



### **Participant Summary Report**

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# FINISHED AT SCHOOL: POST-16 FOR AUTISTIC YOUNG PEOPLE AFTER THE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES ACT 2014?

*View and perspectives of autistic young people, parents, and professionals.*

*Research summary*

## About our research

This research project was commissioned by the Department for Education and the Autism Education Trust. Our aim was to explore the effects of the Children and Families Act (2014), five years after its implementation.

## The Children and Families Act (2014)

The Children and Families Act (2014) is a legal act designed to reform services for vulnerable children and those with additional needs, while also helping parents and families as a whole. As part of the act, a range of changes were made to education, services, and support. These changes include the potential to extend support to learners with special educational needs up to the age of 25, the move from Statements of Educational Needs to **Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans**, and the development of **Local Offers** (documents that summarise the available support in your local area). Autistic children and young people are the largest group represented in EHC plan statistics meaning that lots of autistic young people are likely to have been impacted by the changes. We wanted to find out what this impact was.

## What we did

In summer 2019, we began discussing ideas for our research. Our team comprised academic researchers and representatives from the charity Ambitious about Autism (including autistic young people themselves). We came up with questions that we organised into three categories: (1) help and support; (2) having a say and (3) getting better outcomes. Our questions included:

### Help and support

1. Do autistic young people and their families get the support they need up until the age of 25?
2. Do autistic young people and their families know what support is available to them, and where to access this?

3. What are the barriers and facilitators to useful support?

### **Having a say**

4. Do autistic young people and their families get a say in the choices and support they are offered up until the age of 25?
5. What are the experiences of Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans for autistic young people?
6. Do autistic young people and their families get their problems taken seriously and subsequently resolved?

### **Getting better outcomes**

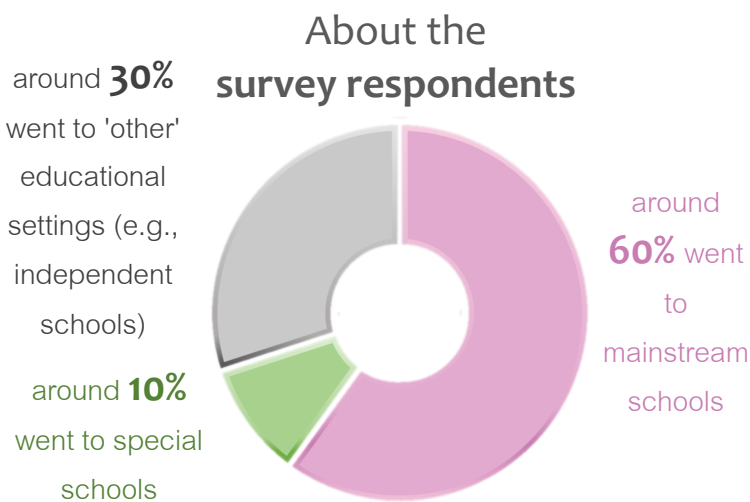
7. What are the educational journeys and final destinations of autistic young people?
8. Do schools and school staff (including specialist autism staff) have the skills to support autistic young people in achieving their ambitions?

In early 2020, we launched a survey for autistic young people and their parents. We also started to interview autistic young people, their parents, and the education professionals who worked with them. In spring/summer 2020, we analysed all the information that we collected and began writing it up as a series of academic articles and as a report. We also hosted a webinar about our research.

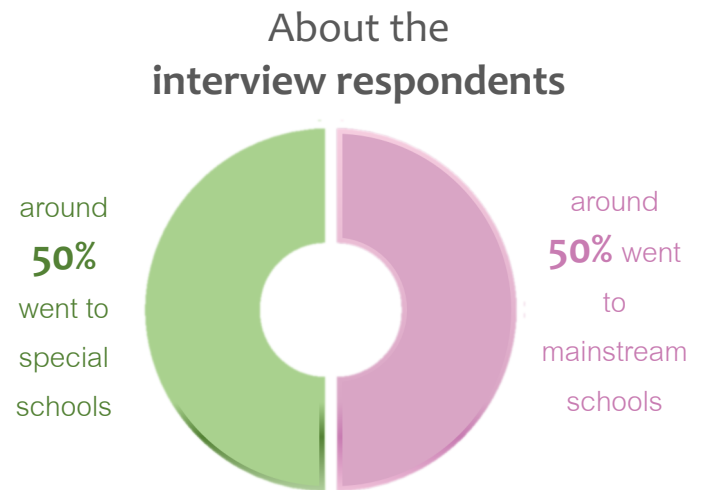
## Research with autistic young people

### WHO TOOK PART?

In total, 89 autistic young people took part in our research: 68 took part in an online survey, 12 took part in an interview and 9 took part in both.



