

What can we learn from parents and caregivers of school-aged autistic children to inform current Emotionally Based School Attendance (EBSA) intervention approaches in England?

A small study written as part submission to my:
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Terminology

As this study is focussed on autistic children with EBSA, it is important to understand what these terms mean. The National Autistic Society (NAS) defines autism as a ‘lifelong development disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world’ (NAS, 2022), while the Autism Education Trust (AET) simply puts this as a ‘different way of being’ and identifies three key areas; social understanding and communication, sensory processing and integration, and flexible thinking, information processing and understanding, with differences in learning styles (AET, 2022a). The term ‘school refusal’ is often used to describe a child that persistently evades school. However, throughout this study I use the term Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) which is defined as a ‘severe difficulty in attending school due to emotional factors’ (West Sussex County Council (WSCC), 2020 p.3), as the word ‘refusal’ implies that the child has made a conscious decision to not attend, yet these children ‘cannot’ rather than ‘will not’ attend (Wadlow, 2020). Throughout this study I use the term ‘autism’ as opposed to ‘Autistic Spectrum Disorder’ (ASD), which is used by the medical model of disability, as it describes the person as disordered (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organisation, 2018). I also only use identify-first language, as opposed to person-first language when referring to autistic people as preferred by the autistic community (Bury *et al.*, 2020). The word ‘parent’ and ‘parents’ is used to represent both parents and caregivers of the child.

Introduction

In January 2022 Dame Rachel de Souza, the Children's Commissioner for England at the time, told the BBC that she would find the so-called 'ghost children', up to 100,000 children who were absent from school following the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020, and 'get them in [to school]' (Shearing, 2022). By May 2022 this figure had increased to over 124,000 (Education Committee, 2022) with Special Educational Needs (SEN) children being 50% more likely to struggle with school attendance (Office for National Statistics (ONS) 2021). Ambitious about Autism (2022) report that over 40,000 autistic students (31% of the autistic student population) suffered with persistent absence in 2020/21 and school attendance struggles are documented as more prevalent for autistic students (Munkhaugen *et al.*, 2017). In May 2022 the government announced *The Schools Bill 2022* with a section dedicated to school attendance giving added powers to fine and prosecute parents for school non-attendance, yet Square Peg and Not Fine in School (NFIS) (2021) report that school non-attendance is a clear message of a child's underlying needs, and this punitive approach does not resolve the problem (Epstein *et al.*, 2019). These statistics and the government approach paint a bleak picture for the many children struggling with school attendance as academic outcomes and achievement in adult life are poorer for these children (Pellegrini, 2007; John *et al.*, 2022).

School attendance struggles are nothing new for families of autistic children. As the parent of an autistic 'ghost' child who has been unable to access a school setting since 2019, I am deeply aware of the stresses this causes the family as well as the trauma that repeatedly 'dragging' the child to school can cause. I find the current government focus of finding the 'ghost children' to bring them back to school unacceptable if the underlying difficulties of these children are not fully understood and supported. Therefore, this study is designed to understand Government and Local Authority (LA) approaches to school attendance and to supporting autistic school-aged children who struggle with Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA). It then obtains the parent's viewpoint to see what may be learnt to inform the current approach. To do this the study first examines the literature in this field before outlining how the research will be undertaken. Following this the results are examined and discussed, within the context of the literature, before concluding what we can learn from parents about the current intervention approaches for EBSA in England.

Literature Review

The purpose of the literature review is to understand the background to EBSA, the causes, support strategies and existing viewpoint. A range of sources were used including the University of Birmingham library, Google Scholar, and a wider web search. Findings were restricted to those published in English language, but not to a specific time period, to explore if approaches have changed over time.

Terminology

In 1880 school was first made compulsory for 5-10 year olds in England and truancy was a major problem (UK Parliament, 2022). A clear distinction between truancy and EBSA is first made using the term 'School Phobia' by Johnson *et al.* (1941) who recognised it as a 'crippling condition'. In 1969 the term 'school refusal' was introduced (Berg *et al.*, 1969) and this term is still commonly used in England today. Recently the term 'Emotionally Based School Avoidance' (EBSA) has appeared which seems to be a better descriptor in acknowledging that these children simply cannot attend school, rather than will not (Wadlow, 2020). Square Peg (2021) states that by using the term 'school refusal' it puts the blame on the child, preferring to refer to 'barriers to school attendance' removing the within-child focus and blame.

