

# SCHOOL ATTENDANCE PROBLEMS DURING COVID-19

In West Sussex, East Sussex, and Brighton and Hove

Created by Brontë McDonald, Supervised By Dr. Daniel Michelson, Dr. Kathryn Lester



## INTRODUCTION

- School attendance problems (SAPs) refer to different types of absences from school that are considered to have problematic outcomes for children.
- The onset of SAPs is likely to occur in primary school [1] and, although the importance of early intervention has been evidence in mitigating the negative outcomes, there is yet to be a focus on support for primary school-aged children in the UK [1].
- Furthermore, Covid-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the educational lives of children across the world and attendance rates are considerably lower than previous years [2].

## METHODOLOGY

**Method**  
Online qualitative survey.

### Participants

29 parents of children experiencing SAP

19 educational professionals (EPs) who work with children experiencing SAP.

Our sample was limited to the Sussex area.

**Analysis**  
Thematic analysis with a focus on answering the research questions.

## OBJECTIVE

This study aimed to provide a foundational understanding of the primary school-aged children's experience of SAP during the Covid-19 pandemic.

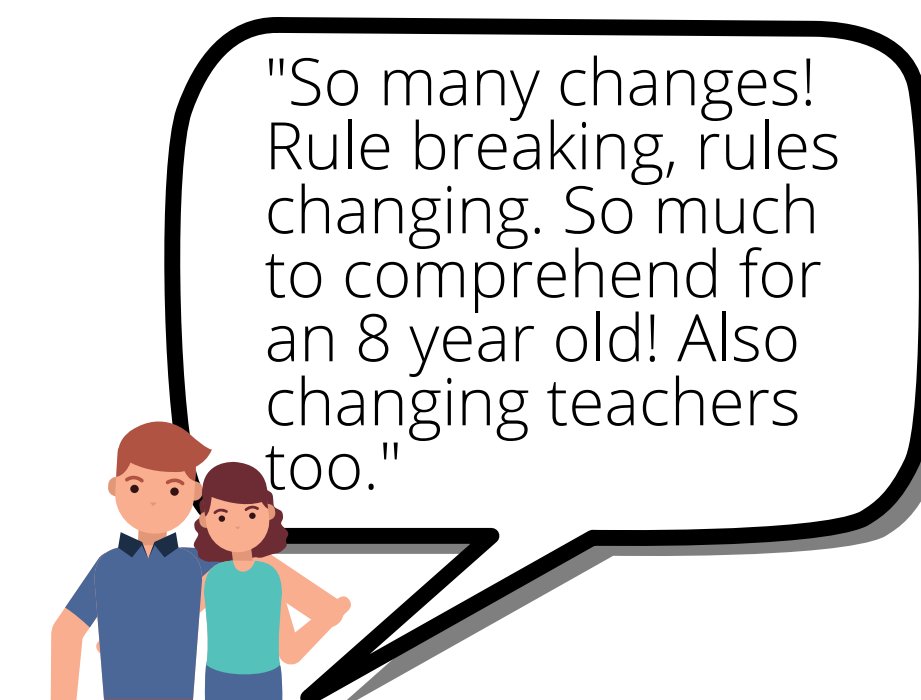
Specifically the research questions were;

What are the factors associated with SAP?

What was the support provided to children and families?

What additional support would be helpful for the children and their families?