Around **35%** of the survey respondents were aware they had an EHC plan.



Around **40%** of the interviewees were aware they had an EHC plan.

### WHAT DID WE FIND?

#### Varied support

Autistic young people told us that experiences of post-16 education and support were varied. Some young people were happy with the help, support, and information they received, whilst others were not. This was often linked to the type of education they received. For example, those in special schools reported having better access to specialised support. Yet these young people also reported experiencing challenges, such as a lack of life skills training.

## Transition to post-16

Our participants told us that the transition from secondary education to post-16 education was not always smooth. This was often because the support that they received changed, or because their EHC plans did not reflect their current needs.

## Support outside of education

Young people acknowledged that the support received outside of their educational setting was important. Unfortunately, many felt that there were not enough initiatives for them. In particular, they were worried about the limited support for their mental health needs.

“ There is almost nothing available to help [with mental health] unless they reach crisis point and even then, it is usually insufficient. ”

## Parents as advocates

Many young people felt that their parents played a crucial role in finding and securing the support and education that they needed. This was particularly the case for those who gained places in specialist provisions, and when they were navigating the EHC process. The importance of strong parental advocacy, however, means that those without such figures may be at a disadvantage. Young people also acknowledged the toll this had on their parents.

“ I did see a big difference in my education when [my social worker] was there to advocate for me ... I strongly believe if I'd have had a parent, my education would have been much better. ”

## Key champions

As well as their parents, young people often spoke about key ‘champions’ that supported them during post-16. This person was often someone in their educational provision that knew them well (e.g., a teacher). However, staff turnover was often

high (which meant that they may not be able to rely on this person in the long term), and the young people were worried about becoming burdensome (by seeking help from that person too often). More generally, young people felt that autism training for professionals could be improved. This was particularly the case for young people attending mainstream settings.

### **Being your own advocate**

Advocates such as parents and professionals, were found to be beneficial. But the young people we spoke to also felt it was important to be able to advocate for themselves. Unfortunately, they often felt unable to do so because they simply did not know what support was out there.

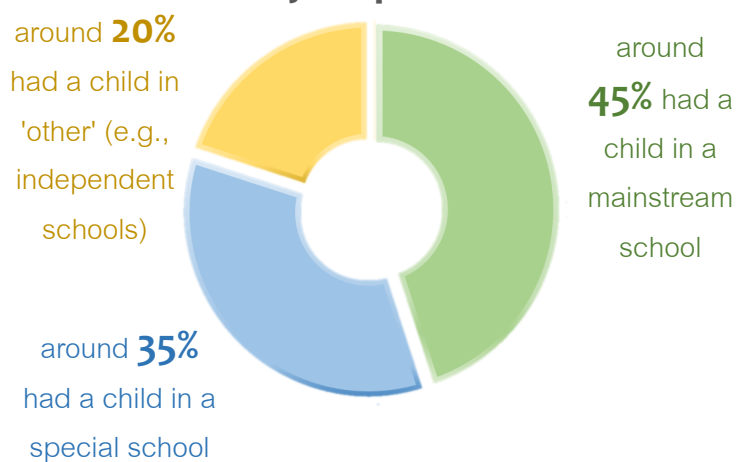
I have never been told that I even have any rights, so I do not know what these are.

## Research with parents

### WHO TOOK PART?

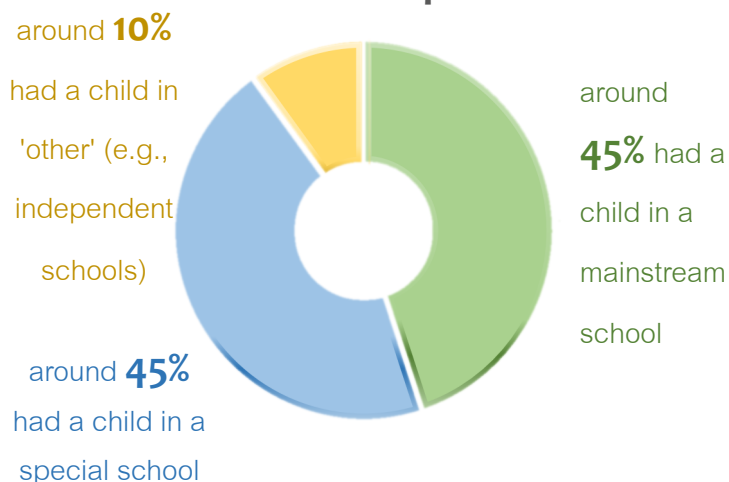
Overall, we gathered the views of 115 parents: 84 took part in an online survey, one took part in an interview and 30 took part in both.

