

Report 03: Parents/carers report on their own and their children's concerns about children attending school

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The Co-SPACE Study

Background

COVID-19 has caused major disruptions to families' lives, through social distancing, school closures and lock-down. This is also a rapidly changing situation where different pressures will arise for children, young people and their families over time. While research has provided valuable information about how parents can support their children's mental health in general, we know little about what is most effective in the current, changing context.

The Co-SPACE project is tracking the mental health of school-aged children and young people aged 4-16 years throughout the COVID-19 crisis. An online survey is sent out and completed on a monthly basis by parents/carers and young people (if aged 11-16 years) throughout the pandemic. The study has full ethical and data protection approval (ethical approval ref: R69060) and is fully GDPR compliant.

The findings will help identify what protects children and young people from deteriorating mental health over time, and at particular stress points. Findings will be shared directly with health and education services to inform the development and provision of effective support for children and families.

Recruitment & Sample

The study sample has been recruited through a variety of means, including social media, distribution through partner organisations, networks and charities, the media and targeted online advertising. The self-selecting nature of recruitment means that *this will not be a nationally representative sample*. In the current report, 88.7% of all participants who completed the questionnaire were female, presumably mothers. Furthermore, the majority of the sample was employed, either part-time (38.4%), full-time (31.3%) or self-employed (9.4%), and had an average income of >30,000 (66.9%). Further information about participants' characteristics can be found at the end of the report.

For the long-term, we are aiming to have good representation across a wide range of socio-demographic and health factors (e.g., income, ethnicity, pre-existing mental/physical health difficulties) to investigate the experiences for different groups that may be particularly vulnerable during and after the pandemic.

We are keen to recruit as many families as possible to the study. Parents/carers can sign up and take part at any point: <https://cospaceoxford.com/survey>

Further information

For further information or to request specific analyses, please contact the research team at co-space@psy.ox.ac.uk

Focus of this report

To date, over 10,000 parents/carers and 1,000 adolescents have taken part in the Co-SPACE survey and we continue to collect data on a monthly basis.

This report provides cross-sectional data from approximately 611 parents/carers who have answered questions about concerns around children and young people attending school during the Covid-19 pandemic.

These questions were added to the survey on 12/05/20, two days after the Government announcement that primary schools would have a phased re-opening from the beginning of June. Participants completed these questions in the survey between 12/05/2020 and 19/05/2020, either as part of the initial survey or one-month follow-up survey.

In this report, we examined responses for the following specific groups:

1. The whole sample
2. Primary and secondary school aged children
3. Children by gender
4. Children with special educational needs and/or neurodevelopmental disorder (SEND/ND)
5. Children with pre-existing mental health difficulties
6. High and low household incomes
7. Parent working status (e.g. not working, employed part-time, employed full-time, or self-employed).

Focusing on the following issues:

- a. Parent/carer report on their own and their children's feelings around attending school.
- b. Parent/carer report on their and their children's specific concerns relating to attending school.

Key findings

- **Around half of participating parents do not feel comfortable about their children going back to school.**
- **The most common concerns among parents/carers are that their child will be upset by, or won't understand the need for, social distancing and that their child will either catch or transmit COVID-19.**
- **Parents of children with SEN/ND are particularly uncomfortable about their children attending school, as are parents who do not work, and those with lower incomes.**
- **Particular concerns for parents of children with SEN/ND are that their child will not get the emotional, behavioural and educational support that they need, or the support they need with transitions to different groups/classes**
- **Parents who do not work appear to be particularly concerned about their child being upset by, or not understanding the need for, social distancing, and that their child will either catch or transmit COVID-19.**
- **Parents on lower incomes appear to be particularly concerned about their child being upset by the need to social distance, or catching COVID-19, and being forced to do something that doesn't work for their family.**
- **Only a minority of children and young people are perceived by their parents/carers to not feel comfortable attending school.**
- **Parents/carers perceive their children to be most concerned about things being different or uncertain and the enjoyable aspects of school not happening. Other worries relate to friendships and social distancing.**
- **While primary school aged children appear to be concerned about being away from home and transitions, secondary school aged children appear to be more concerned about catching Covid-19 and academic pressures.**
- **Parents/carers of children with SEN/ND or a pre-existing mental health difficulty, in particular, report that their children are not comfortable about attending school.**

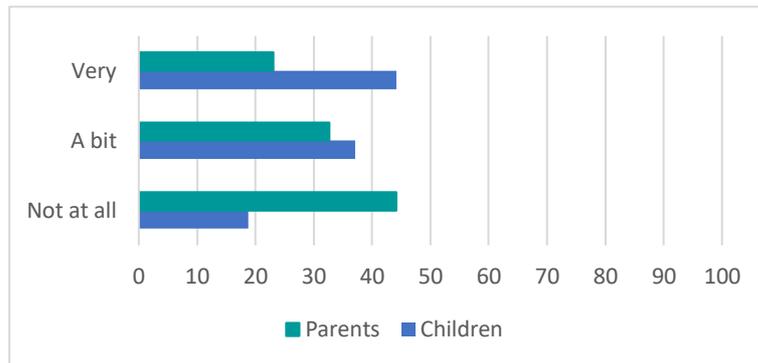
- **Parents of children with SEN/ND or a pre-existing mental health difficulty report that their children are particularly concerned about things being uncertain or different, changes to routine, the enjoyable parts of school not happening, and being away from home.**

Findings

1. The Whole Sample

a. Feelings about child attending school

Figure 1. Percentage of parent/carers reporting how comfortable they and their children feel about their child/themselves attending school

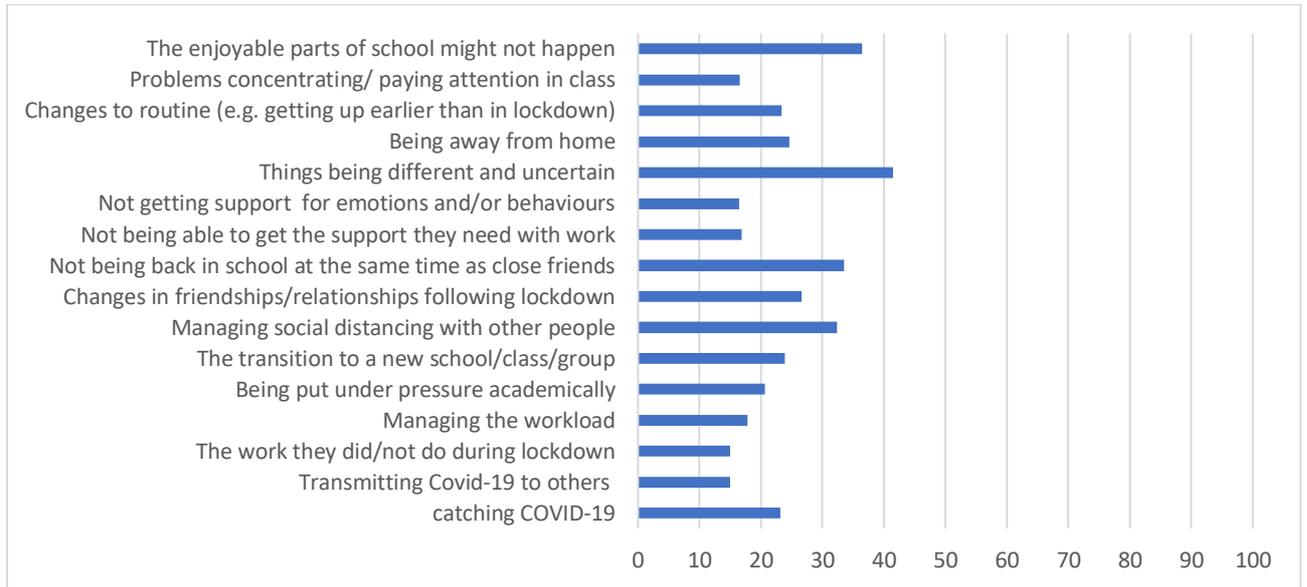


Parents/carers reported on how comfortable they, or their children, felt about their child attending school. Possible responses were “not at all”, “a bit”, “very” and “extremely”. Data represents the percentage of parents reporting feeling “not at all”, “a bit” and “very/extremely” comfortable.

