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# COVID-19 and Remote Learning: Experiences of Parents supporting Children with Special Needs and Disability during the Pandemic

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## Abstract

The closure of school buildings due to COVID-19 created a challenge for parents and teachers supporting children's remote learning. This paper presents findings of a study that explored whether parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) experienced an unusually challenging period and what obstacles they faced. An online survey was sent to parents during the first (March - June 2020) and second (January - March 2021) lockdowns in England: a total of 141 voluntary participants responded. Thematic data analysis identified three significant themes: **Infrastructure** (Quality and efficacy of resources; Access to school's virtual learning environment); **Impact on parent** (Perceived lack of ability or understanding; Relationships; Time; Mental health); **Impact on child** (Reduced stress and anxiety; Need for routine). Recommendations for schools include collaborating with parents to ensure children with SEND achieve greater equality and inclusivity in educational provision, by developing blended models for in-school and remote learning.

**Keywords:** remote learning; inclusive education; parents; special educational needs and disability (SEND); COVID-19 pandemic

## **Introduction**

In Spring 2020, an overwhelming majority of children across the globe experienced the temporary closure of school buildings and their subsequent move to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, in an attempt to encourage social distancing and decelerate the transmission of the virus (Viner et al. 2020). Nearly 200 countries closed educational buildings with over 90% of these learners ranging from early years to higher education facing some sort of disruption to their education (UNESCO 2020). In England, the government ordered the closure of school buildings from 20 March 2020 to all but the children of essential workers and those deemed most vulnerable, resulting in severe disruption in which staff were mobilised to teach remotely with little preparation or training time (Bubb and Jones 2020). Many families and children were unprepared for this sudden shift, bringing the challenges of increased parental involvement to the surface while supporting their children in remote learning. School buildings saw a gradual re-opening in June, with all children returning to face-to-face learning in September 2020; this was short-lived. A resurgence of the virus in December resulted in schools once more turning to remote learning from January 2021 until their staggered re-opening on 8 March 2021.

During the closure in 2020/21, schools were compelled to adapt to new modes of teaching: classroom; remote learning; blended. Typically, remote learning is used to describe situations where children are taught remotely in their own homes rather than in a school classroom, often online; it also covers the use of hard-copy resources including textbooks and worksheets. Blended learning refers to a combination of face-to-face teaching and remote learning delivered online or through hard-copy resources; these were often adopted for children who needed to attend school sites because they were identified as vulnerable or the children of key workers. The transition to remote learning was disruptive for virtually every child in England, at a time when their parents were also facing drastic changes. For most parents, school building closures meant that school-aged children were at home, requiring care and support with remote learning, for an average of four and a half hours a day (Andrew et al. 2020).

This paper presents the findings of a study of the experiences of parents supporting their children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) during the first (March - June 2020) and second (January - March 2021) lockdowns in England. Acknowledging the paucity of research focusing specifically on parents of children with SEND, we draw on wider UK and international studies pertaining to a broader range of parents' experiences of supporting their children with remote learning. Integral to this study is the aim of facilitating senior leaders and teachers in thinking differently about the educational provision for children with SEND by working more collaboratively with their parents, post-pandemic. By requesting qualitative comments, in addition to quantitative data, we aimed to make sense of affected parents' experiences. Illustrative excerpts are presented that include positive aspects of remote learning, which schools might employ to support children who are not able to access education within the school building, whilst also challenging educationalists to develop more inclusive

practice that responds to the diverse and changing needs of this group of children. We adopt Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (2005) as a theoretical lens through which to analyse the data.

### **Educational context for children with SEND**

Whilst research is emerging about the impact that remote learning has had on parents' ability to support their children, limited research is available on parents' experiences of supporting children with SEND (Kidd and Kaczmarek 2010; Maxwell et al. 2018). Prior to the pandemic, parents of children with SEND indicated they were concerned about the quality of teaching in mainstream schools (NASEN 2019); they also highlighted how much harder learning is for their children than for their peers (Hewitt-Taylor 2009). A House of Commons report (Long et al. 2021) highlights the existing inequality stating that many of the 1.3 million school-age children with SEND in the UK were not receiving the support they needed in the pre-pandemic period. It reports that the Department for Education (DfE) has insufficient understanding of the reasons for significant disparities between the identification of children's needs and access to support (i.e. between genders, different ethnic groups), and why children with SEND, yet without a formal agreement through an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan, were found to be at risk of missing out on the support they need, especially in mainstream schools. Moreover, it reveals that parents still feel left out of decisions that affect their children.