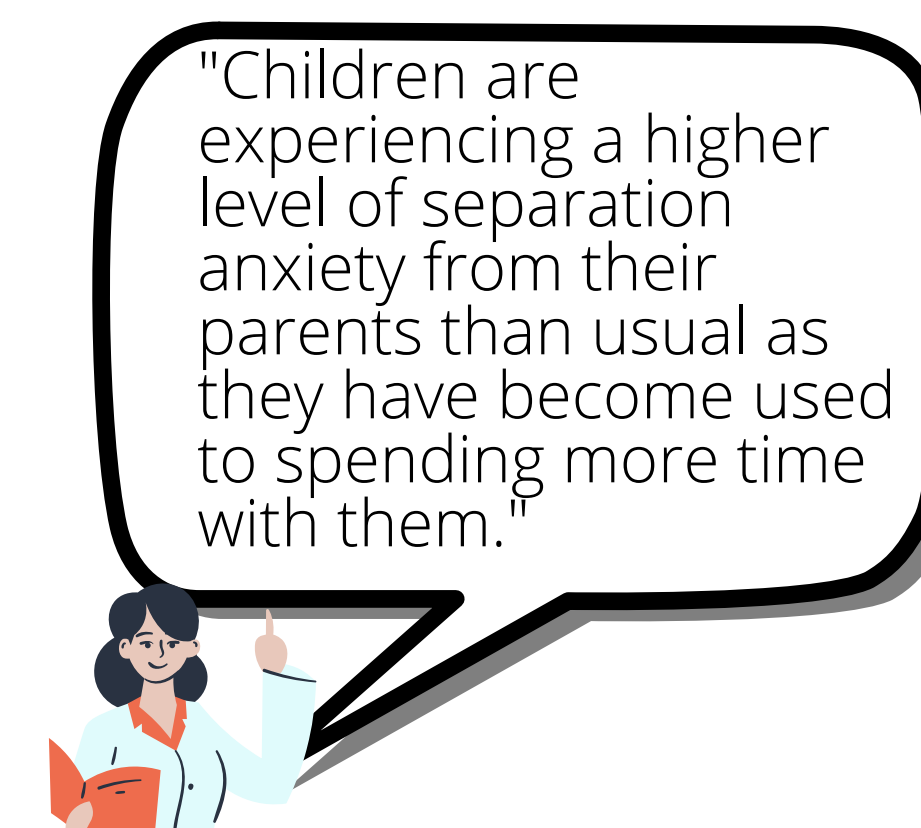
## RESULTS



"So many changes! Rule breaking, rules changing. So much to comprehend for an 8 year old! Also changing teachers too."

### Changes Covid-19 has had on school life

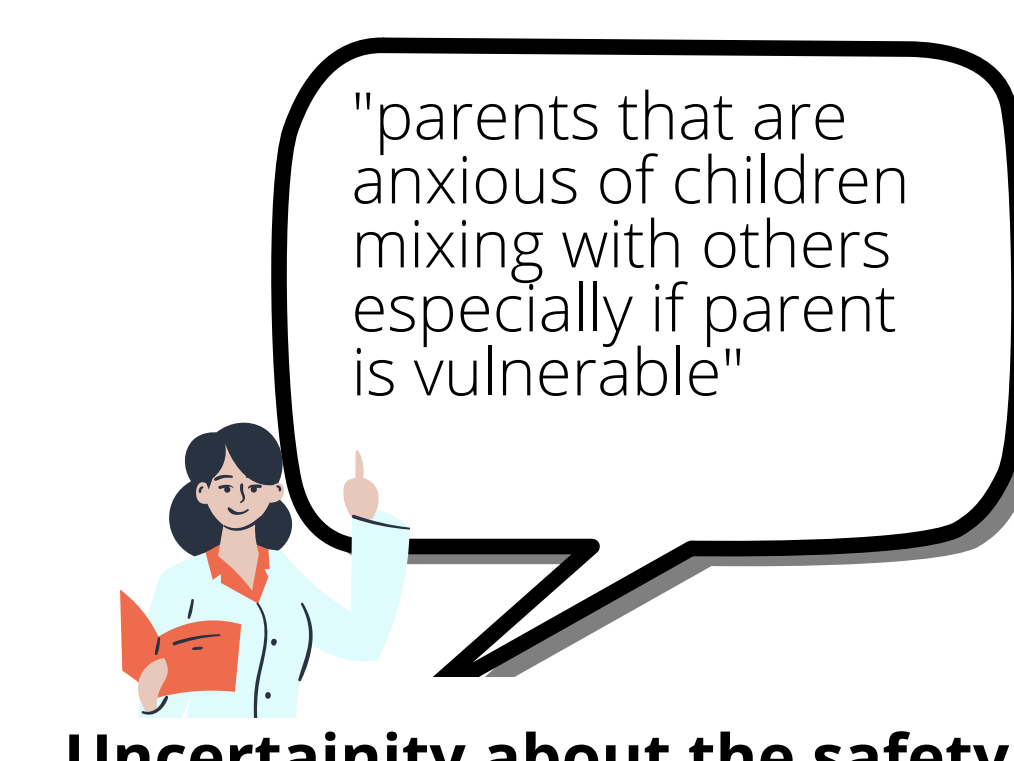
Both groups reported that children were finding the new routines and rules (due to covid-19) overwhelming and worried about 'getting it wrong'