About the survey respondents



Around **60%** of the survey respondents had a child with an EHC plan.

About the interview respondents



Around **55%** of the interviewees had a child with an EHC plan.

### WHAT DID WE FIND?

#### Nothing has changed

Parents appreciated the aims of the Children and Families Act and hoped for the Act to lead to meaningful change. Unfortunately, parents felt that these changes were often not realised. Parents reported an overall lack of support for their children. This included a lack of appropriate provisions for their child(ren) within their local area, and a lack of support around the transition into post-16 education.



Like the young people we spoke to, parents were also concerned about the support that was available outside of the school setting. Particular issues were highlighted with the Local Offer. For example, parents often felt that their Local Offer was hard to navigate, and that support that was featured there was often not relevant for autistic young adults.

### **Academic achievements and support**

Parents, particularly those whose child(ren) attended a mainstream setting, felt there was a strong focus on academic achievement and moving onto further study. While this may be helpful for young people who aspired to continue in formal education, parents were concerned that this approach left behind young people who achieve in areas that are not necessarily aligned with traditional academic success. Parents also highlighted that this approach often means that young people who *are* academically succeeding can get overlooked in terms of the support that they need.



The children who weren't going to university were pushed to one side and felt that nothing was offered to them.



### **Fighting for our right to education**

Parents recognised that Local Authorities are often overstretched and underfunded. This led to parents feeling that they constantly had to fight the system to get the education their child needed. Yet, parents noted that information about their child(ren)'s rights was sparse and unclear. As a result, they often spent a lot of time researching and trying to unpick lots of legal documents. Parents were concerned that other parents may not have

the time, skills, or energy to do this, and this may mean that their children do not get the level of support they deserve.

The fight for education continued with Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans. While parents appreciated the level of legal protection that EHC plans afforded, they highlighted how difficult it was to get and to keep this support. Some parents reported their “promises being broken”, with the support outlined in the EHC plan not being provided. Others felt the EHC plan their child had did not match their needs.

“ I’d like to feel like I was working with the Local Authority, rather than against them. ”

### Key champions

Despite the many challenges, some parents did report on more positive experiences. This was often in relation to a key “champion”: a professional (either in their child(ren)’s educational provision or Local Authority) who developed a meaningful relationship with the family and advocated on their behalf.

Unfortunately, champions were often not long-lasting relationships due to high staff turn-over.

“ She went above and beyond what her job was because she really cared about my son and really wanted to see him succeed. ”

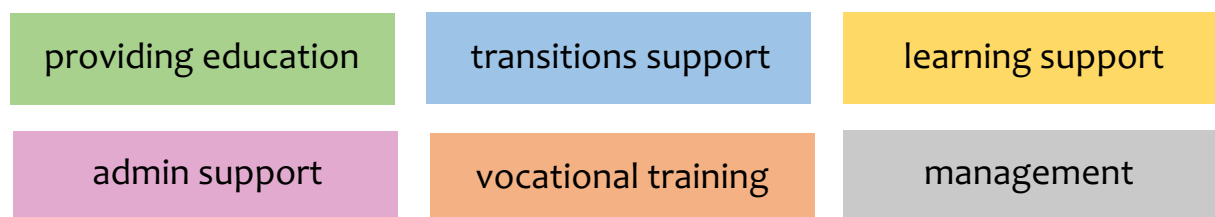
## **The cliff edge of transition**

The Children and Families Act extended support for those with SEND potentially up to the age of 25. Parents whose child(ren) were eligible for this additional support were grateful that their education could continue. However, they highlighted that it is essential for funding to match the needs for this service. Some parents also felt that the overall lack of support for autistic adults means that the provision of education potentially up to the age of 25 simply “pushes the cliff edge”. This is because, when education finishes, their child(ren) will likely be left with no meaningful education, work, or activities.

## Education professionals

### WHO TOOK PART?

Education professionals took part in either one-to-one interviews or focus groups. In total, 41 education professionals took part from eight special schools in London, the South East, and North West. Participants were employed in a range of roles:



All schools that the professionals worked at (apart from one academy) were rated as 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted. The schools ranged from teaching about 60 to 320 students.

### WHAT DID WE FIND?

#### Training

The education professionals that we spoke to were keen to develop their knowledge and skills by attending training sessions. Unfortunately, training opportunities became more limited as budgets were reduced. Education provisions did, however, try to think creatively to ensure staff could still upskill. For example, by holding more internal training sessions run by members of the team.

Education professionals also highlighted how useful the support of colleagues was in their professional development. For example, discussions with colleagues about support and techniques, as well as observations of other lessons and interactions, were felt to be important. However, education

professionals also felt it was important to be given the time to embed the skills and techniques they learned, into practice. Unfortunately, this was not always possible.