Additionally, the report cites the inadequacy of the current system of Ofsted inspections to provide assurance about how well schools are supporting children with SEND, particularly in mainstream, with many not focusing specifically on SEND provision. It recommends that the DfE should supplement inspection evidence by drawing on additional information to formulate a rounded, timely assessment of support for children with SEND, one of which should emanate from parent/carer forums. Interestingly, in September 2019, the DfE had announced a review of support, with the aim of improving the services for families, and equipping staff to respond effectively to their needs (Roberts 2019), however, this is yet to be realised.

The reopening of school buildings, presents an opportune time for schools to reflect on what they might do differently in the climate of the 'leave no one behind' (UNICEF 2020) agenda. With parental involvement being cited as a critical ingredient for children's achievement (Goodall and Montgomery 2014), the importance of extending the limited research into parents' experiences of supporting children with SEND during the COVID-19 pandemic is ever pressing, especially as evidence from previous pandemics suggests that such events worsen existing inequities (Quinn and Kumar 2014). With schools leaning towards more blended ways of learning that integrate online and traditional classroom modalities (Rasheed, Kamsin and Abdullah 2020), the so-called 'new normal', and amid calls for them to ensure teachers keep abreast of emerging evidence about effective practice and issues (NASUWT

2021), parents of children with SEND are in a key position to provide valuable insight into the challenges they faced during the pandemic lockdowns, and offer opportunities for schools to harness any positive outcomes they noted.

Moreover, in response to the advice for schools to seek regular feedback from teachers to establish what works and to identify barriers and areas where improvements need to be made (NASUWT 2021), we invite schools to reflect on the study's findings and consider how parents' experiences might also be included. Furthermore, the study responds to multiple calls for additional research to better understand parental involvement in remote learning (Cavanaugh et al. 2009) prior to the pandemic. By providing a glimpse into the lives of parents of children with SEND, new relationships may be formed that are productive of alternative ways of seeing, knowing, experiencing, and practicing, which are crucial to the imagining of new and more inclusive educational provision for children with SEND.

### **Parents' experiences of supporting children through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's bioecology theory**

Acknowledging critiques of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) original ecological systems theory (e.g. Christensen 2016), we draw on his final iteration, the bioecology theory; using the process-person-context-time (PPCT) framework, we explore existing research into parents' experiences of supporting their children with remote learning (Bronfenbrenner 2005) and analyse the findings alongside. Decades of research (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) clarify that children's development is the result of everyday activities and relationships in their immediate environment, plus interactions between factors within the child, the wider environment, and time-related processes. Focusing on the critical role that parents perform in their child's development and achievement, we proffer valuable insight into the interconnection between the parent, child and their environment during remote learning, with a view to developing educational provision that is equal and inclusive for all children in the post-pandemic context.

### **Process - Parents' role in children's learning**

The process, or more specifically the proximal process, is the primary mechanism for developing a child (Bronfenbrenner 2005). In the absence of regular contact with teachers during the COVID-19 lockdowns, we contend that parents assumed a stronger role than usual in their children's development. This is supported by Devercelli (2020), who states that the pandemic placed parents as the main responders for children's learning, which naturally gives them the new role of teachers. Research into the experiences of parents surrounding remote learning presents a mixed picture. Some highlight the negative aspects associated with the dual role of parent and teacher, with the parent: reduced to a functional role (Suissa 2006); asked to professionalise themselves (Lambeir and Ramaekers 2007);

required to negotiate the school-parent partnership (Kong 2018). Others note the situation as providing an opportunity for parents to develop closer bonds with their children (Ndhine 2020). Bubb and Jones (2020) report of parents playing more with their children, developing better relationships with teachers (that places them in a much stronger position to support their children's learning), and gaining more knowledge about their learning, particularly with younger children. Notwithstanding, some (e.g. Selwyn et al. 2011) report parents viewing the dual role as an additional burden, often struggling with understanding the role they should assume.