"Children are experiencing a higher level of separation anxiety from their parents than usual as they have become used to spending more time with them."

### Separation anxiety between child and parent

After spending lockdown together, children are finding it more difficult to be away from their parents, the parents are also anxious about children being away.



"parents that are anxious of children mixing with others especially if parent is vulnerable"

### Uncertainty about the safety of school (Covid-19)

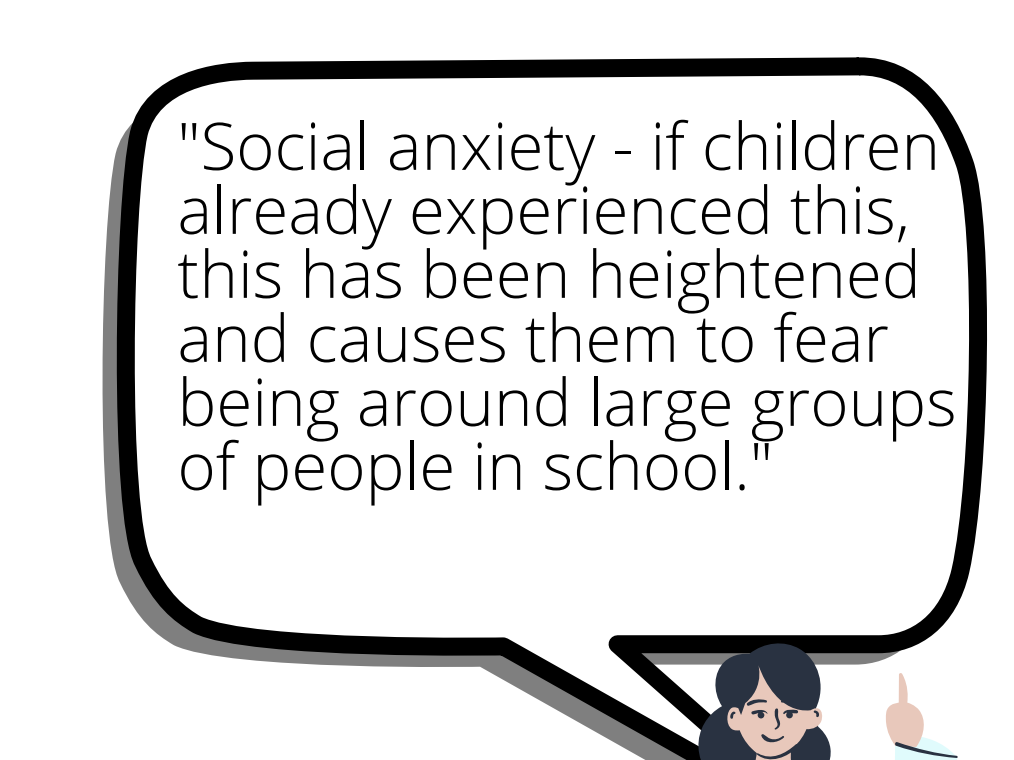
Some of the parents reported that their child felt uncertain about the safety of schools. This was not reported by the EPs, but they did report parents anxieties and uncertainties about school



"His worries about being behind compared to his peer group"

### Worry about catching up on learning

Both EPs and parents reported that children with SAP were worried about catching up with learning after lockdown, especially compared to their friends.