Causes

Since the 1930s, it has been understood that EBSA is rooted in anxiety and that we should focus on the individual and their reasons for not attending, rather than approaching it as truancy (Broadwin, 1932). EBSA differs from truancy as it displays as emotional distress, rather than antisocial behaviour (Maynard *et al.*, 2015). It is agreed that there is not a single cause of EBSA with different factors contributing towards the avoidance of school including the young person themselves, their family, and the school environment (Thambirajah *et al.*, 2008; Maynard *et al.*, 2015). Kearney and Silverman (1990) attempt to classify the reasons for EBSA into four distinct areas; to avoid uncomfortable feelings that school causes, to avoid stressful situations or environments caused by school, to reduce separation anxiety or to gain attention from others, and to take part in more pleasurable out of school activities. Transition points in education, the first years of Primary and Secondary (Pellegrini, 2007; Nuttall and Woods, 2013), and disability are identified as risk factors associated with EBSA (Kearney, 2008) with Munkhaugen *et al.* (2017) confirming that it occurs more often in autistic children than 'typically developing' children.

Interventions

Ek and Eriksson's (2013) literature review highlighted the complexity of EBSA and therefore the importance of understanding the individual reasons behind the behaviour to inform intervention. The most common treatment adopts a cognitive approach with Cognitive Behaviour Therapies (CBT) aimed at changing the behaviour of the child with social skills training, exposure therapy and cognitive restructuring (Layne *et al.*, 2003 in Ek and Eriksson, 2013). Lee (2019) investigated CBT in relation to school non-attendance and found that there was not enough evidence to support the approach, yet exposure strategies such as part-time timetables are still undertaken today with the emphasis on changing the child's mindset (Maynard *et al.*, 2015). A number of strategies have resulted from research that consider the child's view including improving school's understanding of EBSA through training, working with the parents and the child to maintain

relationships, multi-agency working, and a quick response to provide access to tuition and social opportunities for children out of school (Baker and Bishop, 2015). In line with the change in attitudes towards school avoidance Nuttall and Woods (2018) developed an ecological model to address school absence based on the individual child's needs, appropriately supporting those needs, supporting the family, and outlining the role the professionals have to play.

EBSA and Autism

Historically, there is little in the literature that focusses on understanding EBSA in autistic children although Csóti (2003) does recognise that for autistic children it is the environment that needs to change and that they should not be forced into school as it increases anxiety further. There is recognition that inappropriate provision for an autistic child's needs can contribute to school non-attendance (Appleby Payne, 2010) and that autistic girls are more likely to struggle with EBSA than autistic boys (Moyse, 2021). Preece and Howley (2018) focus on supporting autistic children to re-engage with education by providing a safe environment and implementing good autism practice. Based on an Ecological model, this holistic approach involving the families and collaboration between professionals was successful, although only carried out on a very small scale. More recently, the literature has focussed on understanding school avoidance in autistic children, noting how the characteristics of autism (Munkhaugen *et al.* 2019) and mental health of the child correlates with school attendance (Adams, 2021; John *et al.*, 2022).

Over time the approach has changed, with the current view rejecting the term 'school refusal' instead preferring 'EBSA' and 'barriers to school attendance'. Anxiety is recognised as a contributor and that EBSA affects autistic students more than their neurotypical peers with more research being undertaken to explore the risk factors contributing to EBSA. Finally, it is clear that there is no single approach to resolving EBSA and that a collaborative and holistic approach is needed that accounts for the characteristics and needs of the individual child.

Design Method

The study was designed to identify current school attendance regulations and EBSA intervention approaches and to obtain the parent viewpoint of these to find out what can be learnt from the parents.

EBSA Approach and Interventions

To obtain the Government view of school non-attendance, documentation available on the government website (www.gov.uk) was explored. To obtain LA intervention approaches, a google search using the search term 'Local Authority School Refusal' was used. 15,800,000 results were returned, so the search was

adjusted to 'Local Authority EBSA', where 160,000 results were returned. Due to the small scale of this study only the first 3 results were examined meaning that the following LA approaches were included: West Sussex County Council (WSCC), Somerset County Council (SCC) and Hampshire County Council (HCC).