### **Person - Parents' perceptions of supporting children's learning**

According to Bronfenbrenner's process-person-context- time (PPCT) model (2005), a person's own perspective and beliefs are considered significant influential elements in determining child behaviour and development. More specifically, a coalescence of the person's characteristics and their environment can impact said development. Tudge et al. (2009) believes that the 'person' can be the developer or the person being developed, the study, herein, focuses on the 'person' as the developer, namely the parents of children with SEND and their experiences of supporting their children with remote learning.

Many studies focusing specifically on parents of children with SEND have reported a lack of appropriate materials and resources. Letzel, Pozas and Schneider (2020), for instance, identify that the vast majority of parents perceived that teachers were not employing inclusive practices in lockdowns; teachers assured parents they would provide differentiated instruction, yet it was not forthcoming. Importantly, this lack of inclusive education caused parents to doubt whether such practice would occur even if the children were in the classroom, aligning strongly with the disparity in education for children with SEND pre-pandemic. Trzcńska-Król (2020) concur citing parents being concerned about the way materials were prepared (often not taking into consideration the specific learning difficulty the child may experience), and the use of too many platforms and tools. This is in direct conflict with the OECD's (2019) recommendation that pedagogical practices should ensure that digital technologies and online tools correspond to learners' needs, prior competencies and digital literacy with teachers acting as mentors to guide children and help them remain focused on the learning elements of tasks.

Moreover, studies convey that teachers were often not present in remote learning, using pre-recorded materials with little or no explanation, which provided limited opportunities for discussion (Trzcńska-Król 2020); others cite parents expressing a need for guidance on how to support children with remote learning activities and homework (Vuorikari et al. 2020). These experiences often resulted in parents' reporting a lack of confidence in their capability, manifesting as hesitancy and attempting support with limited abilities (Lase et al. 2020).

### **Context - Education through remote learning**

The nature of parents' experiences cannot be addressed without noting the impact of the context in which the learning occurred. Bronfenbrenner (2005) defines the context as four interrelated systems: micro, meso, exo and macro. These nested systems view child development as a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment, from immediate settings of family and school to broad cultural values, laws, and customs. Acknowledging that the developing child would typically find themselves enmeshed in, and influenced through many different interrelated micro-systems, we have restricted our review to the child's remote learning environment supported by the child's school. The meso-systems are the interactions between these micro-systems. The exo-system comprises those contexts that are not directly involved in the developing child, herein restricted to the impact of remote learning on parent's mental health, relationships with their children, and work schedules. Finally, the macro-system was limited to the public policy associated with child education during the pandemic lockdowns.

International studies focusing on the increased time pressures experienced by parents during the pandemic (Häkkinen et al. 2020; Letzel, Pozas and Schneider 2020; Trzcńska-Król 2020) report parents struggling to create new everyday routines and reconcile their own work with becoming teachers for their children. Parents stated they utilised flexibility in their working hours by taking turns to support their children and concentrate on work, resulting in, for example, evening working. Others admitted there were challenges to concentrating and engaging in a work mode mentality, while some acknowledged that they were not able to complete all their work; this contributed to increased anxiety in parents regarding their economic future (Skulmowski and Rey 2020).

To meet the demands of parenting during COVID-19, parents actively planned new caring, work, and education routines, potentially compromising time to tend to their own emotional experience and self-care (Russell et al. 2020). An example from a UK study of children with SEND, reveals the negative effect of closing school buildings on parents' mental health as well as that of their children (Asbury et al. 2020). Family systems' theory and parenting research describes a parent's role as complex (Masten 2018), having to attend and respond to the needs of multiple family subsystems (individual self-care, coordination of co-parenting demands, and parenting needs). Some studies (e.g. Letzel, Pozas and Schneider 2020) reveal that parents felt stressed, tired, angry, listless and bored in comparison to when their children were in school, with some becoming frustrated and exhausted, choosing to disconnect entirely for the remainder of the school year. In others (Carter 2020; Weiner 2020), parents permitted their children to watch television, play video and board games, cook and bake, clean and sew, read, and pursue their own interests. UK studies expose what appear to be more acute challenges due to the withdrawal of all support during the pandemic; this resulted in most parents of children with SEND and two-thirds of non-disabled siblings providing much more care than before (Disabled Children's Partnership 2020).