In general, parents/carers reported that their children feel comfortable about attending school in the pandemic, with 44.2% of parents reporting that their child would feel “very” comfortable and 37.1% reporting they would feel “a bit” comfortable. However, nearly a fifth of parents/carers reported that their child would not feel comfortable at all (18.8%). In contrast, almost half of parents/carers reported that they do not feel at all comfortable about their child attending school (44.2%), with around a third reporting that they feel “a bit” comfortable (32.7%) and just over a fifth reporting that they feel “very” comfortable (23.1%).

b. Specific concerns around attending school

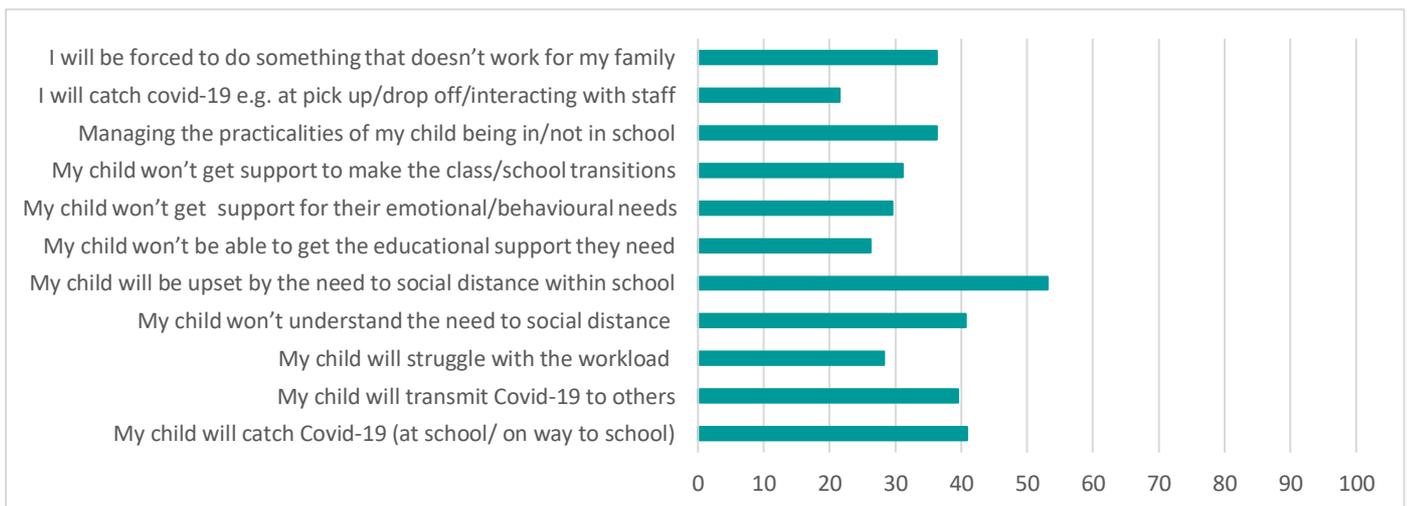
Figure 2. Percentage of parents/carers reporting that their child has substantial worries around different aspects of attending school



Data in the graph represents the percentage of parents reporting substantial worries (i.e., responses of “very” or “extremely” to the question) about specific concerns.

Parents/carers reported that children’s main concerns were around things being different or uncertain (41.5%), the enjoyable parts of school not happening (36.4%), not being in school at the same time as close friends (33.5%), managing social distancing (32.4%), and changes to friendships during lockdown (26.6%).

Figure 3. Percentage of parents/carers reporting that they have substantial worries around different aspects of attending school



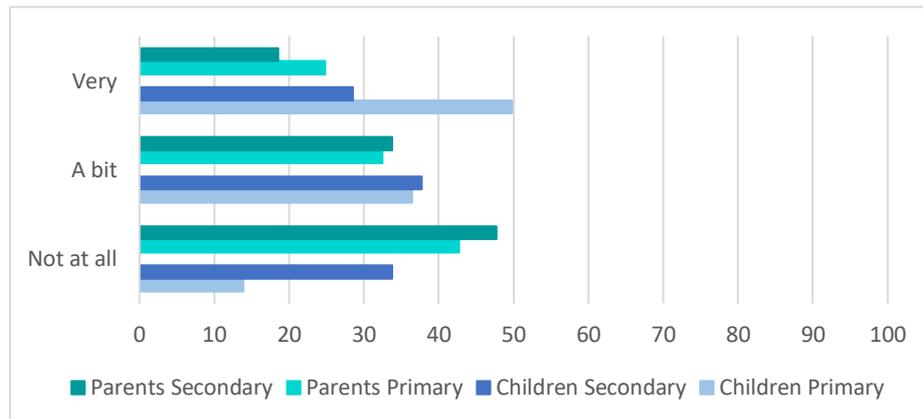
Parent's/carer's main concerns were that their child would be upset by the need to social distance (53.1%), that their child would either catch COVID-19 (40.9%) or transmit COVID-19 to others (39.5%), and that they won't understand the need to social distance (40.7%).

Around a third of parents/carers also reported being worried about being forced to do something that doesn't work for their family (36.3%), managing the practicalities of children being in/not in school (36.3%) and their child getting the support they need for class/school transitions (31.1%) or with their emotional/behavioural needs (29.5%).

2. Child Age Group

a. Feelings about child attending school

Figure 4. Percentage of parent/carers reporting how comfortable they and their children feel about them attending school, by child age group.



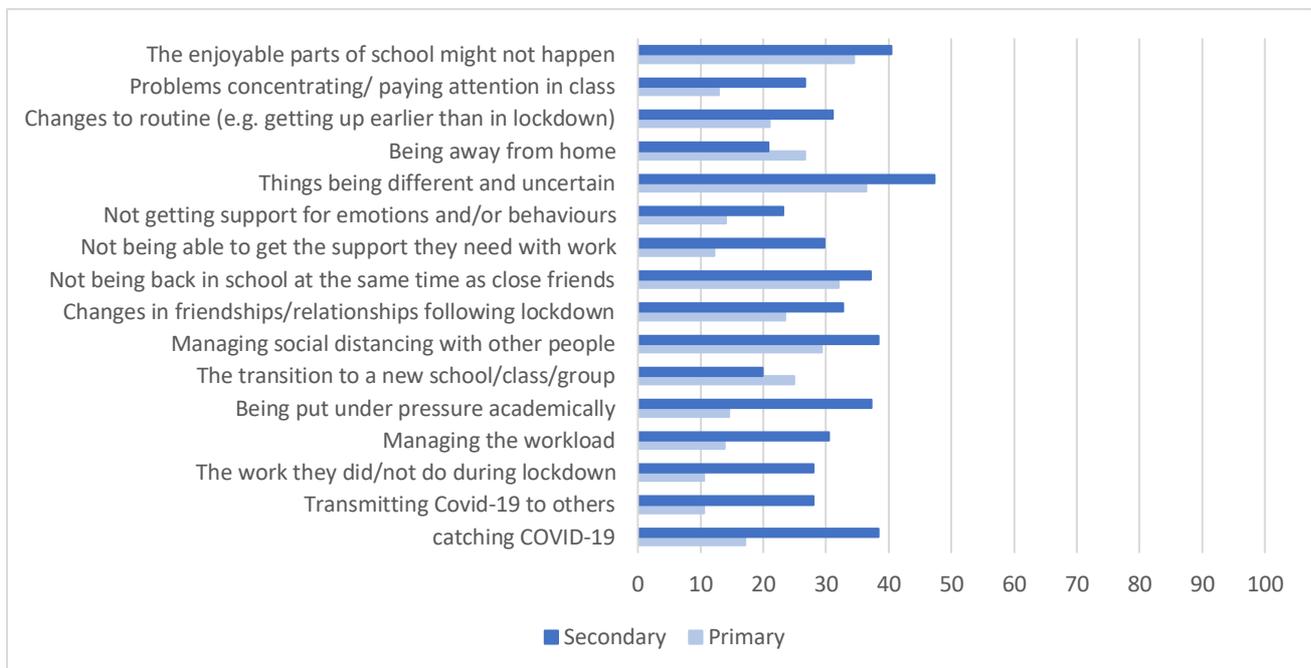
The current sample included 426 parents/carers of children aged 4-11 years (primary school aged) and 152 parents/carers of young people aged 12-16 years (secondary school aged).

