

# **Findings from 'The Big Ask' survey on Special Educational Needs and/or Disability (SEND)**

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

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## Introduction

*‘People with disabilities are very intelligent in their own way, we all have a voice if it’s by iPad or by mobile phone or eye gaze or a communication book’ – Boy, 17, The Big Ask.*

In April 2021, the Children’s Commissioner for England, Dame Rachel de Souza, launched The Big Ask: a national consultation exercise with children in England to ask them about their lives and their priorities, aspirations and worries for the future. The purpose was not only to provide a large-scale ‘state of the nation’ assessment of the views of children on these issues, but also to help inform the Commissioner’s priorities and longer-term strategy for her term in office, and to help ensure that children’s needs and interests could be placed at the forefront of policy measures to recover from the impacts of the pandemic.

The Big Ask ran for approximately 6 weeks and gathered more than 550,000 responses, making it the largest ever survey of children anywhere in the world, to our knowledge.

The 6-8 and 9+ ‘Big Ask’ surveys included one free-text question each. To ensure the survey was age-appropriate, the questions asked to the 6-8 age group and children aged 9+ were slightly different, though designed to capture the same theme and underlying issues.

### **The 9-12 and 13-17 surveys asked:**

*‘What do you think stops children/young people in England achieving the things they want to achieve when they grow up?’*

### **The 6-8 survey asked:**

*‘If you could change anything to make your life better when you grow up, what would it be?’*

This analysis explores how children felt about their physical health generally alongside qualitative analysis of the main themes from children whose response referred to disability. The methodology for how the qualitative data were analysed is available separately.<sup>12</sup>

## **Quantitative findings**

### **Happiness in life**

Children aged 9-17 were asked 'how happy are you with these things in your life now?' and were given a list of aspects of their life to consider which included 'my physical health' and 'my life overall'.

Overall, the majority of children were happy or ok with their physical health (89%) however around 1 in 10 children were unhappy with their physical health and 3% of children overall were very unhappy with their physical health. Unhappiness with physical health was linked to unhappiness with life overall, with 45% of children unhappy with life overall also unhappy with their physical health.

Similarly, there was a link with mental health, children unhappy with their physical health were four times more likely to be unhappy with their mental health compared to other children.

Older children were the least likely to be happy or ok with their physical health, only 80% were happy or ok with this compared to 95% of 9-11 year olds. In other words, 16-17 year olds were nearly 4 times more likely to be unhappy compared to 9-11 year olds.

Girls were slightly less likely to be happy with their physical health than boys (88% compared to 91% happy or ok respectively). The difference in levels of unhappiness was greatest for girls aged 16-17, nearly 1 in 4 were unhappy with their physical health, compared with around 1 in 7 boys aged 16-17 and 1 in 20 girls aged 9-11.

Among children aged 9-17, 72% of children with SEND<sup>3</sup> were happy with their life overall compared to 71% of children overall. Across most aspects of life, children with SEND were just as happy as children overall. Minor differences include:

Children with SEND were less likely to be happy with their friendships (78% vs 80% for children without SEND), their experiences online (71% vs 74% for children without SEND) and their personal safety (78% vs 81% for children without SEND).

Children receiving SEND support were more likely to be happy with their life at school (62% vs 56% for children without SEND) and progress in education (70% vs 68% for children without SEND) and mental health (61% vs 57% for children without SEND).

## **Vulnerable children**

Children receiving mental health support were least likely to be happy or ok with their physical health (76%). They were more than twice as likely to be unhappy with this aspect of their life than other children.

Children supported by children's social care (in care or receiving support from a social worker) were slightly less likely to be happy with their physical health than other children (87% compared to 89%). The difference was greater for children in kinship care (living with relatives other than their parents) and young carers (84% and 85% respectively were happy or ok with their physical health).

Children who were identified as being within our SEND proxy measure were generally as likely to be happy or ok with their physical health as other children (90% happy or ok compared to 89%).

There was also a small variation by neighbourhood deprivation. Children in the most deprived 10% of areas were slightly less likely to be happy or ok with their physical health (87%) compared with children in the most affluent 10% of neighbourhoods (90%).

## **Priorities for a good future**

Children aged 9-17 were asked 'when you grow up, which things, if any, do you think will be the most important for you to have a good life? Choose up to 5 things from the list below'. The list included 'good physical health' alongside 14 other options including 'I don't know' and 'other'.