Parent Experiences

To obtain the parent view of the support they received, a voluntary, online and anonymous survey was created. SurveyMonkey was selected for ease of remote access and reaching participants, as well as its data security capabilities (SurveyMonkey, 2022). The survey questions were designed to obtain both quantitative data (presenting options in a list) and qualitative data (presenting a free text box to allow an open response) to inform the lived experience of the parents. Questions were written in plain English with one question per screen to avoid participant frustration that may lead to an abandoned survey. Questions were reviewed to ensure they were relevant and would not influence the response (Bell and Waters, 2018 p.196) with approval from the university prior to publication. The survey asked 48 questions. The first 11 were to ensure the participant met the inclusion criteria and to understand a little about the child. An example is, 'Is or was your child on roll at a school in England?'. The next 19 questions were to find out the school's response to the child's non-attendance. An example is, 'Have you been told by the school that your child is 'fine' when in school?'. The third section presented 14 questions about the parent's experience such as, 'Have you felt supported by your child's school?'. The final 4 questions gave the participant the opportunity to share their view including, 'What is the single most helpful thing that the school or LA has done while your child experienced EBSA?'. All survey questions are presented, with the possible responses, in Appendix A. The survey was piloted to a single respondent to ensure ease of completion before being opened for a period of 5 days from Monday 18th July 2022. The survey link was published in 7 private Facebook groups, 3 that support parents of autistic children and 4 for parents of children who are struggling with school attendance. Participants had to meet the below criteria, or the survey was ended.

- Be the parent or caregiver of a school age child;
- The child is, or was, on roll at a primary or secondary school in England;
- The child is, or is suspected to be, autistic; and
- The child struggles, or has struggled, with school attendance.

The target number of respondents was 50-100 due to the small-scale of this study however, the response to the survey was extensive and it was closed at 1200 participants. The larger response has a positive impact on the study as the increased sample size is more representative of the population experiencing EBSA and increases the reliability of the results (Thomas, 2017).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were given in line with educational research and approval for the study obtained using the University of Birmingham's Ethics Form (Appendix B). There were no objections to be considered. Appendix C shows the screens that were presented to the participant prior to agreeing to take part in the study.

Results and Discussion

The parent survey was undertaken to find out what may be learnt from the parents of school-aged autistic children to inform current EBSA intervention approaches in England, therefore this discussion presents and reviews the results of the survey in the context of the regulatory framework, current EBSA interventions and research. 1200 parents of children in England who struggle with school attendance took part in the survey with 81 disqualified for not meeting the inclusion criteria. 83% of the children attended mainstream schools and 63% were secondary school age (Appendix D). The children struggled with school attendance, on average, for just over 3 years with some having struggled their entire school lives (Table 1). Transition years were when most struggles began (Figure 1), supporting the research of Nuttall and Woods (2013).

Table 1. The number of months the child has struggled with school attendance

| Valid Responses | Average | Range |
|------------------------|----------------|--------------|
| N=1021 | 36.4 months | 3-144 months |