Half of the parents/carers of children reported that their primary school aged child would feel very comfortable attending school (49.8%). However, less than a third of parents/carers of young people of secondary school age reported that their child would feel very comfortable attending school (28.5%).

Nearly half of parents/carers of both primary (42.7%) and secondary school aged children (47.7%) reported that they do not feel at all comfortable about their child attending school and a third of the parents/carers of secondary school aged children reported that their child does not feel at all comfortable attending school (33.8%). However, only 13.9% of parents/carers of primary school aged children said that their child does not feel at all comfortable about attending school.

b. Specific concerns around attending school

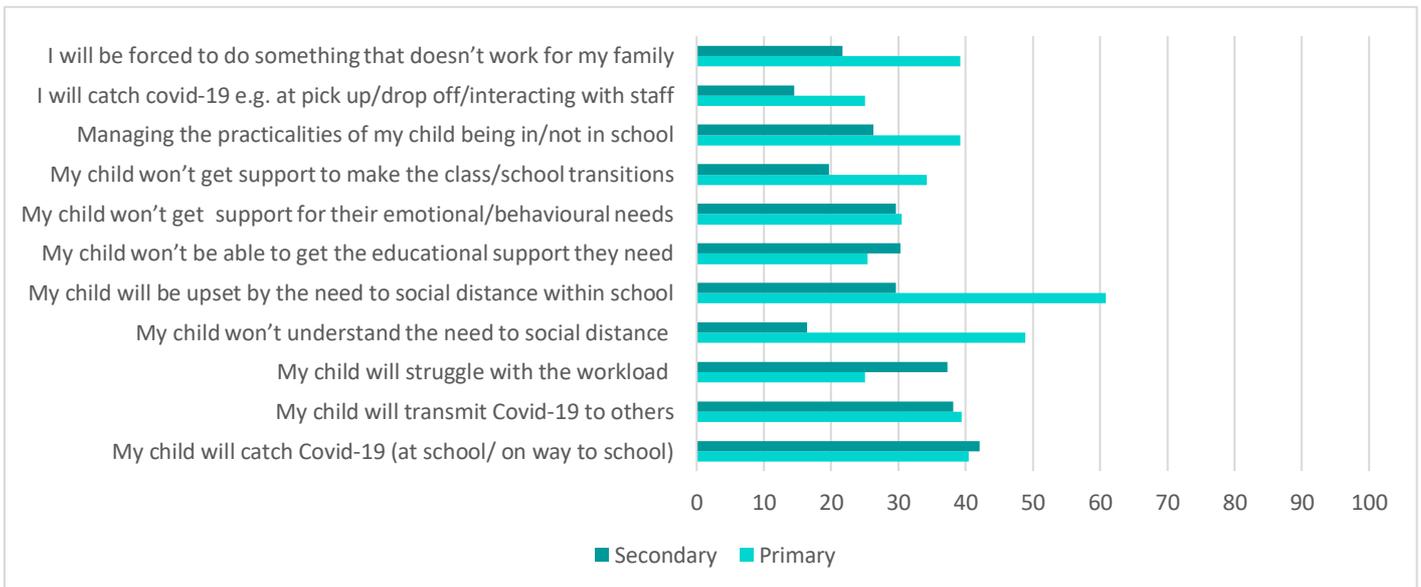
Figure 5. Percentage of parents/carers reporting that their child has substantial worries around different aspects of attending school, by child age group



Parents/carers of both primary and secondary school aged children reported that their children are particularly concerned about things being different and uncertain (36.4% of primary and 47.3% of secondary school age), the enjoyable parts of school not happening (34.5% of primary and 40.4% of secondary school age), and managing social distancing (29.3% of primary and 38.4% of secondary school age).

Parents/carers reported that the following were particular concerns for secondary school aged children: catching COVID-19 (38.4% of secondary and 17.1% of primary school age), being put under pressure academically (37.3% of secondary and 14.6% of primary school age), managing workloads (30.5% of secondary and 13.8% of primary school age), not being able to get the support they need with work (29.8% of secondary and 12.2% of primary school age), transmitting COVID-19 to others (28% of secondary and 10.6% of primary school age), the work they did/didn't do in lockdown (28% of secondary and 10.6% of primary school age) and problems concentrating (26.7% of secondary and 12.9% of primary school age).

Figure 6. Percentage of parents/carers reporting that they have substantial worries around different aspects of attending school, by child age group



Around 40% of parents/carers of both primary and secondary aged children reported being very concerned about their children catching (40.5% of primary and 42.1% secondary school parents/carers) or transmitting COVID-19 (39.4% of primary and 38.2% secondary school parents/carers).

More than a quarter of parents/carers of both primary and secondary children were also very concerned about their child getting the support they need for their emotional/behavioural (30.5% of primary and 29.6% secondary school parents/carers) and educational needs (25.4% of primary and 30.3% secondary school parents/carers).

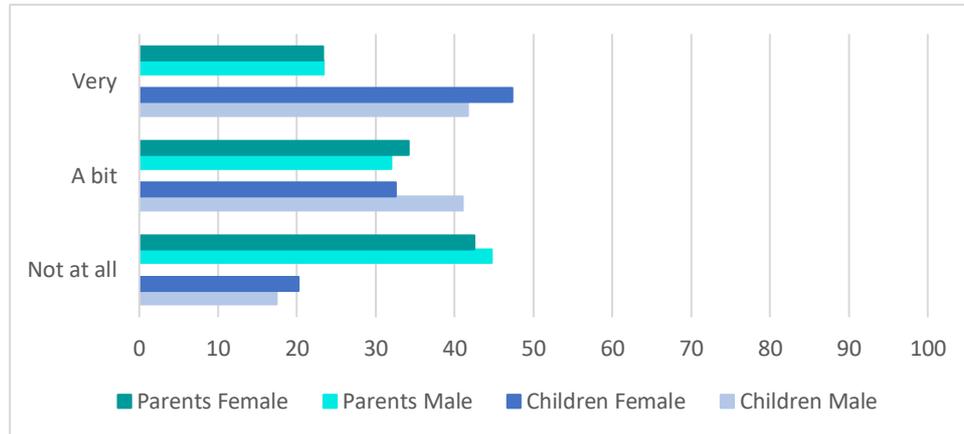
The main concerns of parents/carers of primary school children were that their child would be upset about (60.9% of primary and 29.6% of secondary school parents/carers) and wouldn't understand the need to social distance (48.9% of primary and 16.4% of secondary school parents/carers). Parents/carers of primary school children were also particularly concerned about the family being forced to do things that don't work for them (39.2% of primary and 21.7% secondary school parents/carers) and managing the practicalities of children being in or not in school (39.2% of primary and 26.3% secondary school parents/carers)

In addition, over a third of parents/carers of secondary school children said that they were very concerned about their child struggling with workloads (37.3% of secondary and 25% of primary school parents/carers).

