



# LEARNING WEEK 2021



**Families are making their voices heard: is anyone listening?  
Connect's Parent/Carer Surveys: What can we learn from families'  
experiences in COVID-19**

Children in Scotland Learning Week: Presentation Transcript

1. **(00:00:00)** Eileen Prior: Hi and welcome to 'Families are making their voices heard is anyone listening?' This is a presentation by Connect on our parents and carers surveys that we carried out during lockdown and the days of Covid during 2020. This has been produced specifically for Children in Scotland's Learning Week.
2. **(00:00:24)** So today we're going to talk to you about what we have learned from the various surveys that we've carried out over the course of 2020, about families, children's experiences of learning and education during the course of the pandemic during lockdown and as schools started to reopen. You'll hear from me Eileen Prior and from my colleague Tina Woolnough. Thanks very much for taking part in this.
3. **(00:00:56)** So first of all I'd like to introduce you to Connect. Connect is an independent membership organisation and a charity and our purpose is to support parents and parent groups in Scotland. We've been around for more than 70 years and we provide a range of services including support and advice to parent groups and individual parents. We work with school communities and education staff on everything around family engagement, and it's all about improving outcomes for young people. We carry out regular surveys of parents and carers on different issues to do with their experience and their children's experience around schooling and education. And we really seek to promote positive relationships and effective communication between families and the whole school. So, it's a whole school community approach that we're aiming for. In addition to all this we also have a professional learning offer, through the Connect Family Engagement Academy.

4. **(00:02:03)** Our pandemic surveys were carried out throughout the year of 2020, started very quickly in April with a survey asking how are you doing? If you cast your mind back and if you have children you'll remember very well, schools closed, children were sent home and families suddenly found themselves in the situation of having to pick up the threads around supporting their children with their learning and their schoolwork at home. So the first survey in April had just over fifteen hundred responses. Survey two went out in May and through June and really was about next steps and starting to think about what was going to happen when schools reopened. So that ran from the end of May to the end of June and you'll see the response rate was almost eight thousand, because by that time we were starting to talk about blended learning in preference to a full school return after the summer holidays, and parents were very motivated to respond to the survey at that time. Our third survey last year was back to school, how's it going, and that took place between September and October with just under six hundred responses. We took a lot of the same questions through each of these three surveys really to try and track how things were changing for families and how they were feeling about their situation.
  
5. **(00:03:50)** The messages that we've taken from our surveys are pretty simple. I'm going to run through these now before I hand over to Tina who will talk to you in a wee bit more detail. And it's clear to us that COVID-19 in terms of education really exposed very many of the inequalities that we all know exist in society and in education. But it left them open for all to see. And parents and carers have really been the unsung heroes over the last year. For many families the struggle has been immense. They've been juggling supporting their children in remote learning, often their work whether at home or outside the home. For many, massive financial stress and caring responsibilities. And we mustn't forget that many families have experienced bereavement and family members have been and continue to be ill as a result of COVID-19. So the impact of that is enormous. From what we've learned single families, those living in financial hardship, families who have children with additional support needs, and those who are digitally excluded for whatever reason really came under enormous stress and they're still really struggling. And this is in March 21. And we know that if parents and carers are struggling then children are impacted. Children and young people don't exist in isolation, so really, Getting it Right for Every Child, which is key in both primary and secondary sectors, should mean Getting it Right for Every Family, because children don't exist in isolation.

6. **(00:05:46)** In our surveys we've found that a consistent third of families were struggling with doing schoolwork at home, and felt communication could be improved, or they felt unsupported. That's a really significant minority of families. Yes, we heard some really great stories and Tina will come on to tell you some of them, and some families have had enormous levels of support and very positive things to say. But for that third who were struggling, that was an ongoing issue for many families. We found that schools and nurseries which had good communication with families before lockdown were in a really strong place and they were able to continue some tremendous work. But many schools and nurseries didn't have up to date contact details, and didn't have effective communication methods in place with the children and the families, and if you start with that, then you're on a real, very steep uphill struggle. So in our view focus is really needed on strong communication and relationship building as a whole school community across the country. So those schools which have done a great job over the last year can really show us what can be done if families and school and wider community work together.
  