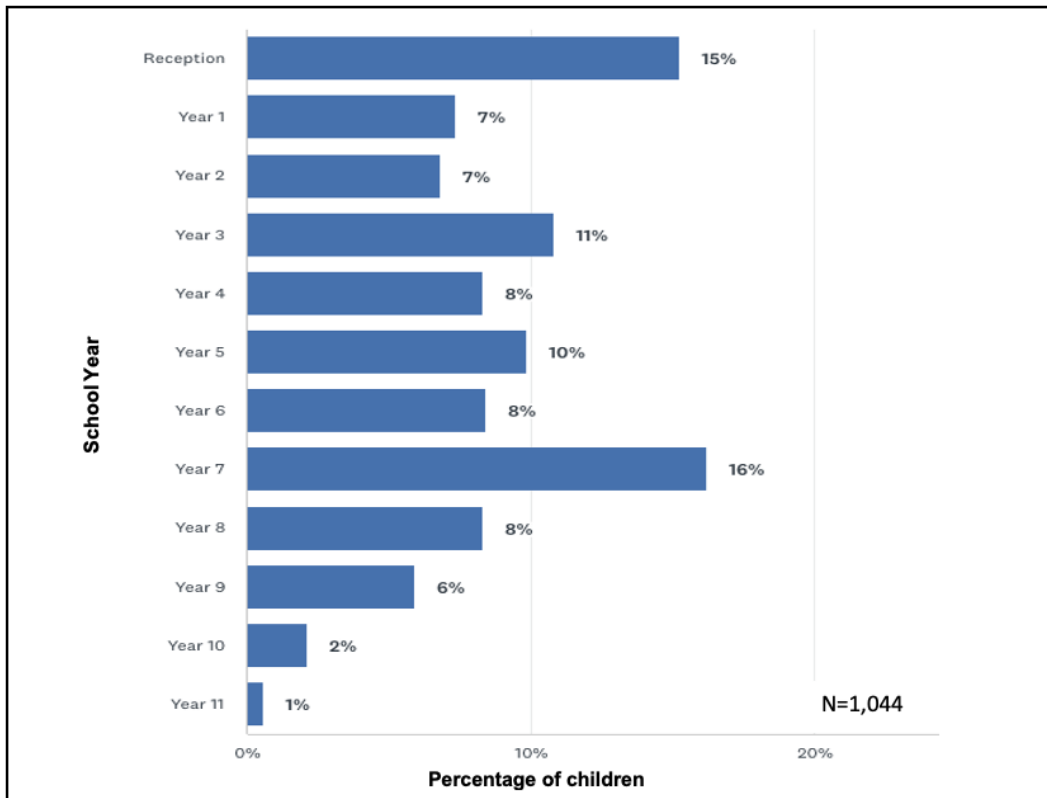


Figure 1. Percentage of children in each school year when attendance struggles started

78% of parents reported their child suffered with anxiety (Figure 2), supporting the view that there is a correlation between EBSA and anxiety (Appleby Payne, 2010; Adams, 2021).

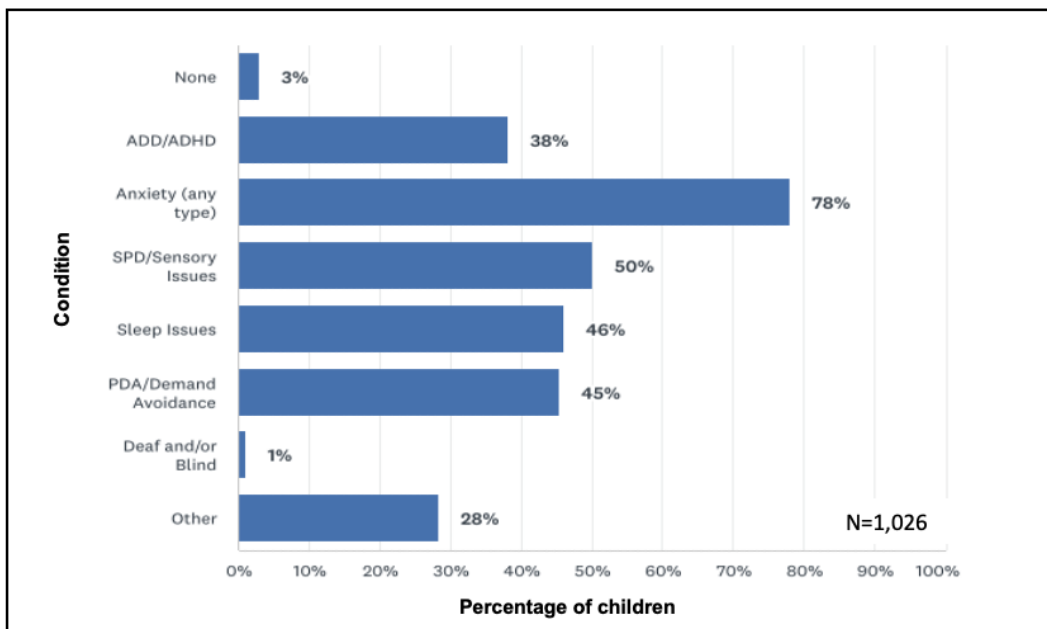


Figure 2. Co-occurring conditions of the child (diagnosed or suspected)

