

Briefing

School return: Covid-19 and school attendance

October 2020 (Updated 2 Nov 2020)

Background

In March 2020, the outbreak of Covid-19 across England led to the closure of schools to nearly all pupils. This was an unprecedented event in peacetime Britain. This briefing covers:

- 1) **What happened in the period March – July 2020**, a period when over 575m days of schooling were lost across England.
- 2) **What has happened since schools returned in September 2020**. Including:
 - > How many children are now attending school
 - > How many children are being sent home due to Covid
- 3) **What we still do not know, and the children we're concerned about**. Including a rise in 'unexplained absence', not related to Covid
- 4) **What children have told us about the return to school**. A Children's Commissioner survey of 1,500 children on their return to school found:
 - > 71% of children agreed that they were excited to be back at school
 - > 93% said they were happy to see their schoolfriends again.
 - > 63% were worried about not being able to go to school under another lockdown.

What happened in the period March - July 2020

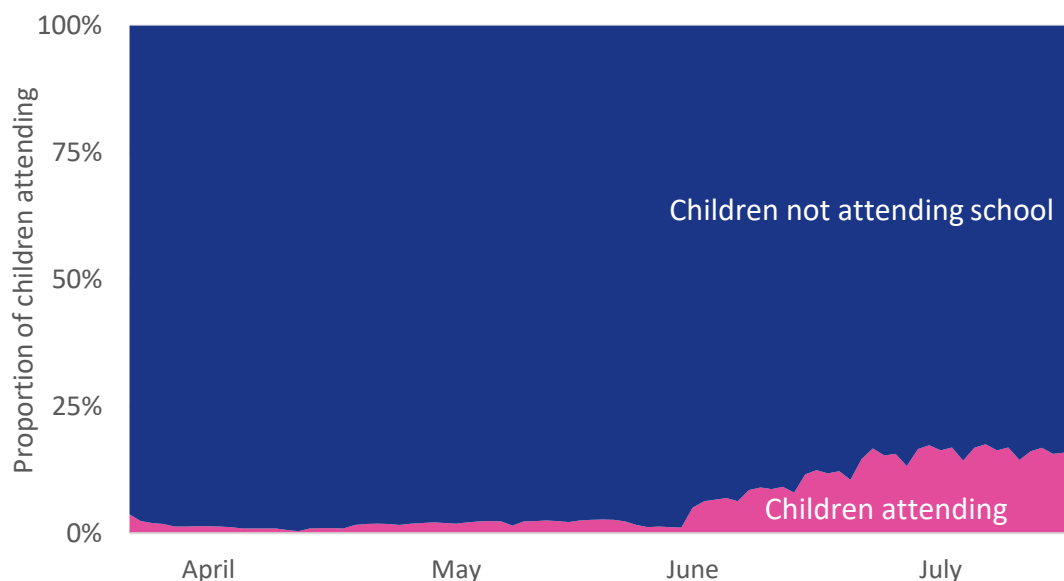
As part of the lockdown introduced in March 2020, all but a few children – vulnerable children¹ and children of key workers – were told to remain at home. **Between the end of March and the start of June, an average of 2% of pupils on roll were in attendance**². Not only were most children told to stay home but attendance among children still expected to come in was low. **Before schools partially re-opened in June, average attendance for children with an EHCP or social worker was only 7.8%.**

This situation persisted until a partial and gradual re-opening beginning in June. However this partial return was of only limited success, with not all schools, and not all areas, opening. Attendance peaked in July with 17.5% in attendance before the summer break. As the table below illustrates, the overwhelming majority of pupils missed out on more than 12 weeks of schooling, **with a total of over 575m days of education lost.**

¹ Vulnerable children were defined as those with a social worker or on an Education and Healthcare Plan (EHCP)

² All statistics are CCO calculations of DfE attendance data. All statistics for pre-September attendance are based on [Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak \(Week 29\)](#).

