

PARENTS, PARTNERSHIP AND PANDEMIC

Kim Foster reflects on the impact that lockdown has had on parents of children and young people with SEND.

Much has been written and considered in regard to the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown for children's education and mental health, but what about parents? What impact did this sudden change in lifestyle and expectations have for them?

Lockdown was no doubt a challenging time for all parents. They suddenly faced a significant shift in their responsibilities, not only in terms of their own daily life and mental health during an uncertain time but also that of their children. For many parents, the overwhelming emotion seems to have been anxiety as they tried to balance the emotional and educational needs of their children and for many this was alongside trying to also manage their own job. Aimee, a mum of two, cited this period as 'an emotional rollercoaster'.

Home schooling became the norm and experiences of success seemed to vary not only by location, but also by the age and the individual needs of their children. In part, this was as a result of variation of provision and support from schools. Some

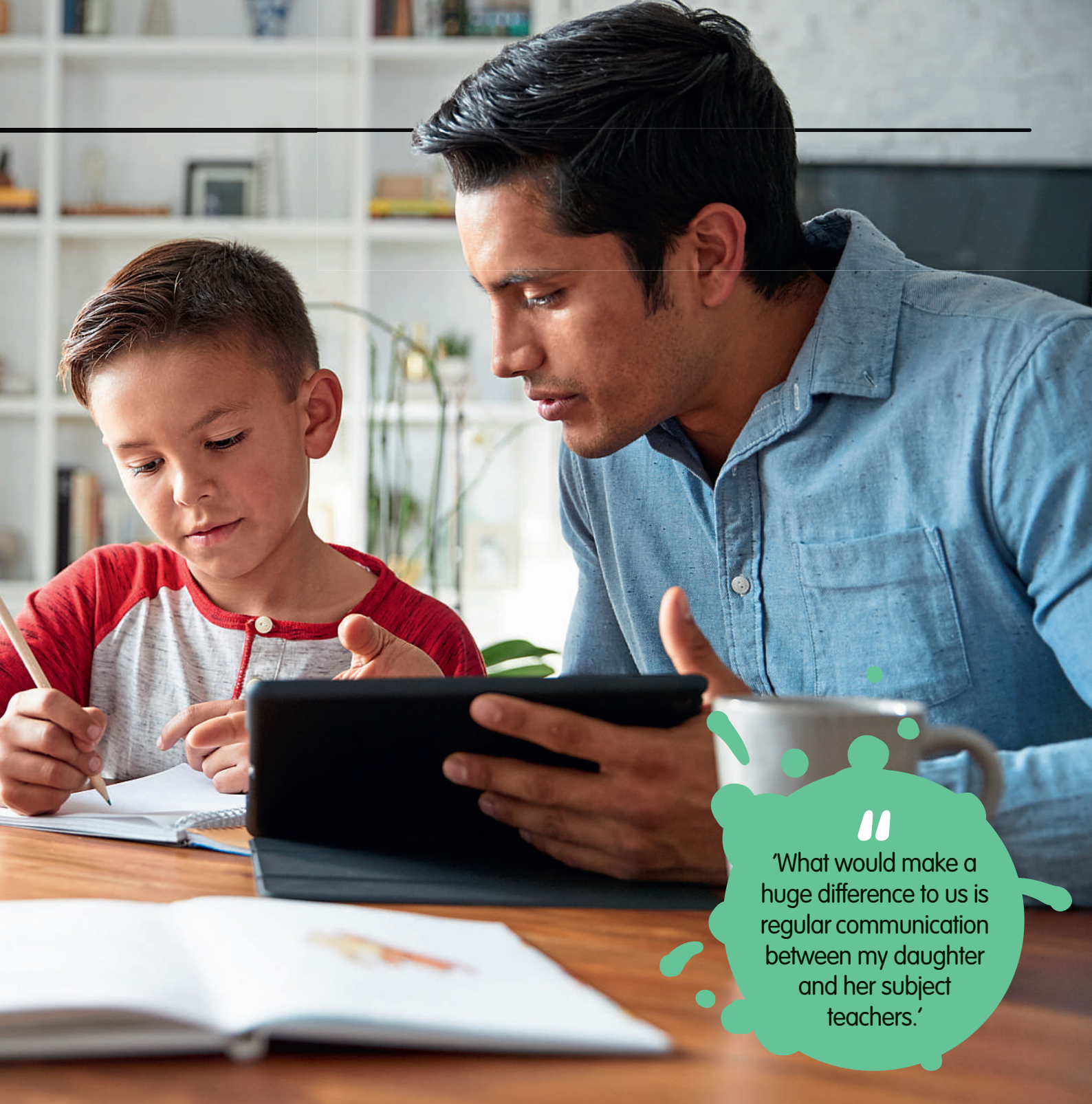
parents reported what they perceived to be good structure and provision of tasks and lessons from school, with video lessons or structured resources. Others were given suggestions for activities weekly. For parents of children with special educational needs, the importance of being given appropriate tasks was even more relevant. Whilst many parents recognised that support for their child could not be the same as in school, they wanted their child's needs to be acknowledged.