Regulatory Framework

From the government website, regulations underpin the duties of parents and the services' statutory obligations in relation to school attendance, which are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. The compiled regulations and statutory guidance that relates to school attendance

| Acts and Guidance | Description |
|---|---|
| <i>The Education Act 1996, s.7</i> | It is the parent's legal obligation to ensure their child, if of compulsory school age, has a 'full-time education' suited to the child and this may be 'either by regular attendance at school or otherwise'. |
| <i>The Education Act 1996, s.444</i> | If the child is not getting a suitable education the parent/s could be guilty of an offence with punishment of a fine up to £2,500 or imprisonment. This includes if the child fails to attend school regularly, if registered at a school. However, this section also states that there are defences for a child missing school which include that the parent can prove that the child is unfit to attend school or other unavoidable reasons. |
| <i>The Education Act 1996, s.19</i> | The LA must provide a suitable education at school or otherwise for those children that cannot attend due to 'illness, exclusion from school or otherwise' and if the child has a disability the school must not discriminate. |
| The Department for Education (DfE) (2013) | Guidance to support children with health needs who are unable to attend state the LA must arrange a full-time education for children who are unable to attend school for 15 days or more because of health needs. The guidance clearly says that alternative provision 'address a pupil's individual needs whether health, behaviour or otherwise' and that LAs, schools, parents and other relevant agencies should work together for an understanding and assessment of the needs of the pupil. |

The review of government regulations clearly shows that whilst it is the parent's responsibility to ensure their child attends school, if on roll, there are safety nets in place for those that cannot attend. According to the guidance, tutoring or alternative provision should be made when it is clear the child is unable to attend school for 15 days. Parents report in only 3% of cases this happened (Figure 3).

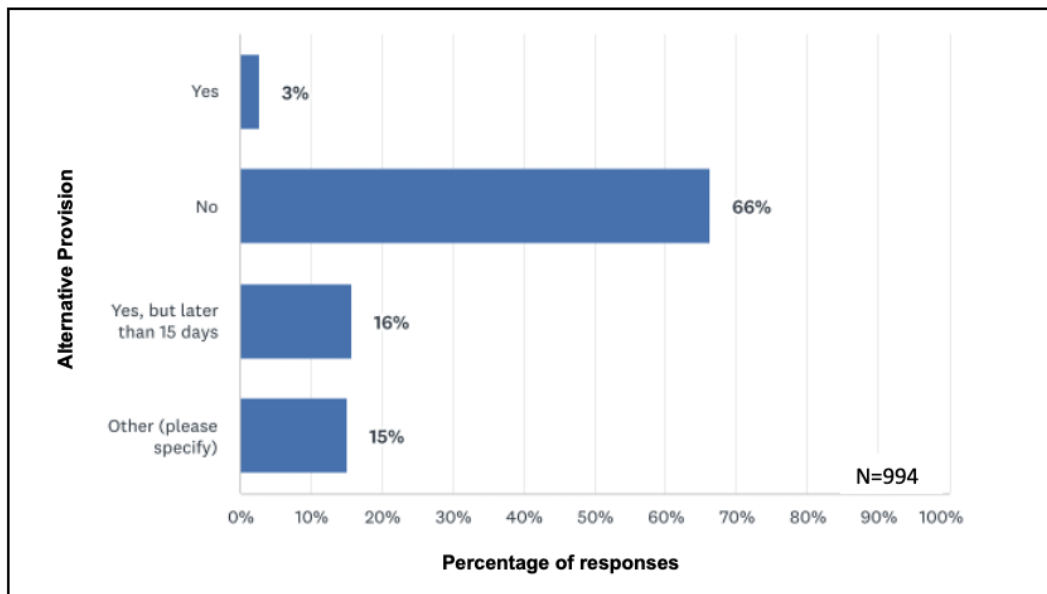


Figure 3. Responses to whether tutoring or alternative provision was provided when the child was absent for 15 days or more

A punitive approach does not resolve the problem of these children’s attendance struggles (Epstein *et al.*, 2019), yet *The Schools Bill 2022* gives further power to fine and prosecute parents. Only 1% of parents reported the threat of a fine or attendance order resolved the school attendance issue (Figure 4).