It was great to have those two days of training, then we needed some extra time to try and implement it ... time afterwards so we can spend some time creating some things that would help us implement it in their everyday use.



### **Collaboration and co-production**

Collaboration inside and outside of education is important to create support that works across education, health, and social care. The education professionals we spoke to wanted to work collaboratively with professionals outside of education, but often found this difficult to coordinate. As a result, collaboration was often only achieved when points of crisis had been reached. They also spoke about the importance of mental health support to be involved in this collaboration.

Collaboration is a key component of the Children and Families Act and means that young people and their families should get a say in the support they receive. Education professionals did use a range of techniques to elicit young people's voices, but they were not sure how to evaluate them. Further, some education professionals questioned the ethics around eliciting the views of young people if their needs and desired outcomes could not be met. After all, young people could have their say but if the opportunities aren't there, they are unlikely to achieve the outcomes they desire.

## Outcomes

Professionals had lots of ideas for what would be a good outcome for the young people they work with. These included independence, education or employment, good quality of life, and realisation of personal goals. They emphasised that these goals should be tailored and specific to each individuals' preferences, needs and abilities.

“ Maybe some find things difficult, but they will be able to do it, so we just need to **find ways around it.** ”

Professionals were concerned about the options for autistic young people, following their post-16 education. For young people that did not want to, or were unable to, progress onto employment, professionals were worried about the lack of meaningful options available. For those who did want to progress onto employment, professionals were concerned about the lack of work experience opportunities and employment support in general.

“ There are lots of organisations that are very reluctant to have anybody with special needs and to take part in their work experience. ”

“ There is not much [autism] awareness and people don't understand how much an autistic person can **contribute to business or society.** ”

## Recommendations...

Based on our research, we made the following recommendations...

### **1. Ensuring all young people have a voice**

Youth voice is something that the Children and Families Act sets out to amplify. Our findings suggest this doesn't always happen successfully, but it is important to young people, parents, and education professionals. Going forward, we must listen to, and learn from, autistic young people so we can support them in achieving their potential.

### **2. Making it clear: ensuring everybody knows their rights and the support that is available**

Many of the autistic young people and parents that we spoke to were not confident about what their rights were. Educating autistic people about their rights and entitlements should happen from a young age to make sure that children and young people know what should be happening in their life. By building a foundation in childhood, we hope they will grow into adults who feel confident and capable of advocating for their needs in education and beyond.

The parents that we spoke to said it was difficult to translate technical documents and understand what support was available on a local level. What is crucial is telling autistic young people and their parents, truthfully, what is available to them. Being able to easily access information that is up to date and relevant means parents do not have to spend time searching for support that does not exist. This gives them more time to just be a "mum" rather than a "manager". This would also allow young people to independently search for information (where possible), thus giving them the ability to advocate for themselves.

### **3. More equality in advocacy**

Our research shows that parents are the driving force in tackling inequality in SEND education. However, not every young person has a consistent parental figure or parent that can act as an advocate for them. Indeed, parental advocacy often requires a level of social status, education, or financial ability. This means that inequality develops between those that can and those that cannot advocate. We recommend a more equitable system, meaning everyone is given access to high quality support, and all autistic people can have their needs met.

### **4. More consistent approaches to support**

Some of the parents we spoke to felt support was like a “postcode lottery” and reported a lack of consistency in how support is provided. Success in post-16 education was often seen when key “champions” were involved, but this does not provide reliable or long-lasting positive outcomes. Instead of relying on individual people, we should try and identify commonalities underpinning positive outcomes and use these to create best practice examples that others can learn from. Often, training about autism (e.g., what is autism? what supports are effective for autistic young people?) is seen key in creating positive school experiences. Our results suggest that training on autism should actually help foster a wider skill set that involves professionals being able to communicate and relate to autistic young people and their families, for example. Learning factual knowledge about autism might be useful for staff, but what seems most important is having the right relational skills to support autistic young people and their families.

### **5. Connecting opportunities**

Despite the challenges faced during their educational journeys, the autistic young people involved in our research, overall, seemed happy with their outcomes. Yet, there were few opportunities following on from post-16



education for this group. Work experience was often limited, but we know that these opportunities can be successful when the right support is in place (e.g., Project SEARCH). We recommend that connections between schools and workplaces are strengthened, to provide autistic young people with excellent work experience that really benefits them.

*Report written by Jade Davies. Project team includes Laura, Jade, Anne, Maria, and Anna from CRAE, Sarah and Alison from Ambitious about Autism, and a group of young researchers (Kerrie, Amy, Robbie, Ibrahim).*

*If you have any questions about the research, please contact Jade Davies ([j.davies@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:j.davies@ucl.ac.uk)).*