Sharon, a parent of a child with an education, health and care plan, commented: "I still want my daughter to feel that she is part of the school – even if she is being sent different work home – and that her efforts are recognised, especially in communications that go out to the whole class or school praising the children who have logged in to do their work."

For others, trying to explain the changes to school routines provided challenge, and for some of those with more complex needs, little respite support.

Discussions within parent friendship groups compared these school arrangements, with parents drawing

conclusions about which school was 'best' in what they had provided. Some parents felt teachers were doing 'less work' and should be engaging with parents and pupils more. This seemed even more significant to those supporting children with special educational needs at home. Sharon, explained: "What would make a huge difference to us is regular communication between my daughter and her subject teachers about the differentiated work being set and progress being made, some support from teaching assistants, even if just a phone or video call once a week,



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and the inclusion of my daughter in whole class projects or activities so that she is not completely isolated whilst working on her individual worksheets at home.”

Some schools worked hard to engage personally with pupils. Clare, an Early Years Foundation Stage Leader, who as a teacher phoned her class members individually each week, identified that the mood of parents changed over time. She explained: “Initially this period felt novel – like holiday time, but as a time went on, I gave out more behaviour management strategies and ways to help support and

manage anxiety. As their children were young, parents needed support in knowing how to ‘pitch’ work for their children.”

Clare also noted the emotional support her calls gave parents: “Parents wanted reassurance that what they were doing was OK. I was a listening ear for parents who felt isolated and were finding juggling work and home schooling tough.”

Not all parents were able to access such support. The use of technology to support teaching also varied but, for many older pupils, it provided the main source of teaching. For some families, logistics of

spaces to work, availability of IT equipment and Wi-Fi issues made this stressful, especially if they were also working online themselves. Parents of older children worried about the impact of lack of lessons on their future exams: “Will they get enough time to make up the time, should I be doing more for them?”

Lockdown had some unexpected outcomes too. Many parents identified enjoyment in spending more quality time as a family. Aimee, a mum of two, acknowledged that although time felt very busy, lockdown also felt like ‘time slowing

→ SPOTLIGHT



BIO

KIM FOSTER

Kim is a Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Winchester and teaches across the undergraduate and postgraduate cohorts as part of the additional needs team. Prior to this, she was Inclusion Leader in a small school in Hampshire, in an area of high levels of deprivation.



down'. Clare, a mum of a 17-year-old, describes how her son had more time to fill his time with new hobbies, "that he probably wouldn't have done before".

For some parents, less time commuting and rushing back from work to cook dinner, reduced stress levels considerably. Daily walks to get out of the house allowed for more time to chat and ensure everyone had screen-free time. However, for some parents, using their daily walk 'allowance' in this way meant opportunities to exercise alone and undertake hobbies, such as running, was not possible. This, in turn, affected parents' emotional well-being.

Sue, a parent of a child with autism, stressed the importance of good communication around transitions with both the student and their parent(s). She

explained: "We can help teachers by backing up what is happening at school and explaining why our child might not respond well or there may be an even better way to approach something. Please don't tell me you know my child and then proceed to show me you really don't at all, that undermines confidence. Better to say, 'I'm still getting to know them better, what else do I need to know?'"

As we now face increasing uncertainty, parents' anxiety is starting to build again. We are approaching winter which will impact on opportunities for outdoor activities, therefore possibly further reducing emotional wellbeing for parents. Many schools are already reassuring parents that lesson materials will be available and are being prepared. Parents are weighing up what supplies to get in the house in order to entertain their children.

Has this experience changed parents' perspectives on teachers? Many parents are exceptionally grateful. Sue was keen to say: "Thank to all of you who try so hard under so much pressure to do all the above, read books we know you've had to buy yourselves, go on courses that are tricky to get time and funding for and above all rooting for our children and helping them to succeed in all the small ways that are so big to them and us."

HOW MIGHT SCHOOL AND HOME WORK BEST IN PARTNERSHIP TO SUPPORT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SEND?

- Ensure communication is maintained. Anxiety is fuelled by the unknown so keeping lines of communication open is key.
- Establishing clearly understood shared routines underpins a sense of security.
- Remember this is new to everyone and we are all learning to deal with the situation on a day-to-day basis – information sharing alleviates some of the concerns that people might have.
- The reassurance of systems that ensure COVID-19 safety is essential.
- Creating a sense of community and belonging is vital, whether online or in bubbles.
- Allow children and young people time to talk about how they are feeling.
- Make time to talk with parents one-to-one about very specific concerns and actively listen to what they are telling you.

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