7. **(00:07:22)** And finally from our perspective we're seeing that schools know the children who struggle in school and therefore they know the children who will struggle at home as well. And in addition to that, there are many who would normally be seen as high performing and committed at school but they have really struggled to continue their school work at home. We know that individual additional support has not been available last year to children who needed it in class or at home. So many children with additional support needs have been left high and dry. And this is really unacceptable. For families, they understand for the most part that home's not school and parents aren't teachers, and again we have emphasised throughout that really the health and wellbeing of children must be the parents key responsibility. It's not doing school work at home, that's secondary. Families role is to ensure the health and wellbeing of their children. So, you know, there has been evidence of a very mixed offering of support from schools, that can be interpreted as some schools varying what they offer to meet individual needs, and to meet the needs of their individual community, but certainly we've heard from many parents who have said that they felt that they were not getting sufficient support from schools. We believe that actually what we have now is an opportunity, it is a time to focus on improvements and building relationships and communication with families to improve outcomes for children. I think we all understand now much more clearly than we ever did just how critical those relationships and strong communication are to children. And so our message really is about whole school

community approaches, it's about inclusion and engaging with the wider community. I'm going to hand over to Tina now, who's going to talk to you about the specific findings of our surveys.

8. **(00:09:50)** Tina Woolnough: Very quickly at the end of March when the first lockdown happened in 2020 we put together a survey of parents and carers to find out how they were doing, to try and identify what concerns and worries they had, to see how we could help by sharing this information. We asked an open question about whether parents and carers had concerns or worries. We were helped with the analysis in this question and responses we received by Scotinform who identified a total of 22 different category of concern which had been expressed by ten or more respondents. The top 5 concerns were: Children being 'behind' in their learning when they return to school; Health and wellbeing of children; Impact of lack of contact with friends and the social interaction they were missing; Parents unable to support learning due to their own work; and Children not engaging with their schoolwork at home. Because we had no idea how families would cope or what issues families would be facing, we wanted to identify in an open way what might be happening.
  
9. **(00:11:12)** In our second survey which took place in May and June of 2020, we asked again about concerns and worries with the options set out based on the responses we received to the April survey. Parents could select more than one option as well as provide their comments. At this point obviously time had gone on. Parents top five concerns were: children missing their friends 76%; concern about their child's health and wellbeing 57%; falling behind with their schoolwork 56%; the fact they were dealing with a lot of stress as parents were working and trying to do schoolwork at the same time, or support school work at the same time 46%; and 39% of parents expressed concerns about their own health and wellbeing at this point. So there was a slight change in emphasis about health and wellbeing, social wellbeing being priorities above falling behind in school work.
  
10. **(00:12:18)** Parents put these comments in the comments box: 'My child will be behind in their learning while others who have better circumstances from a parental perspective will be ahead.' 'This is fine in the short term, but much longer I would be worried about their mental health and the psychological effects on them.' 'Getting the right balance between children not falling behind, mental health and positive relationships. We found that being too focussed on home

learning in the first two weeks caused stress and anxiety that had a huge impact on relationships.' 'Worried about the lack of social contact, especially for teenagers' 'Child with ASD/ADHD who has rigid thinking that home is home and school is school, so extremely difficult to get him to engage with any schoolwork at home.' 'The stresses of trying to juggle of trying to work from home and care for my child. It's impossible and the pressure is immense. Constant guilt about both.'

