

Closing the attainment gap and 'catch up' - a briefing from the British Psychological Society

This briefing outlines the British Psychological Society's response to recent proposals to accelerate children's education following the disruption to learning.

With extended school days and potential summer schools being floated as solutions to address the educational attainment gap created by the pandemic, the British Psychological Society is advocating for a phased return to regular schooling, combined with a quality-over-quantity approach to learning. Where additional school time is a strategy, it should focus on supporting children through socialisation and play.

The notion that children need to catch up or are 'behind' at school due to the pandemic reinforces the idea that children have 'one shot' at their education and puts them under even more pressure to perform academically after what has been a challenging and unprecedented time for everyone.

It is important to celebrate the progress, learning and development children have made in the last year and ensure that they feel proud of what they have achieved. Together, parents, caregivers and teachers have done an amazing job of continuing children's education outside the school environment, and it is vital that this work is not diminished.

The impact of the lockdowns on children's wellbeing and mental health must be considered as part of the decision-making around the return to school plan.

- Some children will have had positive lockdown experiences, but the pandemic has had a huge impact on all children's everyday lives.
- Many children may have seen their families struggling with sudden unemployment, loss of earnings or grieving the death of a loved one.
- Vulnerable children and families from disadvantaged communities may have spent the lockdowns worrying about food poverty, or keeping a roof over their heads.
- We cannot assume that the right thing to support children's recovery and wellbeing is for them to attend a longer school day.
- The voice of children and young people has been noticeably missing from this debate. It is essential that they are consulted as part of the decision-making process about the return to school.

Research from the Education Endowment Foundation considered the [effect of extending the school day](#) and [summer schools](#) on educational attainment. It found that these particular measures have a low impact, suggesting it is not an effective way to address the attainment gap. Evidence also indicates that these interventions are not effective in meeting the needs of the vulnerable children who need support the most.

- What really makes a difference in children's attainment is high-quality instruction and high-quality feedback, delivered by teachers, who are best placed to assess children and young people's gaps in knowledge.

- It is important that children know that education and learning is a lifelong skill, not a sprint. It is vital for children's psychological wellbeing that the rhetoric around 'catch up' does not detract from their achievements and progress during lockdowns.
- It is also essential that this conversation does not detract from the many real issues facing the most disadvantaged children that more urgently need to be addressed by the government, such as food poverty, access to green spaces, use of digital devices and access to high-speed broadband.

All the money in the world for 'catch up' on educational attainment will come to nought if children are not school ready and/or are struggling with psychological, family, social or economic difficulties. The workforce to support children's mental health must be developed – including health visitors, nurses and psychologists in the mix.

We recommend that there should be:

- An initial rocket boost of funding to support children's mental health and wellbeing.
- A long term workforce investment strategy to ensure the support infrastructure for comprehensive provision is in place.
- A more radical approach, which is to have sufficient numbers of applied psychologists, both clinical and educational, working more directly in schools and leading the MHSTs.
- A wellbeing strategy which addresses societal factors which contribute to mental health difficulties.
- A comprehensive children and young people's health and wellbeing strategy, to ensure all children can thrive.
- An enhanced MHST to support every school in the country as part of an integrated model of provision for children, young people and families.

About the British Psychological Society

The BPS is the representative body for psychology and psychologists in the UK. We are responsible for the promotion of excellence and ethical practice in the science, education, and practical applications of psychology. We have over 60,000 members across the UK, ranging from students to qualified psychologists.

We support and enhance the development and application of psychology for the greater public good. We set high standards for research, education, and knowledge, and seek to disseminate these to increase wider public awareness of psychology and its importance. As part of this work we want to ensure that the value of psychology to society is recognised by policymakers and used to inform policy development across government.

***For further information please contact Nigel Atter, Policy Advisor, at
Nigel.Atter@bps.org.uk***