Finally, parents commented on how remote learning had affected their use of family shared space, for instance, moving furniture around to accommodate learning, or dedicating certain areas for schoolwork. Andrew et al. (2020) report that 22% of primary school children and 10% of those in secondary school did not have access to a dedicated study space at home. This is particularly worrisome as evidence suggests that children need to be able to select environments where they can focus in order to master difficult new concepts (Starkey et al. 2021), with uncomfortable and ill-designed settings having a profound impact on children's sense of comfort and a direct impact on their ability to concentrate on learning (Lei 2010).

### **Time - Education during COVID-19**

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) position time as three distinct levels: microtime - the initiating and ending of the proximal process (i.e. remote learning); mesotime - the periodicity of the proximal process (lockdowns); macrotime - the change that occurred during the enforced remote learning. Since the beginning of the first lockdown, school provision for remote learning has changed radically. Montacute and Cullinane (2021) reveal that 54% of teachers are using online live lessons, compared to just 4% in March 2020, and that offline methods have fallen with just 15% now using textbooks, compared to 34% in March 2020. They report confirmation from parents about the clear increase in intensity of online learning - the proportion of primary pupils doing more than 5 hours of learning a day has risen from 11% to 23%; for secondary students it has increased from 19% to 45%. Notwithstanding, Sharp et al. (2020) recount that very few senior leaders have focused staffing on remote learning; only 6% in primary schools and 38% in secondary schools. Moreover, despite evidence highlighting effective strategies for remote learning to include interactivity, consolidation, and support for children to self-regulate their learning (Education Endowment Foundation 2020a), by July 2020, teachers were no more likely to offer interactive teaching methods than earlier in lockdown. This is of particular significance, since Montacute and Cullinane (2021) report that 41% of parents with children learning at home indicated that they had either very little or no time at all to help their children with remote learning.

### **Methodological overview**

The study adopted a mixed methods approach, in which an inductive methodology enabled theory to emerge from the data (Bryman 2012). It draws on an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter that can be viewed as a bricolage, which is pragmatic, strategic and self-reflexive (Nelson, Treichler and Grossberg 1992) and is dependent on the questions asked as well as their content. An online survey was sent to parents of children with SEND, comprising both qualitative and quantitative questions (see Appendix 1); participants were asked to provide reasons for their responses to quantitative questions. The quantitative objective was to develop a new set of scales to assess parents/carers' experiences of remote learning; this element of the study goes beyond the scope of the



paper, nonetheless, some descriptive statistics are presented to indicate the importance of ensuing themes. The questions were initially based on Ohan, Leung and Johnston's (2000) Parenting Sense of Competence Scale (PSCS). Using the guidelines and principles advocated by Churchill (1979) in scale development, a focus group comprising four parents of children with SEND assisted the authors to rework and develop the PSCS into a more appropriate set of questions. These were trialled and modified with the support of three academics and ten parents of children with SEND. This paper focuses specifically on the qualitative data that emerged, since it provides an opportunity to 'participate in the mind of another human being' (Lofland and Lofland 1995, 16).

Ethical consent was approved by the University of XXXX Ethics Committee (Approval number 1920STAFF23). An electronic survey was employed since it provided ease of distribution and a fast and effective way to extract data. Clear information was provided on a separate page at the beginning, which participants were required to read and acknowledge their voluntary consent; they were informed of their right to withdraw by not submitting the survey. Participants were assured of anonymity through the use of pseudonyms, and confidentiality by not disclosing any opinions or information gathered in the research process, to other parties.

Participation rates are often poor for electronic surveys; this was borne out in our initial distribution to parents of children with SEND via our school networks in October 2020. Receiving no responses, we sought another means and approached Mumsnet - the UK's biggest network for parents, with around 10 million unique visitors per month clocking up around 100 million-page views (Mumsnet n.d). They agreed to support our research and we received 137 responses. We followed up with another distribution in Jan 2021, to determine if there had been any changes in parents' experiences, however, only four responses were received. Each survey was left open for three months to enable sufficient time for parents to respond. Descriptive details pertaining to demographic attributes of the children and their learning, are presented in Table 1.

Once the survey had closed, parents' responses were analysed; we adopted an inductive approach without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies (Thomas 2006), comprising the preparation of raw data; close reading of data; creation of categories; overlapping, merging and deleting of codes; and creation of themes and dimensions. Data were initially analysed by the lead author and reviewed by the second. Where slight differences in analysis occurred, we returned to the primary data and discussed the differing interpretations before a consensus was agreed.