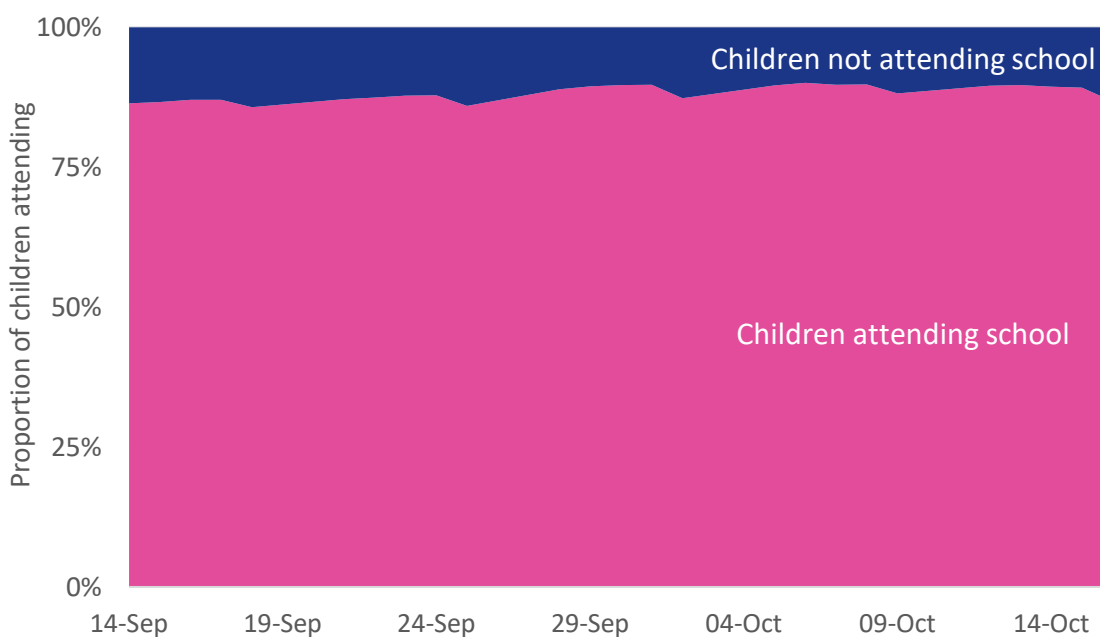
Figure 1: School Attendance April-July 2020



The return of schools in September

The full re-opening of schools in September has been largely successful. The numbers of children in school started high (over 80%) and grew steadily throughout September. **By early October, 9 out of 10 children are in attendance each day on average³, including 5 out of 6 vulnerable children (those with an EHCP or social worker).⁴** The diagram below, showing school attendance since September, shows the overwhelming number of children are in school.

Figure 2: Overall daily attendance since return to school



³ 89.2% average attendance for all pupils on roll in the week Friday 11th October to Thursday 15th October

⁴ 83.5% average attendance for children with a social worker in the week Friday 11th October to Thursday 15th October. 83.4% average attendance for children with an EHCP in the week Friday 11th October to Thursday 15th October

Schools continue to stay open

As the diagram above shows, the number of children in school grew throughout September, but has stalled since. The week before half term's average attendance (89.2%) is lower than that of the week before (89.3%). **However, attendance rates are still significantly higher than they were in September, and nearly 9 out of 10 children are still in school.** Furthermore, more than 4 in 5 children with an EHCP or a social worker are going to school – compared to less than 1 in 12 during the spring.

Moreover, given the rise in case numbers since the beginning of September, school attendance has remained remarkably robust. The week before half term, an average of 99.7% of schools were open. Nearly 8 out of 10 schools (81%) were “fully” open, meaning no children were being told to self-isolate due to potential transmission within the school.

It is important to note that confirmed Covid cases at school remain very rare. **There are just 8,000 (0.1%) pupils reported to be off school with a confirmed Covid case out of a total school population of 8.2 million.**⁵ School level clusters or outbreaks are rarer still: PHE's latest surveillance report shows that even in the most recent week for which we have data, only 202 ‘clusters’ or ‘outbreaks’ of Covid-19 were recorded in schools.⁶ This is equivalent, on average, to an outbreak in less than 1 in 100 schools.

The relatively high numbers of children off-school given low numbers of children with Covid-19, is due to large numbers of children being sent home from school following one positive case within schools. When we look at the data reported by individual schools, we see that **the average school is sending home 62 pupils for every child who tests positive for Covid** (while the median school is sending home 34 pupils).⁷ As the table below demonstrates, this varies significantly across schools.