3. Child Gender

a. Feelings about child attending school

Figure 7. Percentage of parent/carers of male and female children reporting how comfortable they and their children feel about their child/themselves attending school.



The current sample included 292 parents/carers of boys, 292 parents/carers of girls and 4 parents/carers of children who do not identify as male/female.

There was a broadly similar pattern in the proportions of parents/carers of boys and girls for how comfortable they feel about their child attending school. Similarly, there was a broadly similar pattern in the proportions of parents/carers of boys and girls for how comfortable they reported their child to be about attending school.

b. Specific concerns around attending school

Figure 8. Percentage of parents/carers reporting that their child has substantial worries around different aspects of attending school, by child gender

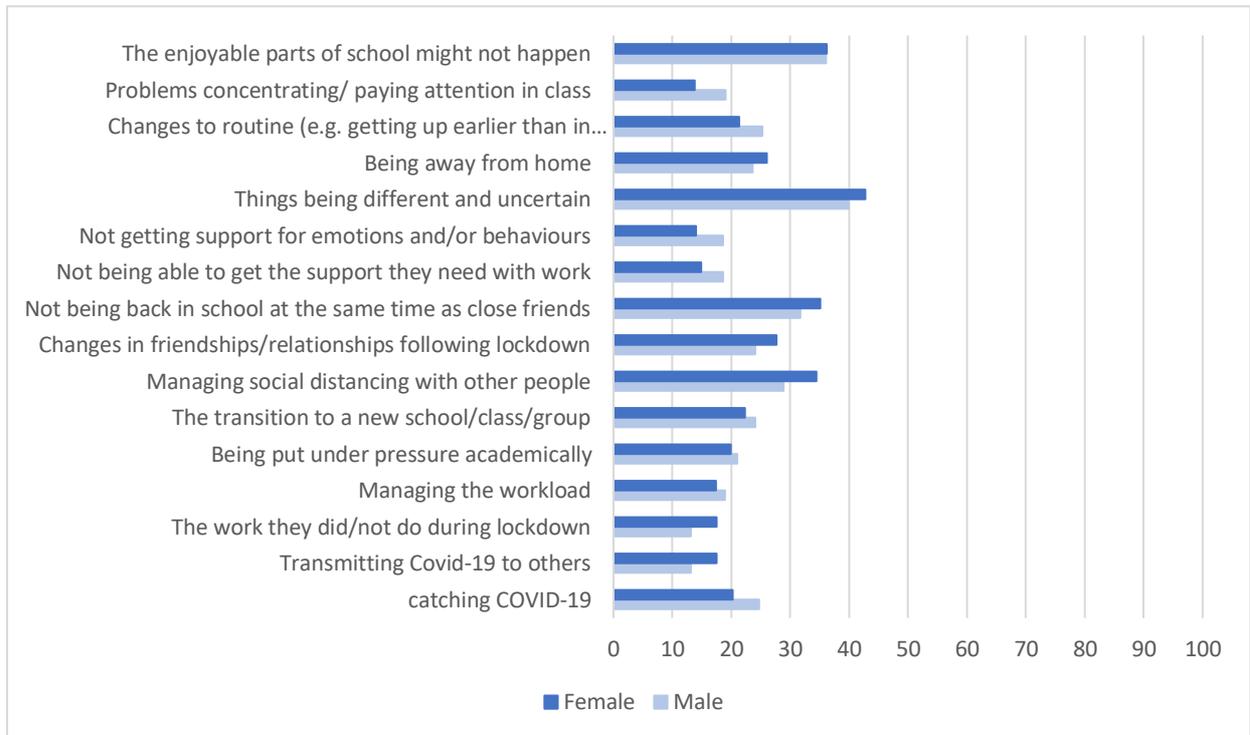
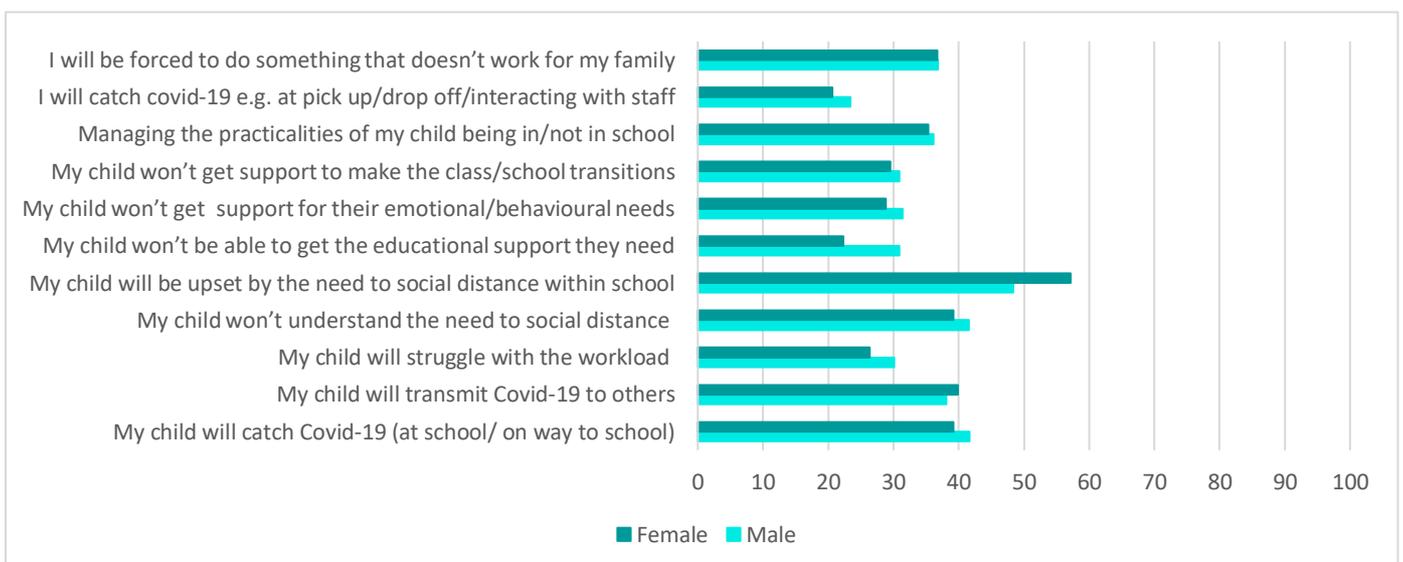


Figure 9. Percentage of parents/carers reporting that they have substantial worries around different aspects of attending school, by child gender

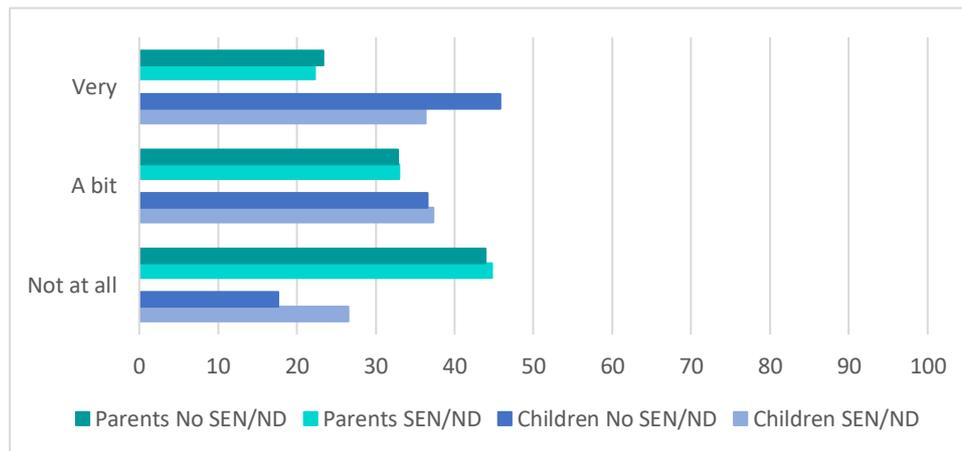


In general, similar proportions of parents/carers of boys and girls reported that their children and they themselves were worried about each of the concerns regarding attending school.