**Table 1. Demographic attributes of children and their learning.**

	Qty	%
No. of children with an EHC <sup>1</sup> Plan	77	54.6
No. of parents with more than one child with an EHC <sup>1</sup> Plan	25	17.7
Type of School		
Mainstream	104	73.8
Special School	20	14.2
Did not say	17	12.1
Age Range		
Primary (4-11 years)	70	49.6
Secondary (11-16 years)	70	49.6
Post-16 (16-18 years)	1	0.7
Lockdown Schooling		
Home	99	70.2
School	3	2.1
Home and school	30	21.3
Did not say	9	6.4

Note <sup>1</sup>: EHC = education, health and care.

## Findings and Discussion

Following the inductive analysis, three themes emerged as significant: **Infrastructure; Impact on parent; Impact on child** (see Table 2). Parents also suggested ways in which schools could assist them in supporting their children with remote learning in the future; this is discussed in the conclusion and recommendations section. Qualitative examples provide illustrations of the experiences of parents of children with SEND; quantitative data are used to indicate the importance of the identified themes.

### Infrastructure

Parents measured resources and teacher support through a prism of understanding, which in turn determined their own ability or willingness to support their child. This led to the identification of three categories: **Quality of resources; Efficacy of resources; Access to school's virtual learning environment (VLE)**. These relate to Bronfenbrenner's micro-system since they refer to the elements of the child's remote learning environment and the schools' educational provision.

Focusing on the quality and efficacy of the resources, which are very much interlinked, parents reported that the schools' resources were not good (n=102, 75.6%) or useful (n=103, 76.3%) (see questions 8 and 9 – Appendix 1). Many of the parents' responses alluded to the resources either being beyond the developmental level of their child or that they were unable to read the materials or view the recordings.

One parent summed up her frustration stating ‘*through the first lockdown my child was expected to sign into a Google classroom platform and work through worksheets with very little direction*’.

**Table 2.** Codes, categories and themes emerging from the research data. (Table view)

Codes	Category	Themes/ Bronfenbrenner’s PPCT model
Above child’s developmental level		
Poor quality	Resources	Infrastructure (micro system)
No differentiation		
<i>Example quote: ‘You can get the resources ok but they are just not very good’.</i>		
Unsure of subject content		
Beyond parent’s ability	Parents’ perceived lack of understanding/ability	
Unsure if teaching correctly		
<i>Example quote: ‘I don’t know if what I am saying is right, I have tried to get advice but this is short in supply’.</i>		
Learnt about child’s likes/dislikes		
Love for child		
Fun		
With father	Relationships	Impact on parent (meso-system)
With siblings		
Arguments		
Different roles – parent/teacher		
Problems with school		
<i>Example quote: ‘I have learnt so much more about them, what they like and dislike’.</i>		
Too many competing responsibilities	Time	
Balance between parents and child’s work		
<i>Example quote: ‘I had too many other things to do including working from home’.</i>		
Stressed	Mental Health	
Depressed		
<i>Example quote: ‘The whole Covid thing is so depressing’.</i>		
No room/space		
Child needs routine		
Difficulty in keeping child motivated	Home environment/context	Impact on child (exo-system)
Child less stressed and anxious		
Flexibility of activities		
<i>Example quote: ‘She loves being at home. She never wants to go to school. It benefits her anxiety’.</i>		

Reflecting on the suitability of the resources, our research appears to support the discourse surrounding the deficiency in differentiation of work for children with SEND in mainstream schools; one parent commented *'My child just could not do what was being asked of her, she was getting the same things as the other students which can't be right'*. The lack of inclusive remote learning concurs with the views of parents of children with SEND across the globe (see van Ackeren, Lenberg and Locker-Grütjen 2020; Letzel, Pozas and Schneider 2020), citing children with pre-existing mental and physical disability most at risk. Reasons include: online platforms incompatible with assistive technology; lack of recreational activities for children with physical disabilities; absence of special education curricula that enable a continuous education accommodating the child's specific learning needs (UNICEF 2020).