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Thirty one percent of all children aged 9-17 selected good physical health as a future priority making it the seventh most popular option.

Older children aged 16-17 were slightly more likely than those aged 9-11 to choose good physical health as one of their priorities (38% compared to 26%) and this option was the fifth most commonly selected among the older age group. Despite girls being the least likely to be happy with their current physical health, boys were more likely to choose good physical health as a future priority (34% of boys selected this compared to 28% of girls).

The top 2 future priorities are the same for children with SEN and without SEND (A good job or career and enough money to buy the things I need). Children with SEND are more likely to choose 'Having a good education' than children without SEND (58% for children with SEND vs 51% for children without SEND). Future worries are similar for children with SEND and without SEND. More children with SEND are worried about having a good education (22% for children with SEND vs 17% for children without SEND).

## **Future worries**

Children aged 9-17 were then given the same list of options and asked 'when you grow up which of these, if any, are you most worried that you won't have? Choose up to 5 things'.

Twenty two percent of children aged 9-17 chose good physical health as one of their top five future worries. Children who chose good mental health as one of their future worries were more likely to also choose good physical health.

Older children aged 16-17 were 30% more likely to choose good physical health as a future worry compared to children aged 9-11. Despite boys being slightly more likely to choose good physical health as a future priority, there was no significant difference between boys and girls choosing this as one of their future worries.

## Qualitative findings

Children thought that having a disability might be a barrier to achieving success in adulthood and this was not dependent on the child having a disability themselves. Over a thousand children mentioned disability as a potential barrier, and raised concerns such as discrimination or a lack of support:

*'Discrimination on people with disabilities both physically and mentally, makes children feel unsuccessful and like they can't do top jobs, which stops them reaching further. Disability shouldn't be a barrier for entry to things'* – Girl, 16, The Big Ask.

*'Not supporting those with special needs, and their families [...] it's not easy to get a job that you want and the life you want. If you have a disability, it's much harder'* – Girl, 11, The Big Ask.

## Preparing for the future

Some children with disabilities mentioned concerns about being prepared for the future and succeeding with their education.

*'Children with disabilities are not prepared for the future as they should. They are not taught the skills that they really need to achieve in live after. Social skills, self help, managing emotions and travel training are introduced too late. [...] We need individual tailored curriculums and people who believe in us'* – Boy, 15, The Big Ask.

*'I have been under the hospital for all my life going through lengthy operations with time healing wounds to medication I have to stay on for the rest of my life and it scares me that I have missed out on so much of my school life. [...] I am terrified I cannot get the job of my dreams, working with animals. [...] I hope I can achieve my own'* – Girl, 16, The Big Ask.

*'I have Crohn's disease so that has cut me off from a lot of things. Seeing my friends, doing physical stuff and much more. I don't like thinking about the past or future, it scares me quite a bit. I don't think I'm*

*doing very well in school and I'm not sure if I'll catch up like everyone else. [...] I also don't know what I want to achieve in the future, it's all messed up in my head'* – Girl, 12, The Big Ask.

## **Accessibility**

Accessibility to public spaces, particularly for children in wheelchairs or with mobility difficulties was mentioned as a barrier by older children and as something younger children would change to make their lives better:

*'I am in a wheelchair and there is nothing for me in my area. I can't make friends, I can't even get into most places'* – Boy, 14, The Big Ask.

*'More accessible playgrounds, wheelchair accessibility areas. No barriers for wheelchair users and disabled people. Support to get me where I need to be'* – Boy, 6, The Big Ask.

*'More places that are wheelchair accessible. There are so many places I can't go to because there are no toilets for me (proper changing places with hoists)'* – Girl, 8, The Big Ask.

For one girl, even getting around at home could be a challenge:

*'I would like a bigger house so I can move around better in my wheelchair'* – Girl, 7, The Big Ask.

## **Equality, discrimination & bullying**

Similarly, to being able to access public spaces, children with disabilities talked about wanting to be treated equally and not be judged on the basis of their disability.

*'Physical access to things and people judging me and thinking I can't do something before they know me. I'm in a wheelchair but my head is perfect'* - Girl, 11, The Big Ask.