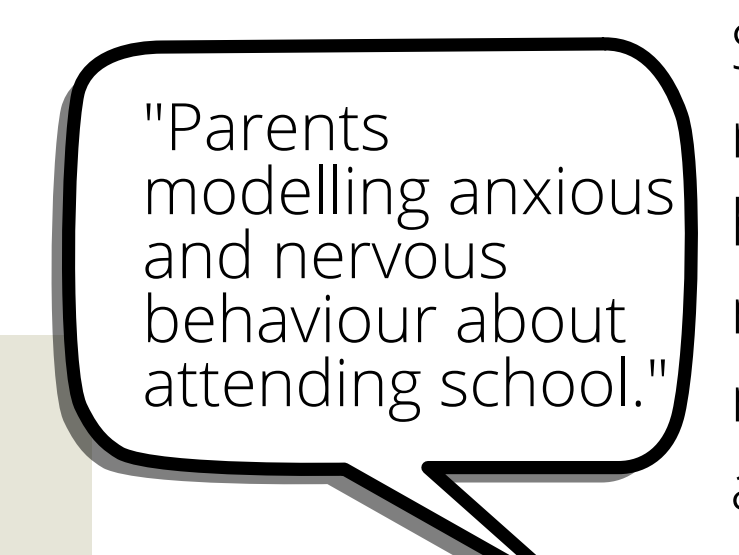
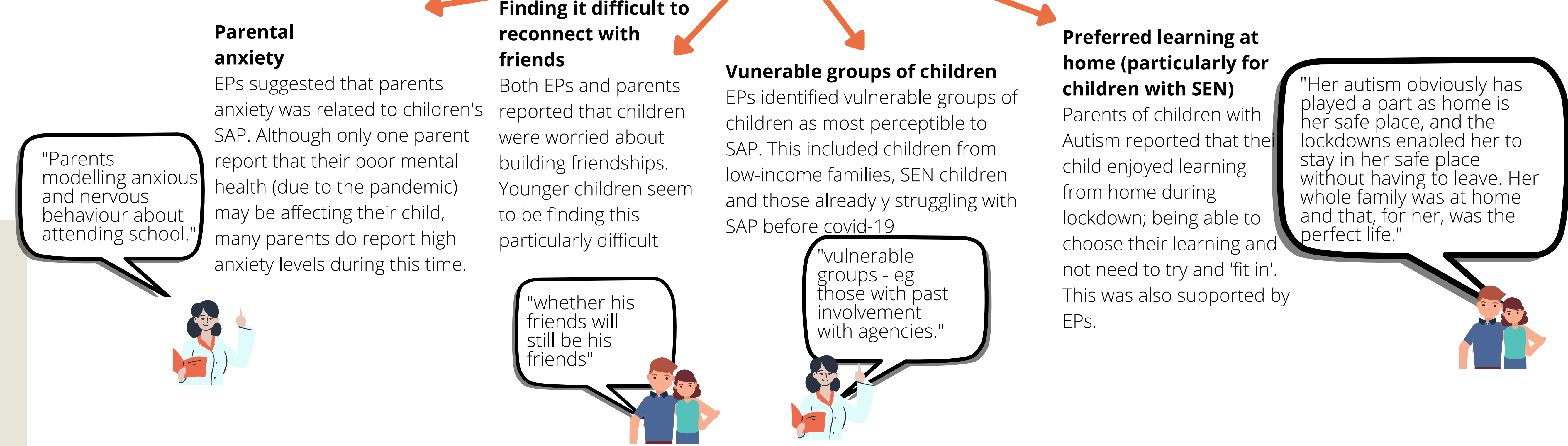


"Social anxiety - if children already experienced this, this has been heightened and causes them to fear being around large groups of people in school."