This evidence is most significant since it suggests a shortfall in education for children with SEND, despite international agreements (UNCRC 1989) and education law in England (Equality Act 2010; Children and Families Act 2014) acknowledging that teachers have a duty to respond to the diversity among children in mainstream schools. Prior to the pandemic, research indicated that there was a gap in teachers' knowledge surrounding SEND (Education Endowment Foundation 2020b). Webster and Blatchford (2019), for example, were unable to find evidence of a theoretically grounded pedagogy for children with SEND, and discovered that children with a Statement (a precursor to EHC plans) received a different, and less effective, pedagogic diet compared to children without SEND.

Closely associated with the issue of resource, is access to the school's VLE and its correlation with the time parents spent supporting their children. There is currently no national policy on how schools should provide instruction while children remain at home and different schools will have different capacities to instruct children remotely. Disparity in the availability of schools' VLEs was evident pre-pandemic; the OECD (2020) reported that only 65% of UK secondary schools in the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data had access to online learning platforms, which was reduced to just over 40% for economically disadvantaged families. The closure of school buildings and the move to remote learning has further exposed the digital divide between more and less socially advantaged groups, reflected in differential ownership of digital devices, varying internet access and school-level differences in digital competence (Cullinane and Montacute 2020). Whilst the majority of schools provided resources via a VLE (69.2%; n=90) (question 7– Appendix 1), 70.7% (n=94) stated that they did not find it easy to access its resources (question 10– Appendix 1) and 61.6% (n=82) were unable to use the technology required to support their child (question 13– Appendix 1). This raises questions about the quality or suitability of its content.

Many parents sought alternative forms of support - *'I could not answer some of my son's questions on the tasks he had been given. I had to search online for the answers.'* The notion of poor access and inaccessible resources resonates with the wider question about the quality, appropriateness and effectiveness of educational provision on offer to children with SEND, compared to that received by

their peers as indicated in previous studies (see Webster and Blatchford 2019). The study, herein, supports parents' perceptions that children with SEND are not experiencing a quality of education that is commensurate with their peers. Indeed, one parent commented that her daughter received '*KSI SATs papers when she is working at pre key stage*', which indicates that the work was not being differentiated to an appropriate level for the child.

### **Impact on parent**

Data analysis led to the emergence of four categories relating to the impact on the parent; these we deem to resonate with Bronfenbrenner's exo-system. Whilst not directly associated with the development of the child, any impact on the parent will ultimately affect the child due to the parents' ability to support them with remote learning. The categories are: **Perceived lack of ability or understanding; Relationships; Time; Mental health.**

Several parents alluded to their perceived lack of ability or understanding of the teachers' tasks - '*It sounds ridiculous but she will run off/lock herself in another room ... at times she is simply unteachable*'; '*I may as well buy my own books (which is what I have done)*'. A final comment by one parent '*It was beyond me!*' speaks of the frustration experienced by parents in already challenging circumstances. Acknowledging the potential influence parents have on their child's outcomes, differences in their abilities to support their children's remote learning can lead to a widening of educational inequalities (Drayton 2020). Contributory factors to educational inequality include the risk of financial hardship due to parents' difficulty in maintaining full-time employment and increased expenditure on basic needs; and higher stress levels (Olssen and Hwang 2003). It is, therefore, not unreasonable to suggest that an increase in parents' time spent seeking suitable resources or answers will only exacerbate these inequalities.

Another category relates to the change in family relationships. Question 17 (Appendix 1) reveals 78% (n=105) of parents stating that remote learning had a positive effect on their relationship with their child: '*I have tried to make it interesting by doing things like baking together, they have all enjoyed that*'. Others referred to their child's relationship with their father: '*I have spoken to my husband and we think our son has learnt a lot more by working with him on the farm*'; '*More so with my husband, he has really bonded with him*'. Some referred to changes in relationships between siblings: '*The older ones are helping the younger ones which is nice to see. It takes the pressure off me and dad.*' These responses indicate that in supporting their children's learning, parents sought alternative ways of keeping their children busy. Rather than amplifying the potential negative aspects of lockdown, these activities provided opportunities for parents and siblings to connect with one another in ways that had not necessarily been possible when education occurred within the school building. These findings concur with other studies (i.e. Australia - Evans et al. 2020; Italy - Mantovani et al. 2020; Spain - Günther-Bel et al. 2020), however, we acknowledge that parental experience was not entirely positive.