4. Children with Special Educational Needs and Neurodevelopmental Disorders

a. Feelings about child attending school

Figure 10. Percentage of parent/carers of children with and without SEN/ND reporting how comfortable they and their children feel about them attending school



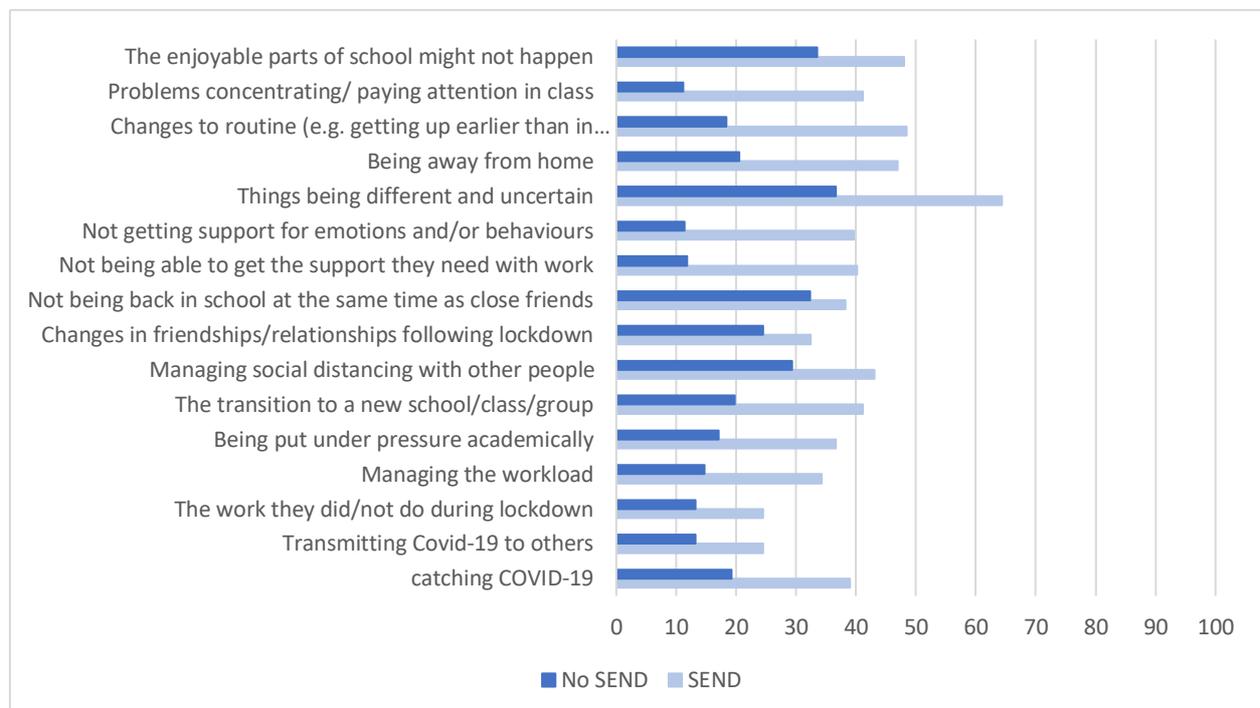
Within the sample, 102 (16.6%) of the parents/carers reported on a child with special educational needs or a neurodevelopmental disorder (i.e., autism or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) (SEN/ND).

There was a broadly similar pattern in the proportions of parents/carers of children with or without a SEN/ND for how comfortable they feel about their child attending school.

However, a larger proportion of parents/carers of children with SEN/ND (26.5%) than those of children with no SEN/ND (17.6%) reported that their child would not feel at all comfortable about attending school; and a lower proportion reported that their child would be very comfortable (36.3% of those with SEN/ND; 45.8% of those with no SEN/ND).

b. Specific concerns around attending school

Figure 11. Percentage of parents/carers reporting that their child has substantial worries around different aspects of attending school, by children with or without SEN/ND



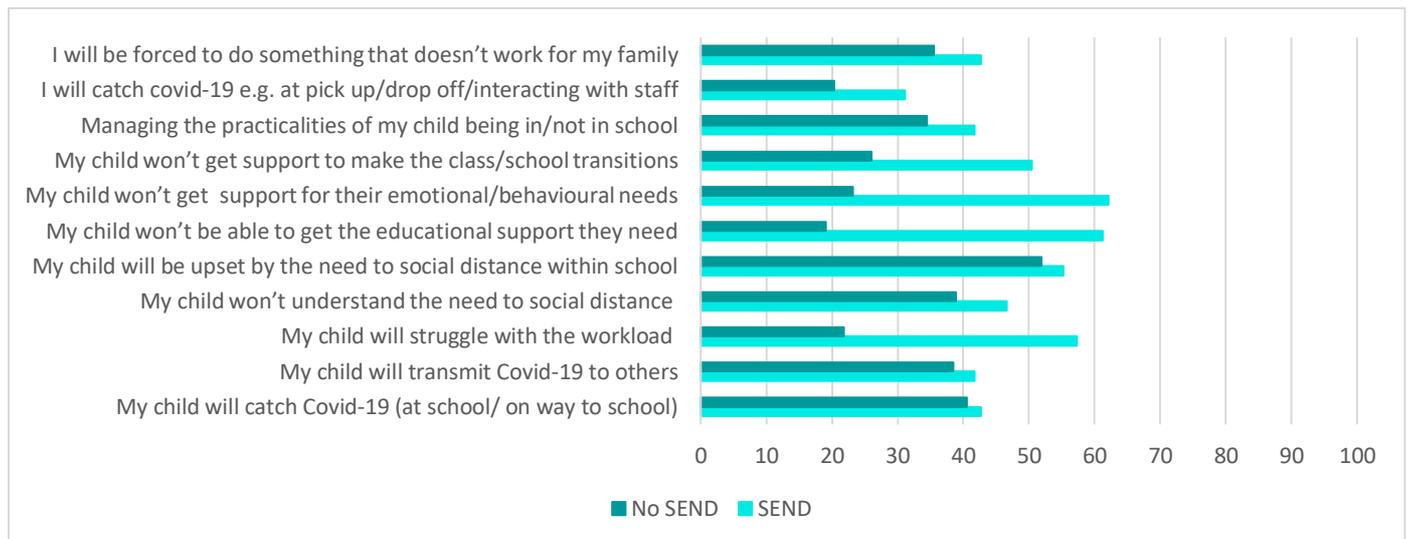
Children with SEN/ND were perceived by their parents/carers to be particularly worried about *all* the different aspects of attending school.

In particular, parents/carers of children with SEN/ND rated that their children were very concerned about things being different and uncertain (64.4% children with and 36.6% children without SEN/ND), changes to routine (48.5% children with and 18.4% children without SEN/ND), the enjoyable parts of school not happening (48% children with and 33.5% children without SEN/ND), and being away from home (47% children with and 20.5% children without SEN/ND).

More than 40% of parents/carers of children with SEN/ND reported that their children were concerned about managing social distancing (43.1% children with and 29.3% children without SEN/ND), transitions to new schools/classes (41.2% children with and 19.8% children without SEN/ND), problems concentrating (41.2% children with and 11.2% children without SEN/ND), and not getting the support they need with work (40.2% children with and 11.8% children without SEN/ND).