### pre-existing anxieties being exacerbated

Some parents reported that their child was sometimes anxious about school before Covid-19, however, since the lockdowns, have found that their child's anxieties are heightened. EP support this and highlights social anxiety and one that has been particularly heightened and leading to SAP.

## Drivers of SAP



"Parents modelling anxious and nervous behaviour about attending school."

### Parental anxiety

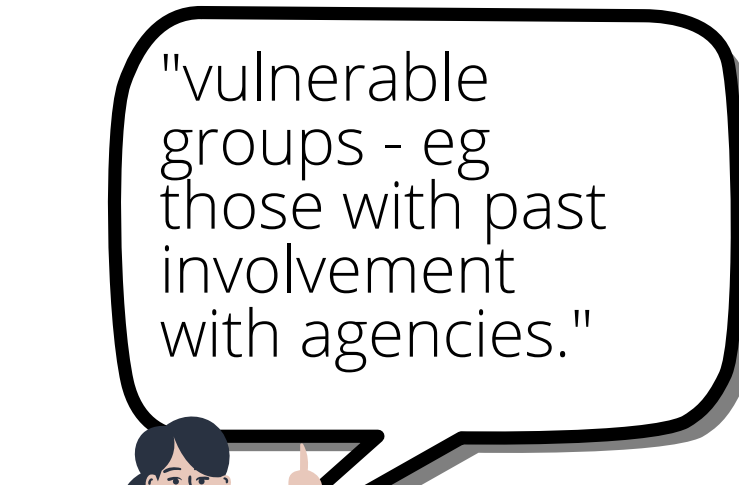
EPs suggested that parents anxiety was related to children's SAP. Although only one parent report that their poor mental health (due to the pandemic) may be affecting their child, many parents do report high-anxiety levels during this time.

### Finding it difficult to reconnect with friends

Both EPs and parents reported that children were worried about building friendships. Younger children seem to be finding this particularly difficult

### Vulnerable groups of children

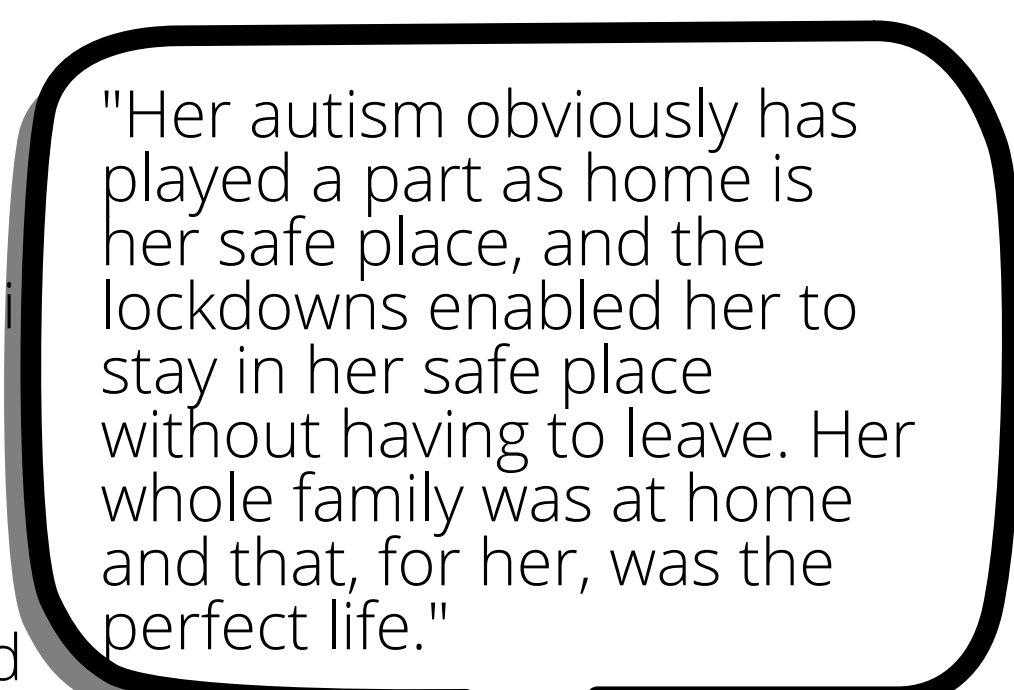
EPs identified vulnerable groups of children as most perceptible to SAP. This included children from low-income families, SEN children and those already struggling with SAP before covid-19



"vulnerable groups - eg those with past involvement with agencies."