11. **(00:13:21)** In survey 1 we asked did families have what they needed? In April, the first survey, we asked whether they had the information and advice they needed. 59% said yes, 10% said no, and 31% said they didn't yet know and it was too early to say. We asked what information or equipment did the families need. 51% said they were doing fine and could find what they need online at home. Obviously the remaining 49% either didn't know or didn't have what they needed.
12. **(00:14:00)** In survey 2 in May and June we asked the same question, did families have what they needed? In May and June we asked again did you have what you need to keep your child healthy and happy at home. 72% said yes, 11% said no, 16% said they weren't sure. We asked do you have what you need to support your child's schoolwork and learning: 63% said they had the equipment, support, advice, and information they needed. Clearly that leaves a significant minority that didn't have what they needed or weren't sure.
13. **(00:14:39)** In both of the two surveys, the first and the second survey, where we asked families if they had what they needed they were given the opportunity to describe the particular issues they were having. They cited a lack of equipment, particularly printers for worksheets, laptops, tablets, internet access. Some also talked about pencils and paper. They described an overload of schoolwork, they also described no schoolwork and no contact from the school, including one comment from a parent who'd not heard from the school at all by the 27<sup>th</sup> of April. We heard a lot about additional support needs, that the parent had support needs as well as they child which made everything difficult. We heard about challenges with engaging children with schoolwork, and that parents were looking for more information about transition from nursery to primary, from primary to secondary, or from secondary on to the next steps. Also concerned about qualification coursework and school place offers.

14. **(00:15:55)** Parents told us in their own voices about what they were struggling with: 'I absolutely cannot manage my children's education at home as it is so stressful and it is now having an effect on my mental health.' 'The reality of working at home and trying to home school is extremely difficult even with a flexible employer. We are not teachers, our child has additional support needs and struggles to learn independently.' 'If my kids are all at school at different times, and I'm having to be home every day still, my work hours will continue to be affected.' 'Schooling at home has been pretty challenging. My employer has been flexible but I don't know if this will continue.' 'We have no access to an iPad, laptop or computer for online learning. We only have smart phones in the house that wouldn't be suitable so their education could suffer.' 'Internet connection and a device for one child at a time is fine. But it becomes difficult when more than one child needs access and adults also needing access for work.'

15. **(00:17:01)** In the second and third surveys we asked about communication between home and school, although the contexts were slightly different. In the May and June survey of course children were still not in school. 49% of respondents reported that communication from their child's school and nursery was going well, 40% though it was going okay but could be better, 9% thought it was not going well. And 52% of pre-school children said that communication was going well, 51% of primary age children and 44% of secondary school age children. So you can see that parents in secondary school were less satisfied than parents in the earlier years. By the time of the September and October survey children were back in school but we were asking whether the schools had shared any planning or plans or proposals for future blended learning or indeed remote learning and we found that some schools and Parent Councils and parents had been kept informed about any possible future closures, which of course in retrospect we know there was, were school closures again. At this point parents were saying that communication had been good, 61%, 28% were still saying it could be improved, and 11% were saying it was still poor. 56% of respondents had not received information on blended learning, doing schoolwork at home, 28% had received information, and 6% didn't know. We were very keen that parents should be involved in discussions for planning for future school closures or for blended learning, but it was quite clear that this wasn't happening. Indeed the vast majority of parents and carers were not consulted on any plans for blended learning in our survey responses.

16. **(00:19:09)** This is what parents told us at this point: 'As a family we feel let down and abandoned by education.' 'When we first entered lockdown, I was quite impressed with how quickly the school responded.... after the first response there seems to have been little improvement or advancement. I think the expectation on parents to have all the IT, time and knowledge to support children's learning has not been recognised properly, and this is even worse for families who have additional support needs.' 'Nursery to Primary 1 transition is not ideal for the children as they are getting no transition visits and are expected to be dropped off on their first day at the school gate when they have never met their teacher in person before.' 'I think that as this is new to us all, there should be more communication between teachers and parents so that the school can establish what children need. Us as parents know our children best.' 'We are receiving lots of generic info but not enough specific additional support and info for kids with autism.'
17. **(00:20:11)** When communication goes well home and school, school and home, parents told us: 'Plenty of resources and activities are being sent and a daily video from the class teacher saying hello to the children has set a good routine Monday to Friday in our house. We've also had special days/weeks such as school uniform day, sports day and health week to feel part of the school community.' 'A weekly newsletter prepared by the head teacher in collaboration with the chair of the Parent Council is very helpful.' 'Due to my child's additional support needs the school have been phoning each week and have sent home his individual project that he works on in school.' 'The head teacher sends out weekly videos. I watch my child when she views this video. Such delight on her face. The video is encouraging. Once work is posted, your child receives a response. With the current situation, the teachers are doing a brilliant job, which cannot be easy on them as well.' 'The schools are giving me information as they have it and have stressed that health & wellbeing will always be the priority which is very important to me.'
18. **(00:21:20)** Eileen Prior: So what can we learn from all this? Well, here's our take. We believe parental, family engagement deserves to be at the heart of education with health and wellbeing for 2021 and beyond. Engagement in children's learning by parents and carers and whole families is a key factor in improving children's outcomes. And we really believe we must refocus on this. We'd like to see a caring school communities' approach where everyone works together to be kind, considerate and supportive to each other. We know that school