Around 30% of parents/carers of children without SEN/ND reported that their children were also concerned about not being in school at the same time as close friends (32.3%) and managing social distancing (29.3%).

Figure 12. Percentage of parents/carers reporting that they have substantial worries around different aspects of attending



school, by children with or without SEN/ND

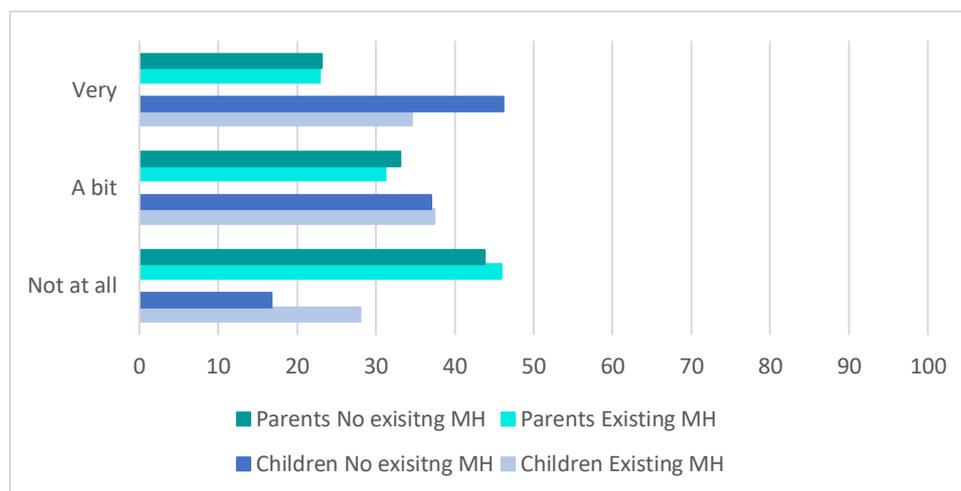
Parents/carers of children with SEN/ND reported being particularly concerned about their child getting the support they need for emotional/behavioural (62.1% SEN/ND and 23.2% no SEN/ND) and educational needs (61.2% SEN/ND and 19.1% no SEN/ND), their child struggling with the workload (57.3% SEN/ND and 21.8% no SEN/ND), and their child not getting the support they need with class/school transitions (50.5% SEN/ND and 26% no SEN/ND).

Broadly similar proportions of parents/carers of children with and without SEN/ND reported being concerned about their child being upset by the need to social distance (55.3% SEN/ND and 51.9% no SEN/ND), and their child catching (42.7% SEN/ND and 40.5% no SEN/ND) or transmitting COVID-19 (41.7% SEN/ND and 38.5% no SEN/ND).

5. Children with Pre-existing Mental Health Difficulties

a. Feelings about child attending school

Figure 13. Percentage of parent/carers of children with and without existing MH difficulties reporting how comfortable they and their children feel about them attending school.

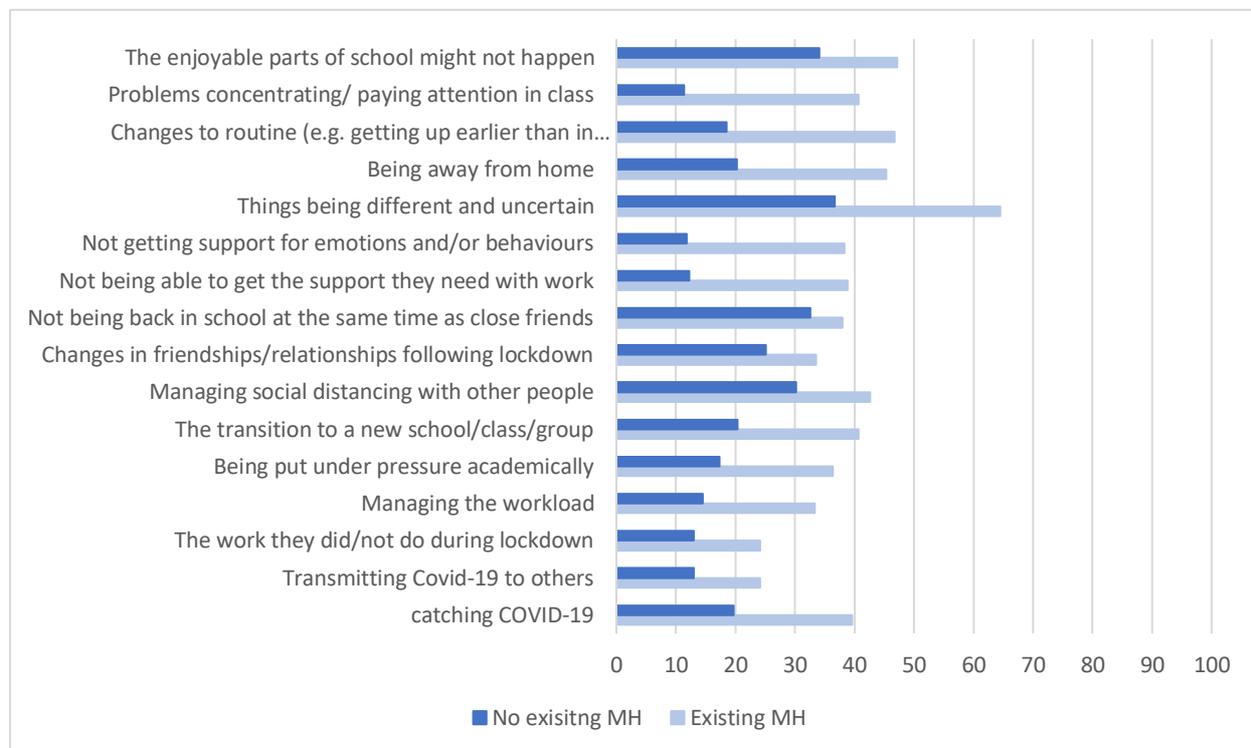


Parents reported on whether their child had a diagnosed mental health (MH) difficulty before the pandemic broke, including clinically diagnosed depression, anxiety or other mental health problem, as well as neurodevelopmental disorders such as ADHD and ASD.

There was a broadly similar pattern in the proportions of parents/carers of children with or without a pre-existing MH difficulty for how comfortable they feel about their child attending school. However, parents/carers of children with a pre-existing MH difficulty reported that their child is particularly uncomfortable about attending school. For example, parents/carers of 28% with and 16.8% without pre-existing MH difficulty reported that their child feels “not at all” comfortable, and parents/carers of 34.6% with and 46.2% without pre-existing MH difficulty reported that their child feels “very” comfortable.

