

Knock-on effects

What are the key issues developmentally for babies born in lockdown, and how are they presenting themselves now?

Jo Parkes investigates

Head teacher Ruth Coleman estimates that her Ipswich setting has seen a tripling in SEND and challenging behaviour levels since the pandemic. 'We've seen lots more children come in with either undiagnosed autism spectrum disorder (ASD), or in the process of being diagnosed, or suspected ASD that needs to be investigated.'

Nearly all early years settings have experienced an increase in SEND in the last year – as many as 95 per cent of settings report a rise in rates of additional needs, according to a survey by special educational needs charity Dingley's Promise.

This finding is supported by Department for Education data, showing that in 2022/3, there were 27,181 children in this category, compared with 23,723 in 2021/2 – and this is likely to be an underestimate, as those needs are often not flagged until school.

So why is this, and how much of it is due to the pandemic? 'Perhaps there was something around lockdown that meant parents didn't know what the signs were,' says Coleman, whose setting, Highfield Nursery School, is in the most deprived local authority area in Suffolk. 'A lot of nurseries are telling parents when they enquire about a place that they can't support their child's needs.'

Health visitors were unable to do the usual universal health checks, which start from birth, during lockdown. Writing in *Nursery World*, health visitor Shirley Adebayo said there had been

a 'noticeable increase in the number of children who have fewer words than would be expected for their age or who are showing obvious signs of speech delay. This is likely to be in part due to the pandemic, with the lack of socialisation from lockdowns, and the difficulties doing the health reviews.'

According to a survey from the Institute of Health Visiting (IHV), published in January, high rates of health visitors reported increases in children with speech, language and communication delay, behaviour problems and autism.

IHV chief executive Alison Morton says, 'I know one Reception teacher with six children who are selective mute. Human interaction is just noise outside of them.' Of course, while much of these issues were undoubtedly exacerbated by the pandemic, larger rises in SEND across all age groups are not new and predate Covid-19.

One question some practitioners are asking themselves is to what extent this explosion of need will be resolved as children make up for early lost experiences to socialise.

Manager of an early years setting in Oxfordshire, Christine Wilkinson, an area lead for the DfE Covid recovery programme, says, 'We've had two years of children with no access to services. There's a feeling that if the help was there earlier, there wouldn't be so many issues now.'

'I am unsure if some of what we are seeing is SEND or just behaviour issues. Earlier help would reduce the number of interventions children are needing.'

'Also, it is hard to tell if children need to be put in for referrals or if

Practitioners are noticing an increase in children with SEND since the pandemic



it is just parents who need support and that would be enough.'

IMPACT ON DEVELOPMENT

Another useful measure of how children are doing overall is the EYFS profile. The latest update in November shows the rate of children achieving a good level of development was 67.2 per cent in 2022/3, up two percentage points on 2021/2. The Government says this suggests an overall recovery from the disruption to children who were already turning two when the pandemic arrived.

However, that leaves nearly a third who, three years on from the last lockdown, are not meeting the expected standard. In the 2022/3 EYFS profile, the rate of children eligible for free school meals achieving a good level of development was just 51.6 per cent, compared with 71.5 per cent of those not eligible – a gap of more than 20 percentage points.

There has not been much change in communication and language, with 83 per cent of children reaching the expected level – hardly any shift on the previous year's 82 per cent.

And in literacy, 76 per cent of children reached the expected level,

a 1.1 percentage point improvement on the 2021/22 cohort. The Government says the apparent improvement overall could be partly due to practitioners' own improved understanding of the EYFS.

Michael Freeston, The Early Years Alliance's director of quality improvement, says, 'Many setting managers might be surprised by that finding [of progress] because anecdotally, there is whole-cohort language and communication delay requiring whole-cohort-level support.'

Freeston also wonders if a sibling effect is driving up need. 'The evidence shows children talking to their younger siblings helps with

development,' he explains. 'If they're not doing that in the same way, that's going to have implications.'

He believes the coming two years' EYFS results are the ones to watch and may be more reflective of the speech issues being reported in early years right now. 'We should track the progress of these cohorts closely all the way to adulthood,' he adds.

WHAT ABOUT AGE?

More than 600,000 babies are estimated to have been born during the pandemic – their early lives shaped by three lockdowns beginning in March 2020 and ending in June 2021.

Some sector leaders suggest the

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younger age groups at the time of the pandemic may have suffered most.

Writing in his blog in early 2023 when still head of Sheringham Nursery School and Children's Centre, Julian Grenier described how settings were seeing more problems with communication delay and emotions in younger children.

'We already know that child poverty is toxic to children's healthy and happy development... For poorer families with children in the first two years of life, there was perhaps little to mediate this during lockdowns – in the way of professional support, services outside the home, or playgroups to join in with. Once lockdowns were over, it wasn't long before the cost-of-living crisis hit. Practitioners... spoke of seeing cold, hungry children crying as they come into nursery,' he wrote.

This may be why Coleman has noticed a significant uptick in older children in nappies at her setting.

'Pre-Covid, the vast majority of children moving from the two- to three-year old room were toilet trained. There may have been one or two still in nappies previously, now it's ten or 12 out of 26.'

She adds, 'I'm on forums where schools are talking about how they're having to put on extra staff for nappy changing.'

Coleman is sympathetic, adding, 'I can understand why it happens. If life is tricky and disorganised and you're worrying about paying your mortgage or rent, putting a nappy on your child rather than potty training is easier.'

Many children arriving for their very first days at school for the 2023/4 academic year were aged around two during the pandemic. For many parents, potty training was better postponed or there was simply no-one around to say 'now's the time', according to Coleman. ■



case study: getting early help

Rina Poku, from Sheffield, is a single mother caring for two sons with special needs (Sol, now aged eight and Iziah, now aged five). She says it took her three years to get Sol's autism diagnosed and she expects both to eventually have an EHCP.

'I had a lot of insight because of the work I'd done with children and families (delivering parenting classes and co-ordinating training for parents at Children's Centres). I never blamed

myself. I'm confident in that, but the system almost broke me.

'I knew what Sol needed and I tried all the things to get early help. Unless I was right next to him he wouldn't sleep. He fed constantly, wouldn't play with things, he would make shrieking noises.'

'Iziah has very typical ADD and autistic traits, but there are other children with a lot more needs in his cohort.'

'He's been awaiting S&L support over

but they're understaffed, underpaid and undervalued. You expect teachers to want the best for your child but they are part of the problem.

'They don't seem to know the appropriate channels of support and what services are able to offer. The paediatric neurodisability service is the right way, but takes so long.'