Some parents commented negatively on the impact of undertaking the teacher role, *'I am a qualified teacher but I can't teach my own daughter because our relationship is different'*; *'This would be a job for 3 different teachers'*, or what they prioritised *'I appreciate he is going to need a formal education but at this moment keeping him busy was our priority'*. Others remarked on the need to balance differing roles, *'My own parents are in a vulnerable position and I had to support them as well'*. These findings concur with other UK and global studies (see Dong, Cao and Li 2020; Fontenelle-Tereshchuk 2021; Garbe et al. 2020). The shift in roles and responsibilities ultimately led to an increase in the pressure parents felt in relation to the time they spent supporting their children's learning, *'I'm not able to support my child due to time pressure and work'*.

Finally, responding to question 18 (Appendix 1) about their mental health, less than half of parents (n=44; 34.1%) reported a negative impact. Interestingly, the lower rates of adverse experience appear to be in contrast to other studies. For example, Davis et al.'s (2020) study explored the association between remote learning and parental mental health, in which they were asked specifically if their children had struggled with remote learning; 51% responded affirmatively and this corresponded with elevated mental distress. In focusing directly on the notion of children struggling with remote learning, Davis et al.'s study may have excluded other factors impacting on parents' mental health, such as pressure of work, or reduced income.

More significantly, this and similar studies (e.g. Giannotti et al. 2021), focused on parents of children without SEND. Families raising children with SEND face more stressors, on average, than those with neurotypical children (McConnell and Savage 2015), therefore, it is possible that some parents had developed ways to overcome challenges pre-pandemic, and therefore these new ways of working did not present such an adverse effect on their mental health. Equally, studies reporting higher levels of poor mental health of parents of children with SEND during lockdown (APA 2020), had established a baseline for their pre-existing mental wellbeing; since our study did not do this it is difficult to gauge whether there was a significant change in parents' mental wellbeing.

### **Impact on child**

The third theme focuses on the impact of the home context on the child during remote learning. The categories here are: **Reduced stress and anxiety; Need for routine**. The majority of parents commented positively on the ways their children either engaged with the work set by schools or their general demeanour in being at home: *'The school pack helped, they were interesting even for me'*; *'He seems happier at home'*. An inverse relationship between mental health and educational attainment is a well-known phenomenon in the literature of sociology and social psychiatry (Halpern-Manners et al. 2016). The evidence presented, herein, supports this notion with parents reporting that being less stressed and anxious while learning remotely has had a positive impact on their children's ability to engage more readily with their learning.

Nonetheless, the notion that they were happier at home does not necessarily equate with children receiving a high quality education. It is possible that children appeared less stressed because parents were undertaking activities such as baking and sewing with them, as suggested previously, or other pastimes - *'He would prefer to just watch his favourite programmes'*, rather than attending to formal school work. If this is the situation, it has serious implications for children's education, which was already experiencing challenges pre-pandemic (NASEN 2019). Indeed, some parents commented on the struggle to keep their children on task, expressing difficulty with *'Keeping her focused'* and *'Keeping them motivated'*. Research shows that stressful learning environments tend to stifle children's academic attainment, making it imperative to address both children's (and their parents') emotional needs (Zhang and Sapp 2008). However, there clearly exists a dilemma for parents surrounding decision-making that maintains good dispositions for their child's mental health, whilst ensuring they engage with high quality education.

Another potential extrapolation is that children with SEND actually found being at home less challenging than navigating the many complex issues incumbent with accessing education in a school building. This concurs with Shepherd and Hancock's (2020) study, in which parents reported lockdown allowing for more time to be spent with families, increased one-to-one time and greater flexibility for children to pursue their own interests while removing the social pressures of school.

Notwithstanding, some parents in our study reported a negative impact on their child's mental health; for instance, one commented, *'She needs a formal work environment with a strict routine'*; *'Having to log in every lesson and is marked absent as if in school has caused a lot of anxiety and resulted in his medication not being as effective'*. Children with existing mental health functioning difficulties, might be particularly affected by isolation, and possible exacerbation of symptoms in response to pandemic-related information and behaviours (UNICEF 2020). Further comments relate to anxiety and frustration: *'There were a lot of tears'*; *'There has been the occasional big fight'*; *'We have had too many arguments.'* School routines are important coping mechanisms for many children with SEND and with the closure of school buildings, children lost their anchor or reference points often resulting in negative behaviour. Moving forward, parents need strategies to support their children through the challenging times of remote learning and with adjustment back to their pre-pandemic lives when education in school buildings resumes.

