positive statements than children without SEND and were more likely to agree with negative statements.

For example, 67% of children with SEND agreed with the statement 'I am worried that I will struggle more with my schoolwork this year' compared to only 44% of children without SEND. Similarly, only 67% of children with SEND agreed that they felt safe at school compared to 81% of children without SEND. However, for both questions the difference was not significantly significant.

Statement	Children with SEND		Children with SEND in mainstream education		Children with SEND in special schools		All non-SEND children	
	% Agree	% Disagree	% Agree	% Disagree	% Agree	% Disagree	% Agree	% Disagree
I am excited to be back at school	71	15	68	17	80	10	76	9
I am happy to see my friends again	84	3	86	3	78	4	94	1
I feel safe at school	67	10	68	10	66	9	81	5
I find it stressful to be back at school	47	26	47	26	46	26	31	46
I am worried that I will struggle more than usual with my schoolwork this year	67	13	69	11	63	16	44	30
I am worried about not being able to go to school if my class has to self-isolate, or there is a local lockdown	65	12	64	13	68	5	56	21
I have everything I need to learn effectively from home if I need to	60	15	59	15	63	16	70	11

Table 8. Rates of children's agreement with statements about school and learning by SEND status and place of education.

Methods

The data in this report was collected through a survey of 3,019 children in England aged 8-17 between 12 March and 29 March 2021.

To ensure a nationally representative sample was collected, participants were selected according to a quota, based on national population estimates for England. After collection, the data was then statistically weighted according to population estimates for England by age, gender, region, primary parent employment status and SEND status using 2020/2021 school census data for England⁵ and the 2011 census for England⁶.

The following tables outline the characteristics of the unweighted sample, including demographic and education factors (e.g., gender, age group, region and school type).

Table 9. Overall sample sizes by gender, age, ethnicity and school type for this sample, sample size as a percentage of the total number of children in the sample which can be compared to the percentage per group for the national population at the time of the survey.

Socio-demographic variables		Sample size (n)	Percentage of sample (%)	National population in 2020/21(%) *
<i>By SEND status & gender</i>				
All	Male	1454	51.7	51.3
	Female	1561	48.2	48.7
Non-SEND	Male	1228	40.7	40.6
	Female	1315	43.6	43.7
SEND	Male	210	7.0	10.4
	Female	220	7.3	5.3
<i>By SEND status & age</i>				
All	8-11	1041	34.5	42.4
	12-15	1485	49.2	39.3
	16-17	493	16.3	18.3
Non-SEND	8-11	880	29.1	38.9

	12-15	1251	41.4	37.2
	16-17	415	13.7	7.2
SEND	8-11	140	4.6	9.2
	12-15	221	7.3	13.3
	16-17	70	2.3	1.3
<i>By region</i>				
East Midlands		253	8.4	8.4
East of England		301	10.0	11.2
London		428	14.2	16.0
North East		161	5.3	4.5
North West		450	14.9	13.0
South East		533	17.7	16.7
South West		272	9.0	9.4
West Midlands		328	10.9	10.9
Yorkshire and Humberside		293	9.7	9.8
<i>By school type</i>				<i>(All age groups)</i>
Mainstream		2653	87.9	88.6
Home educated		210	7.0	1.3
Special school		119	3.9	1.5
Alternative provision		22	0.7	0.1
Other		15	0.5	6.27 (including Independent)
Total		3019	100%	100%

**National population estimates calculated using the most appropriate available national datasets for England in 2020. Estimates for the total population of children were calculated using ONS data for the school population in the 2020/21 Academic Year⁷. For the population of children with SEND, the DfE 2020/21 school census⁸ was also used. Age-based estimates of the national population were based on data for 8–17-year-olds in England to match the age range of the sample.*

Table 10 below outlines the overall sample sizes without weighting. Overall, 3,019 children took the survey, including 431 children with SEND.

Table 10. Overall sample sizes by SEND status and school type.

SEND status	School type	Sample size	Percentage of sample (%)
Non-SEND	All	2546	84.3
	Mainstream	2319	76.8
	Home educated	174	5.8
	Alternative provision	9	0.3
	Special schools	32	1.1
	Other	12	0.4
SEND	All	431	14.3
	Mainstream education	302	10.0
	Special schools	82	2.7
	Home educated	33	1.1
	Alternative provision	10	0.3
	Other	3	0.4
N/A	All	42	1.4

Parents of children with SEND were able to select more than one education need or disability as appropriate. The table below shows the number of children in this sample with each type of SEND. 'Autism spectrum disorder' is the most common (122 out of 431 children with SEND in this sample), followed by 'Social, emotional and mental health' (n = 113) and 'Specific learning difficulty' (n = 100).

Table 11. Number of children with SEND in this sample, that selected each of the types of SEND listed in the questionnaire.

Type of SEND need	Sample size (n)
Autistic spectrum disorder	122
Social, emotional and mental health	113
Specific learning difficulty	100
Moderate learning difficulty	69
Speech, language and comms needs	39
Visual impairment	25
Hearing impairment	24
Physical impairment	21

Multi-sensory impairment	17
Severe learning difficulty	16
Profound and multiple learning difficulty	16
Other difficulty/ disorder	34
I don't know	42

Quantitative analysis

All analyses were conducted in R. All responses are weighted to be representative of the national population by age, gender, SEND status and region. Logistic regressions were used to test the statistical significance of the effect of school type and SEND on binary response variables (e.g., Important vs. Not Important).

Qualitative analysis

All text was first read by the analyst to ensure familiarity with the most used terms and themes in the text. The top 10 most used words used by respondents for the question of interest were calculated in R. This aided the choosing of themes for thematic analysis in Excel. A single coder then manually coded each response into themes which were added iteratively to ensure all themes were included.

¹ The Institute for Government, 2021. *Timeline of UK government coronavirus lockdowns and restrictions*. [Link](#).

² University of Warwick, 2020. *About the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing scale (WEMWBS)*. [Link](#).

³ University of Warwick, 2020. *Collect, score, analyse and interpret WEMWBS*. [Link](#).

⁴ ONS, 2018. *Children's and young people's experiences of loneliness: 2018*. [Link](#)

⁵ ONS, 2021. *Schools, pupils and their characteristics, Academic Year 2020/21*. [Link](#).

⁶ ONS, 2013. *2011 Census - Office for National Statistics*. [Link](#).

⁷ ONS, 2020. *Schools, pupils and their characteristics, Academic Year 2019/2020*. [Link](#).

⁸ ONS, 2021. *Special educational needs in England, Academic Year 2020/21*. [Link](#).



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