b. Specific concerns around attending school

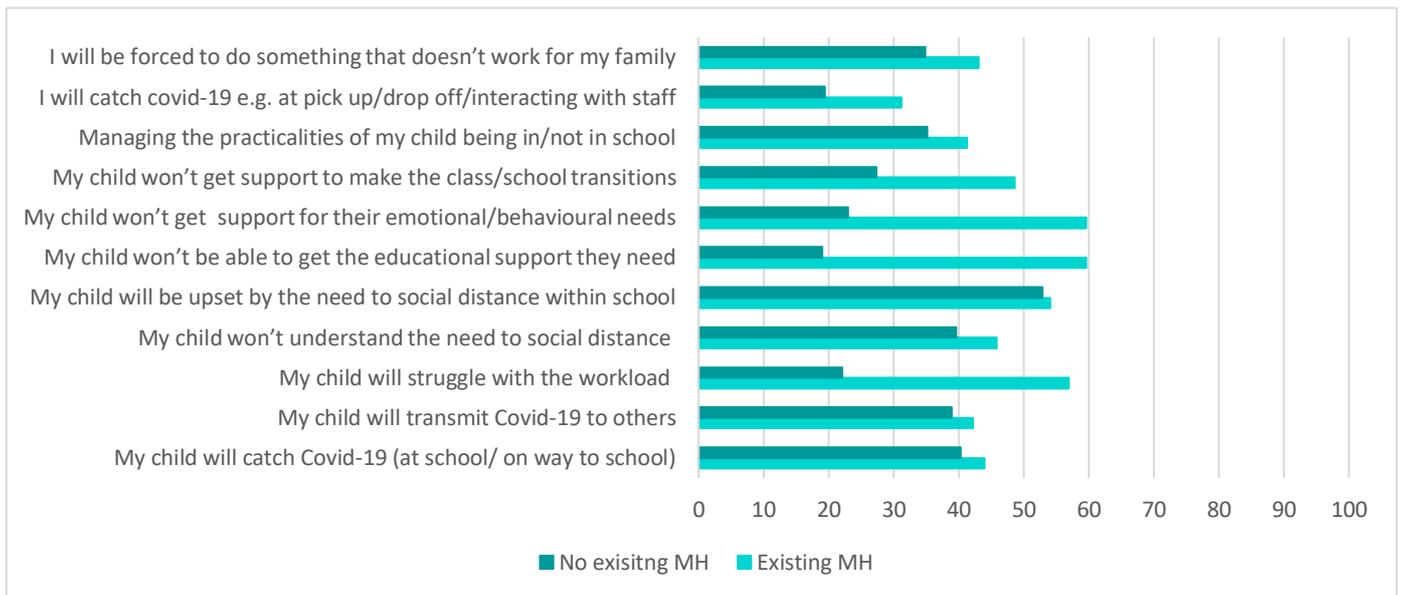
Figure 14. Percentage of parents/carers reporting that their child has substantial worries around different aspects of attending school, by child pre-existing mental health difficulties



In general, parents/carers of children of children with pre-existing MH difficulties reported that their children have relatively high levels of concerns about all aspects of attending school.

In particular, parents/carers of children with pre-existing MH difficulties reported that their child feels very concerned about things being different or uncertain (64.5% with and 36.7% without pre-existing MH difficulties), being away from home (45.3% with and 20.3% without pre-existing MH difficulties), changes to routine (46.7% with and 18.5% without pre-existing MH difficulties), problems concentrating (40.7% with and 11.4% without pre-existing MH difficulties), and not getting the support that they need for work (38.9% with and 12.2% without pre-existing MH difficulties), or their emotional and behavioural needs (38.3% with and 11.8% without pre-existing MH difficulties).

Figure 15. Percentage of parents/carers reporting that they have substantial worries around different aspects of attending school, by child pre-existing mental health difficulties



In general, parents/carers of children of children with pre-existing MH difficulties in particular reported having relatively high levels of concern about all aspects of their child attending school.

In particular, parents/carers of children with pre-existing MH difficulties reported that they were very concerned about their child not getting the support they need with their education (59.6% parents of children with and 19% parents of children without pre-existing MH concerns), emotions and behaviours (59.6% parents of children with and 23% parents of children without pre-existing MH concerns), or school and class transitions (48.6% parents of children with and 27.3% parents of children without pre-existing MH concerns), and that their child will struggle with workload (56.9% parents of children with and 22.1% parents of children without pre-existing MH concerns).

6. Household Income

a. Feelings about child attending school

Figure 16. Percentage of parent/carers of children with high and low household incomes reporting how comfortable they and their children feel about them attending school.

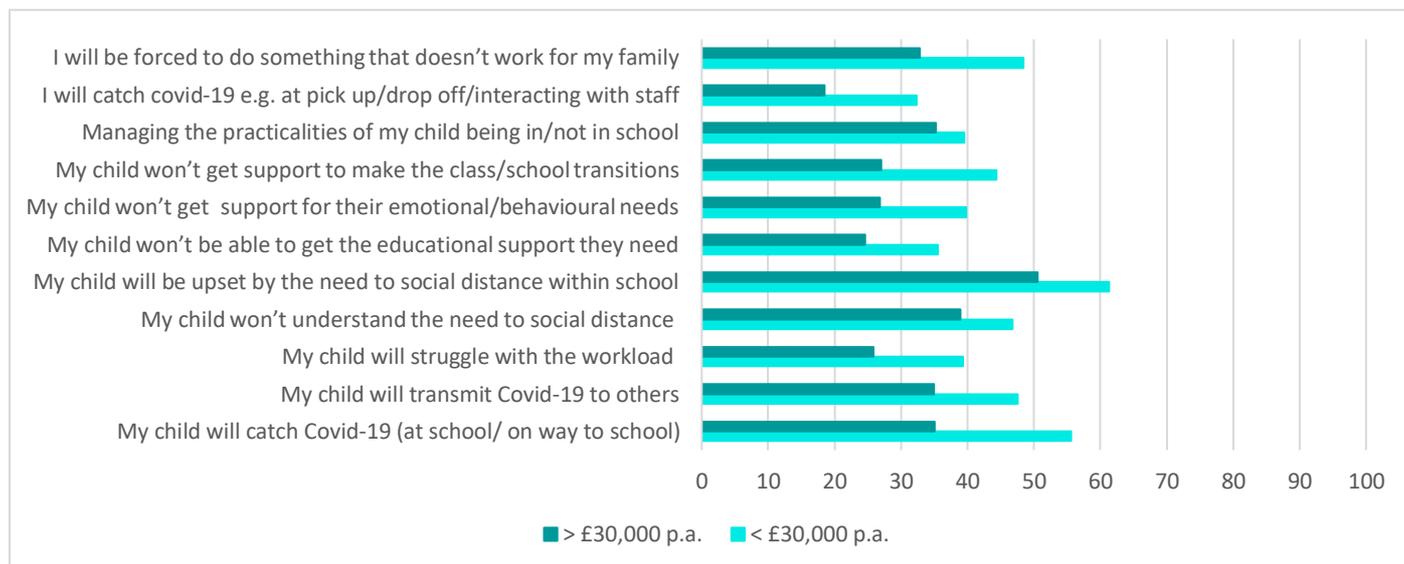


Of the 540 parents/carers who reported on their usual total household income, 126 parents reported theirs as below the national average of £30,000 per annum (20.4%) and 414 reported theirs as above the national average (66.9%).

Parents/carers from lower-income households reported feeling particularly uncomfortable about their child attending school. For example, nearly 60% of parents/carers from a lower-income household reported not feeling comfortable at all about their child attending school (59.3%) whereas 18.7% reported feeling very comfortable and 22% only somewhat comfortable. Just over a third of parents/carers from a higher-income household reported feeling not comfortable at all about their child attending school (38.6%).

b. Specific concerns around attending school

Figure 17. Percentage of parents/carers reporting that they have substantial worries around different aspects of attending school, by household income



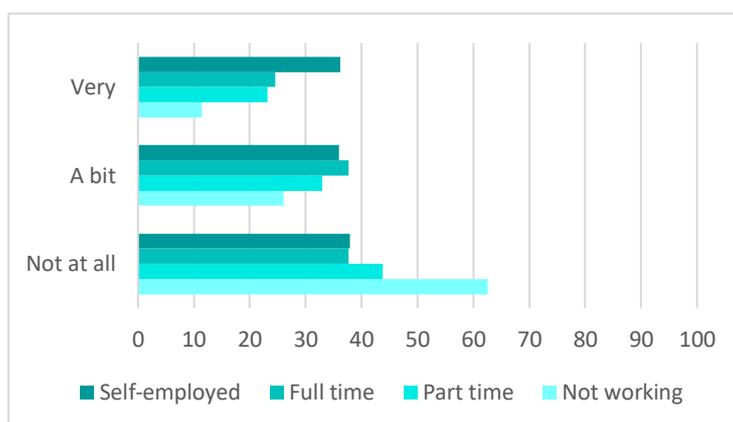
In general, parents/carers from lower income households had relatively high levels of concern about all aspects of their children attending school.