### **Limitations of the study**

The study, herein, focused specifically on parents' experiences rather than children. If we had extended the micro-system to include children's perceptions of their parents' support with remote learning, we might have gleaned deeper understanding of how parents' experiences resonated with, or impacted, upon their children. However, this would have presented a significant challenge for ethical approval to conduct research about a vulnerable group of children, in addition to any potential access issues, which

would likely have resulted in a delay and impacted on our aim to report back in a timely manner so that schools could consider what they might do differently in the next academic year.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Whilst schools were unaware that COVID-19 would result in the closing of school buildings, and many were ill-prepared to deliver education via a VLE, the pandemic has highlighted some existing inequalities for children with SEND that were amplified during the lockdowns. Noting Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model's aim to improve our understanding about the conditions and processes that influence human development, we consider this study raises awareness of the contextual conditions and processes that influenced the experiences of parents supporting children with SEND with remote learning. The most significant issue for parents relates to the quality and suitability of resources supplied by schools. Too many commented on the lack of differentiation relative to the child's developmental level, or the poor quality of resources. Parents provided practical examples of how schools could assist them in supporting their children's learning: information packs and answers to worksheets; helplines; better or more appropriate resources; clearer guidance about structure or routine. Whilst undoubtedly parents encountered contextual challenges in supporting their children with remote learning, our research reveals the development of some positive outcomes mediated by proximal processes, namely, better family relationships. These indicate that parents are willing to find time to support their children even when they have additional pressures; nonetheless, they require appropriate resources and infrastructure to do so.

It is clear that adjusting to life without the usual school routine presented a major challenge for some children with SEND and their families; it seems equally clear that returning to school, which may look very different due to COVID-19 adaptations, is also likely to be challenging and possibly more pronounced, for children with SEND than for most of their neurotypical peers. Further, despite the intention for remote learning to be temporary, it is entirely possible that schools could find themselves in a similar situation if levels of COVID-19 infections continue to rise. Thus, our study provides a timely opportunity to refresh educational provision for children with SEND, and ensure greater equality and inclusivity post-pandemic. Acknowledging that children with complex needs have greater rates of school absenteeism (Arslan and Julies 2017), if schools, government and policy makers reflect on the aspects of remote learning that worked well and consider how they might be translated into a blend of school and remote learning, there is real potential for children with SEND to experience a more inclusive education. Consequently, schools need to work collaboratively with parents to determine the best way forward so that no child is left behind.



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## Appendix 1: Survey Questions.

Questions 1-7 each had a drop-down list allowing participants to select the appropriate answer:

1. Are you a parent of a child with an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP)?
2. Do you have more than one child with an EHCP?
3. Which type of school does your child attend?
4. Please select the age range of the child
5. Did your child learn at home during lockdown?
6. If your child learnt at home during lockdown, what forms of resources did your child's school provide you with?
7. How much time did you spend on average each day supporting your child's learning?

Questions 8 to 20 each had a 5-point Likert scale and an open "long text response" where participants were asked to "please give reasons for your response":

8. My child's school provided good resources to help her/him continue learning at home during lockdown.
9. I found the resources helpful to support my child's learning.
10. I found it easy to access the school's resources on the internet.
11. I found it easy to access other learning resources on the internet.
12. I believe I have the necessary skills to support my child's learning at home.
13. I was able to use the technology needed to support my child's learning.
14. I was able to find a suitable space in my home to support my child's learning.
15. I found it easy to support my child's learning during lockdown.
16. Sometimes I felt that I was not able to support my child's learning during lockdown.
17. I believe that supporting my child during lockdown has had a positive effect on my relationship with my child.
18. I believe that supporting my child's learning during lockdown has had a negative effect on my mental health.
19. I believe my child has benefitted from being supported with her/his learning at home.
20. I believe my child made better progress when learning at home than when they were at school.

Questions 21 to 23 required an open qualitative response.

21. What were the main challenges you faced to support your child's learning during lockdown?
22. What could your child's school have done to help you support your child's learning at home during lockdown?
23. If you would like to be involved in working with the project team to record a case study of your lived experiences, please leave a contact email address below.