### Preferred learning at home (particularly for children with SEN)

Parents of children with Autism reported that the child enjoyed learning from home during lockdown; being able to choose their learning and not need to try and 'fit in'. This was also supported by EPs.



"Her autism obviously has played a part as home is her safe place, and the lockdowns enabled her to stay in her safe place without having to leave. Her whole family was at home and that, for her, was the perfect life."

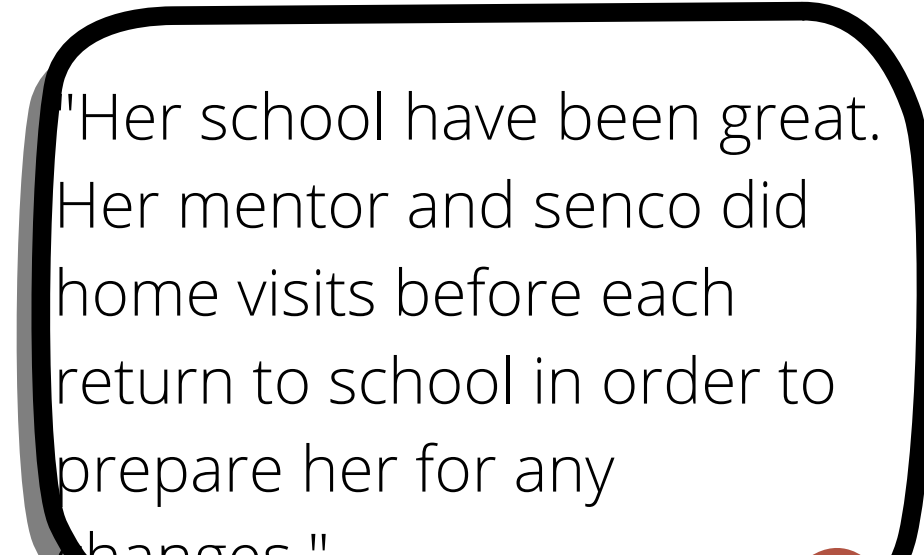
## Experiences of support for SAP

### Flexibility and accommodations from schools

Schools have offered a flexible timetable and some accommodations for children during the school day. This has been particularly important for children with SEN.