communities have been doing some amazing things this last year. A whole school community approach is key to supporting families, and to ensuring that family engagement. And part of that needs to be a communicating with parents' plan. It's essential in every school to be agreed and reviewed annually by parents, parent groups and the school. So that everyone understands what we're aiming for and how effective communication can look for each individual school.

19. **(00:22:31)** We've also learned that digital exclusion must be addressed, whether it's broadband, devices, skills and confidence, they're all essential for everyone, now and into the future. So a whole school and family learning approach to digital access is imperative, as well as the systems, the broadband network in Scotland. And as schools reopen to all, a child-centred and solution focussed approach is urgently needed to deliver the wider curriculum, and the aspects of school that are essential to children's wellbeing. The drama, the music, art, PE, hot lunches, proper breaks. All of the things that children have really missed, as well as the social engagement with their friends and with their teachers. The absence of individual support from health or social work professionals for children and young people must be addressed urgently. Many families who have children who have additional support needs have felt that they have been dropped off a cliff this last year. And parental wellbeing is essential for children's wellbeing and really needs to be supported.

20. **(00:23:56)** So Connect has launched its manifesto for 2021 to 26. This is really our blueprint for our work and what we'll be focusing on as an organisation over the next five years, as well as what we will be pressing policy makers for. So, the key points. The importance of parents and carers in children's learning; they are absolutely central and we've learned that over the last year. The importance role of parents and carers in improving schools and nurseries; so helping school management to focus on the outcomes that are right for that school, for that cohort of children. The importance of good relationships between families and schools and nurseries. And that fairness, kindness, and access for all children and young people in our education system is absolutely critical. We have learned over the last year that fairness and kindness trump everything else and that school communities have made amazing progress in the face of adversity this year. But sadly we've also recognised that there are some significant cracks in the system for our most disadvantaged young people.



21. **(00:25:26)** We've also produced a pledge around supporting school communities. So we're campaigning to put the whole school community approach at the heart of our education system, with parents, carers, parent groups, schools, nurseries and the wider community working together to support families. It's about: it takes a village to raise a child, and that saying's absolutely true. During the pandemic we've seen some fantastic examples of whole school communities pulling together to support families. We think that together we can do amazing things. At Connect we really want to see this wonderful way of working together in school communities to continue and grow. So we're now calling on parents, carers, groups, politicians, policy makers etcetera to work together to support that whole school approach, that whole school community approach, with schools, nurseries at the heart of our communities with the way to make real change in education outcomes.
22. **(00:26:36)** And this is the pledge we're asking people to sign. I will leave you to read it, I don't think you need me to read it for you. So the link is there if you would like to sign the pledge, if your organisation would like to sign the pledge. We'd love to hear from you. The purpose of this is really to try to set the agenda for the coming parliamentary term and beyond. So that we shift our focus to recognise families and the important part that they play as part of a whole school community.
23. **(00:27:33)** And finally I'd like to say thank you to you for listening and please contact us if you would like to hear more, visit our website, follow us on Twitter, and please do consider signing our pledge. I'd also like to say a big thank you to all the parents and carers who took part in the surveys who shared their positive and negative experience, their worries and their fears. We have been absolutely overwhelmed by the response that we've had. And we'd also like to say a special thanks to Scotinform and Public Health Scotland for their assistance in analysing the results of our surveys. So as I say, please contact us by email for more information on these surveys or anything else that we are doing. We'd love to hear from you. And hope you have a very successful learning week. Thanks very much for listening.