Parents/carers from lower income households were particularly concerned about their child being upset by the need to social distance (61.3% from lower and 50.6% from higher-income households), their child catching COVID-19 (55.6% from lower and 35.1% from higher-income households), being forced to do something that doesn't work for their family (48.4% from lower and 32.8% from higher-income households), their child transmitting COVID-19 (47.6% from lower and 35% from higher-income households), won't get the support to make school/class transitions (44.4% from lower and 27% from higher-income households), or for their emotional/behavioural needs (39.8% from lower and 26.8% from higher-income households), will struggle with workloads (39.3% from lower and 25.9% from higher-income households), won't get the educational support they need (35.5% from lower and 24.6% from higher-income households), and that they will catch COVID-19 at drop off or pick up (32.3% from lower and 18.5% from higher-income households).

7. Parent Working Status

a. Feelings about child attending school

Figure 18. Percentage of parent/carers with different working status's reporting how comfortable they feel about them attending school



Parents/carers reported on whether they were self-employed, employed part-time, employed full-time, or not working (including those who are in education themselves, homemakers, unable to work, unemployed, or retired).

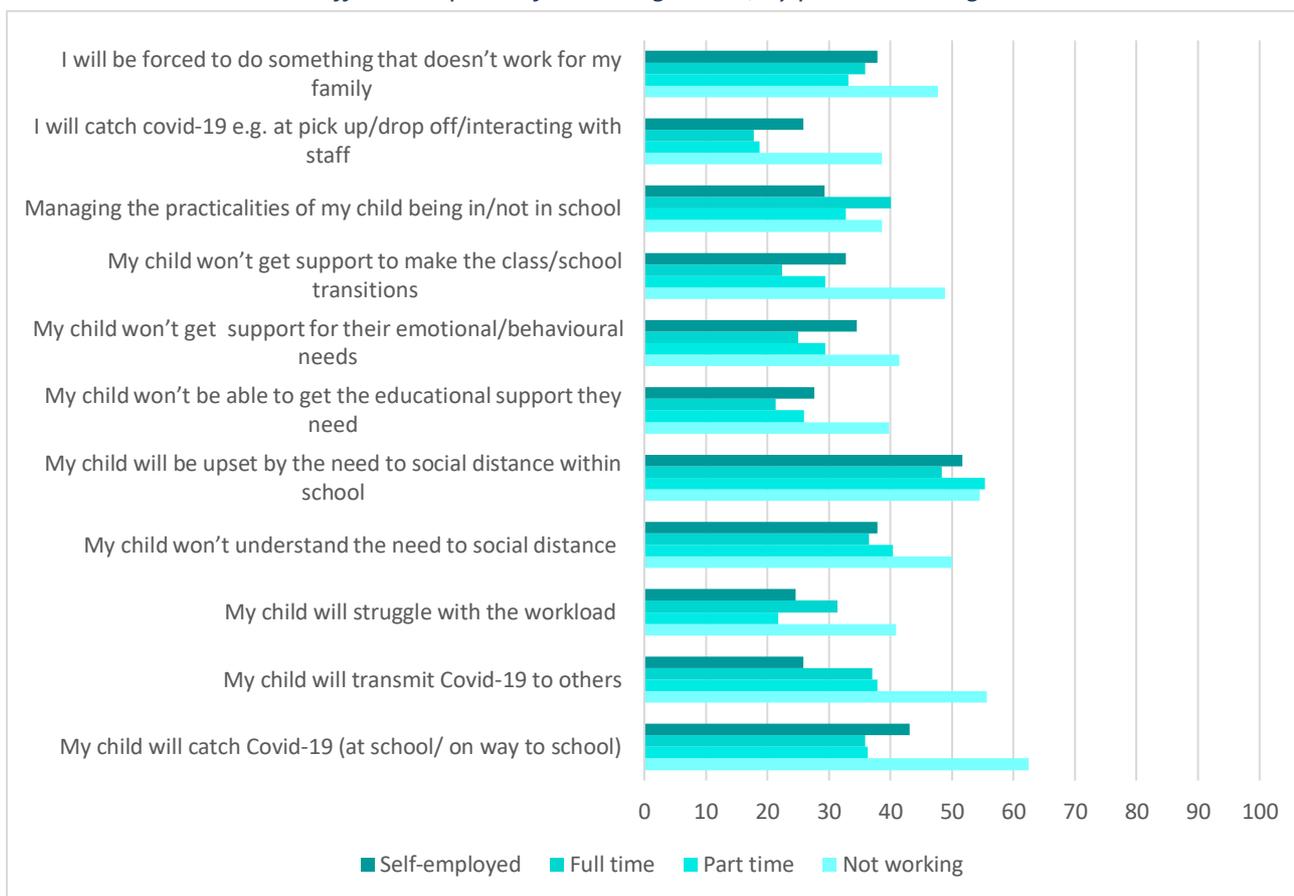
Parents/carers who are self-employed appear to be most comfortable about their children attending school, where just over a third reported feeling “very comfortable” (36.2%). Around a quarter of employed parents/carers (24.6% full-time, 23.2% part-time), and only 11.4% of parents/carers who are not working reported feeling very comfortable about their child attending school.

However, around 40% of all working parents/carers reported that they do not feel at all comfortable about their child attending school (37.9% self-employed, 37.7% full-time, 43.8% part-time), and around a third reported feeling only somewhat comfortable (35.9% self-employed, 37.7% full-time, 33% part-time).

Parents/carers who are not working appear to feel the least comfortable about their child returning to work; 62.5% reported that they do not feel at all comfortable.

b. Specific concerns around attending school

Figure 19. Percentage of parents/carers reporting that they have substantial worries around different aspects of attending school, by parent working status



Parents/carers across all working statuses reported being concerned that their child would be upset by the need to social distance (51.7% self-employed, 48.4% employed full-time, 55.4% employed part-time, 54.5% not working).

Parents/carers who are not working had relatively high levels of concern about all aspects of their children attending school. Many parents/carers who are not working reported being particularly concerned that their child would catch (62.5%) or transmit COVID-19 (55.7%). Around half of non-working parents/carers also reported being concerned that their child wouldn't understand the need to social distance (50%), wouldn't get the support they need with class/school transitions (48.9%) and that they would be forced to do something that doesn't work for their family (47.7%).

Parents/carers who are employed full-time in particular reported that they were concerned about managing the practicalities of their child being in/not in school (40.1% employed full-time, 32.8% employed part-time, 29.3% self-employed).

Appendix A

Participants' demographics

		Number of observations	%
<i>Parent/carer</i>	Parents	562	90.8
	Carers	16	2.6
<i>Gender</i>	Female	549	88.7
	Male	27	4.4
	Other	2	0.3
<i>Work</i>	Working full-time	194	31.3
	Working part-time	238	38.4
	Self-employed	58	9.4
	Not working	88	14.2
<i>Annual household income</i>	< £30,000	126	20.4
	> £30,000	414	66.9
	Prefer not to say	38	6.1
<i>Child age</i>	Child (aged 4-11 years)	426	68.8
	Adolescent (aged 12-16 years)	152	24.6
<i>Child gender</i>	Female	292	47.2
	Male	292	47.2
	Other	4	0.5
<i>Child SEND/ND</i>	SEND/ND	102	16.6
	No SEND/ND	475	76.7
<i>Existing MH concerns</i>	Pre-existing MH difficulty	109	17.6
	No pre-existing MH difficulty	510	82.4