*'I have a disability - downs syndrome. I am afraid I am not going to be treated fairly - whether this means getting a good job, being able to stay on my own, or being part of the community. If the community*

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*and the wider world aren't aware of my disabilities, and what I can achieve, I won't be even be given a chance to prove what I can achieve' - Girl, 17, The Big Ask.*

For one girl, the main thing she would change to make her life better would be to simply have friends and to not be bullied for her disability:

*'To have friends I have no one to help me I get bullied cuz I have a bad genetic disease and cancer I'm bald and they make fun of me they call me minion and that makes me sad' – Girl, 8, The Big Ask.*

#### Challenges in education

Many children with SEND were quite vocal about challenges they had experienced in education. These children wanted teachers to have more training to equip them with learning materials and teaching approaches that would work for them. They also wanted easier routes to diagnosis within school, easier access to treatment, and more awareness within school of different types of SEND.

*'I am dyslexic and I don't feel there is enough support and resources in school to help me. Teachers are not trained in dyslexia so it takes a long time to be diagnosed so you just feel stupid for a long time which makes you unhappy' – Girl, 12, The Big Ask.*

*'Our current education system is not suited to... those with ADD, ADHD and autism. Teachers aren't educated in the teaching styles that are appropriate, or don't care enough to implement the techniques to help students' – Girl, 16, The Big Ask.*

*'Not enough mental health help or educated teachers in noticing students who may have issues. In my case, I was recently diagnosed with ADHD at 17 and for the whole of lower school only 2 teachers listened when I was frustrated' – Girl, 17, The Big Ask.*

For children who were home educated or were not in any education, the most consistently mentioned barrier was the lack of support for SEND. This included access to timely diagnoses, support from the school and teachers and lack of suitable adjustments or provisions to meet their needs, resulting in them not being able to participate in mainstream education.

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*'There aren't enough school places for young people with SEN. Mainstream school is really hard to cope with. I have been out of school for a very long time, and I don't see friends, it can be really lonely. I don't think people always understand autism and it's hard to fit in. I need an education so I can get a good job, but I am stuck because there is no school where I fit in' – Girl, 16, not in education, The Big Ask.*

*'I have never had the help I need my education has been non-existent and I now live I care because my family didn't get help to care for me. I have Tourette's syndrome and I am isolated with no friends. I spend my whole time with adults' – Girl, 17, not in education, The Big Ask.*

Many children with SEND talked about how hard their parents had to work to secure support for them in school.

*'I'm autistic and they didn't help me at school. Even after my parents got an EHCP they still didn't help me. [...] My mum and dad spent a lot of money for me to see therapists to help me. School didn't do any of that. I'm worried for people like my brother because he has severe learning disabilities and my mum and dad are always trying to get him the right help but they don't help. I'm scared for him because I know they put people like him in special prisons called ATUs [...] It's not fair and I want to tell Mr Johnson to help people like us' – Girl, 13, The Big Ask.*

*'My mum is trying to get me support for my bad anxiety attacks and ADHD but everyone she contacts tells her to contact another place and she is going round in circles. School makes me so anxious because I can't learn as quickly as everyone else and I struggle with my concentration' – Boy, 12, The Big Ask.*

*'I have autism and I struggle with school, I want to do well but the system doesn't work for me and I have been excluded 4 times due to my condition. I wish it was easier to go to a school that I liked but mum and dad are very sad that they have to work hard to fill forms in and fight to get me what I need' – Boy, 10, The Big Ask.*

*'I was not given a language system until I was 9 and so I had no way of communicating even my most basic needs. [...] It also meant I could not make friends and didn't have a single friend. I was hurt by other children. My mum had to do a lot of work to get me the help I need. She had to give up her job to*

*support me [...] since she did all of things she managed to get me into a different independent special school'* – Boy, 13, attending a school for deaf children, The Big Ask.

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<sup>1</sup> The Children's Commissioner For England, *The Big Ask Qualitative Methodology*, 2021. [Link](#)

<sup>2</sup> The Children's Commissioner For England, *The Big Ask Methodology*, 2021. [Link](#)

<sup>3</sup> For all findings on children with SEND from The Big Ask, it is important to note that 'children with SEND' is defined as those receiving support from a teaching assistant/SENCO, those enrolled in a special school or those completing the easy read version of the questionnaires, and therefore may not be representative of the population of all children with SEND.



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