### Schools and Home collaborating together

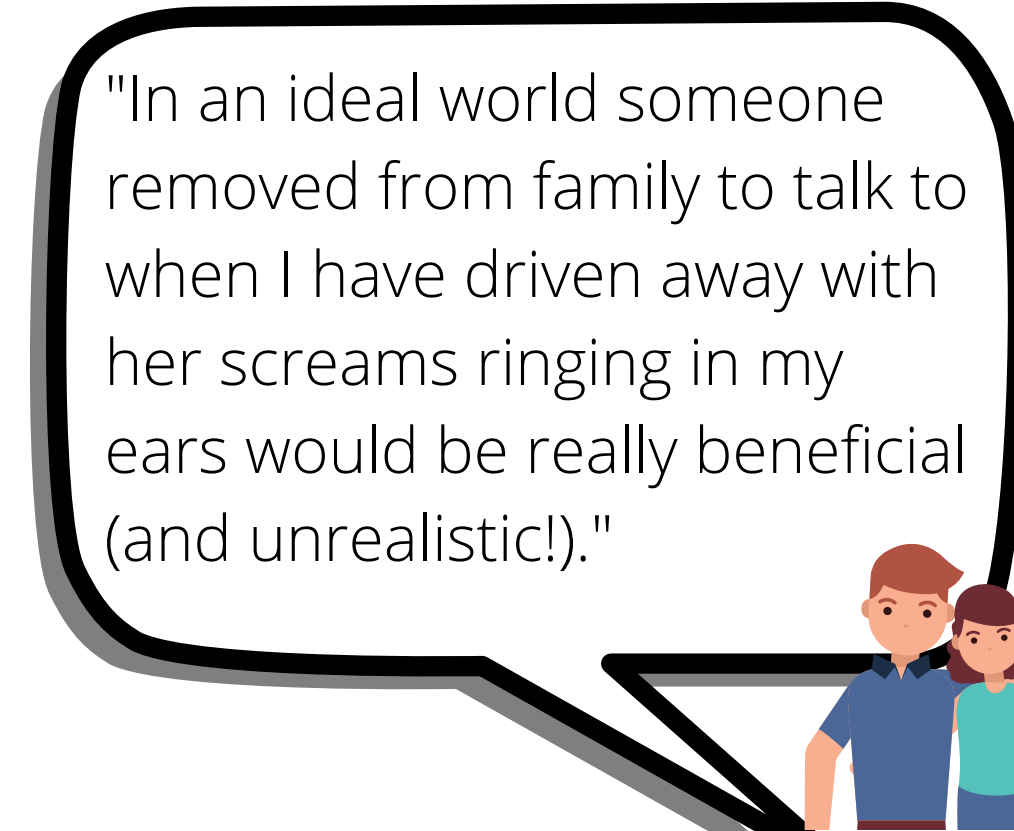
E.P reported the effectiveness of building connections with home through home visits and phone calls. Parents, who had experienced this, were very positive about this collaboration



"Her school have been great. Her mentor and senco did home visits before each return to school in order to prepare her for any changes."

### Children's wellbeing a priority

Parents reported a need for schools to focus on children's well-being and anxieties over attainment and attendance. This was supported by EPs sharing that schools with less SAP are those who prioritised children's wellbeing.



"In an ideal world someone removed from family to talk to when I have driven away with her screams ringing in my ears would be really beneficial (and unrealistic!)"

### Supporting parents well-being

There was evidence of high-anxiety from parents. EPs suggest that this could be affecting children's SAP. Both groups suggested that it would be helpful for parents to be provided support for their own well-being.

### Little or no support

Most parents reported having no support and also being unsure where they can get the support. EP's reported support that wasn't mentioned by the parents. Further research is needed to explore the reasons for this disparity.

## CONCLUSION

- Two higher order themes were identified from the surveys. Firstly, "The drivers of SAP" illustrate how Covid-19 is affecting children's school attendance, particularly by causing or exacerbating worries and anxieties. This includes anxieties about Covid-19 rules and regulations, the safety of schools, academic progress, friendships and being apart from parents.
- Secondly, "Experiences of support for SAP" illustrate the importance of school and home collaborating and the need to prioritise children and parent well-being.
- Many parents reported having no or little support and other support that was mentioned by EPs was not experienced by the parents in this survey.

## RELEVANT LITERATURE

[1] Cook, P. J., Dodge, K. A., Gifford, E. J., & Schulting, A. B. (2017). A new program to prevent primary school absenteeism: Results of a pilot study in five schools. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 82, 262–270.  
 [2] Creswell, C., Shum, A., Skripkauskaitė, S., Pearcey, S., and Waite, P. (2021) Report 10: Children and adolescents' mental health: one year in the pandemic. Available at: [http://cospaceoxford.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Report-10\\_05May2021.pdf](http://cospaceoxford.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Report-10_05May2021.pdf) Accessed 14th June 2021.  
 [3] Kearney, C. A., & Graczyk, P. (2014). A Response to Intervention Model to Promote School Attendance and Decrease School Absenteeism. *Child and Youth Care Forum*, 43(1), 1–25.