Table 1: Number of children asked to self-isolate per confirmed case of COVID-19

Phase	Median	Mean	25 th percentile	75 th percentile
Primary	32	46	28	59
Secondary	47	86	25	139
Other	21	52	13	43
All schools	34	62	26	70

This table demonstrates that, at secondary school:

- > An average of 47 (median) or 86 (mean) children are being sent home for every Covid case.
- > The considerable difference between the mean and median indicates that a small number of secondary schools are sending home very large numbers of pupils per case of Covid. In fact, as the table also shows, in a quarter of schools 139 children or more are sent home following a positive case.
- > But at the other end of the scale, in a quarter of schools 25 children or less are sent home following a positive case

⁵ These figures are restricted to state-funded schools only and exclude any schools on half-term break.

⁶ Source:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/923668/Weekly_COVID19_Surveillance_Report_week_40.pdf

⁷ These figures are calculated by taking the ratio of the number of children recorded as self-isolating in a school on the first day they record a confirmed case of coronavirus and report having consulted public health teams. The means and medians are then calculated from these school level ratios. This sample is limited to schools supplying data every day between 14th September and 9th October. This differs from data [published by the DfE](#) that provide an alternative estimate of 44 children sent home for each outbreak on average calculated by dividing the number of children currently self-isolating by the number of children with a confirmed case. These two estimates are not comparable due to these differences in methodology and its use of more recent data based on different definitions.

What we still don't know

The Department for Education collects daily attendance totals from schools, but is not currently collecting pupil-level data (schools do record this and will report it to the Department for Education in the future). This means: **we know how many children are at school each day, and that about 10% of children are absent each day. But we do *not* know of these 10% of children absent each day, how many are consistently absent, or how many have not returned to school at all since September.** We also don't know who are the children that aren't attending, and whether they have particular needs or vulnerabilities.

Attendance is lower than at the equivalent point last year. In Autumn 2019, the overall absence rate was 4.93%. While attendance has improved since the start of term, there remains a large gap between current attendance and what it would usually be. For example, on 15th October 89.2% of pupils on roll in state-funded schools were in attendance and between 4% and 5% of pupils were absent for COVID-19 related reasons (i.e. self-isolating due to a suspected or confirmed case or contact with a case). **This means that there were between 1% and 2% pupils absent over and above the expected rate, this is 120,000-200,000 children.**

Table 2: Total School Absence, October 2020

Pupils in attendance	89%
Autumn 2019 absence rate	5%
COVID-19 absences	4% to 5%
Unexplained absences	1% to 2%
Total absences	11%

While we are concerned about this rise in absence, the failure of the DfE to collect pupil-level data from schools during this term means that we cannot within these numbers identify persistent-absence and school refusal or the number of pupils who have been removed from the school role (indicating they may have been withdrawn for home education).

Nor has the DfE collected data from schools on school exclusions (again, schools do record this and will report it to the DfE later in the year). Anecdotally, local authorities and some schools have reported to the Children's Commissioner's Office concerns about rises in both home education and school exclusion, but we do not have the data to substantiate these accounts at present.

What children have told us about the return to school

Between 5 and 11 October, the Children's Commissioner ran a survey of 1,500 children who had been back to school since the start of September, to get their opinions about how it had gone. The survey found that:

- > **71% agreed with the statement that they felt excited to be back in school**
- > 93% said they were happy to see their schoolfriends again.
- > 63% were worried about not being able to go to school under another lockdown or school closure.
- > **71% of children agreed with the statement 'I feel safe at school'**. Primary school students were the most likely to feel safe (78%), and girls were more likely to agree that they felt safe compared to boys (74% compared to 67%).
- > 91% of children agreed with the statement 'I understand what the coronavirus guidelines are in my school and how to follow them'.

Children also told us in their own words about the stresses that school closures caused them:

"Being stuck in one place with everyone at home arguing all the time" - Boy, 15

"Being back in my friendship group. I am an only child and have missed that, especially as we are in a lockdown area." Girl, 17

"Due to school closing I'm missing out on a huge chunk of education that can prepare me for secondary school and later life. That makes me feel unprepared and not ready for the journey ahead. Despite doing the same subjects, I miss a sense of structure in my life. I miss socialising with my friends and laughing with them." Girl, 11