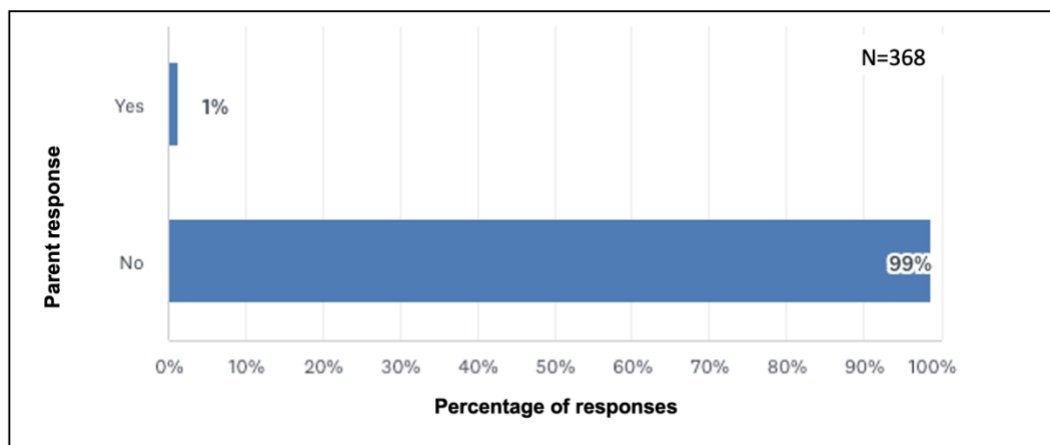


Figure 4. Parent response when asked if the threat of a fine or Attendance Order improved their child’s school attendance

The latest government approach is therefore only likely to exacerbate the situation with schools pressuring parents to force the child to attend, which is reported to be the case by 62% of parents (Figure 5). Only 2% said that this forceful approach helped (Figure 6), confirming the research of Csóti (2003) that forcing the child will increase anxiety further.

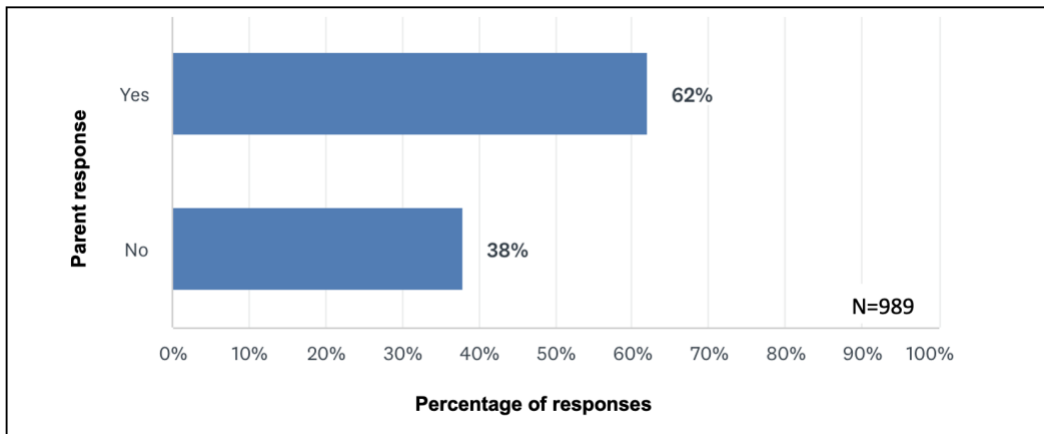


Figure 5. The percentage of parents who have been told by the school to force their child to school

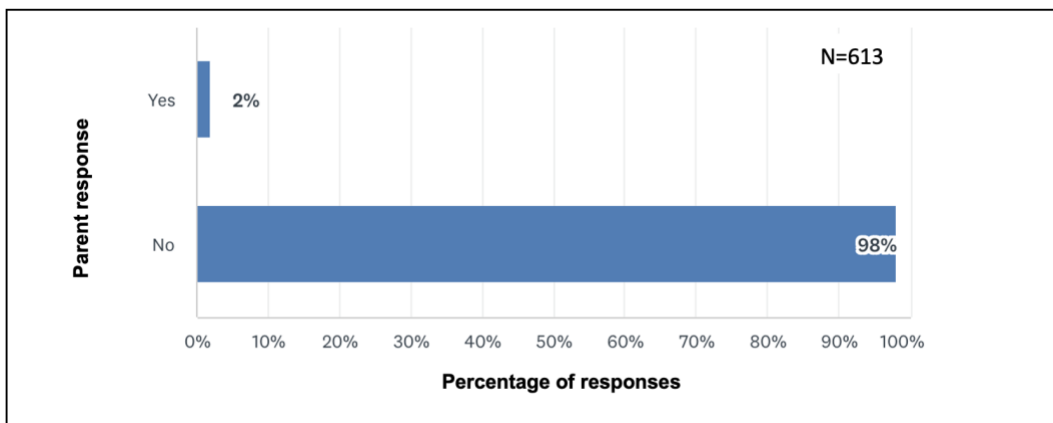


Figure 6. The percentage of parents who said that forcing their child to school resolved the attendance struggle

This punitive approach may lead to an increase in illegal off-rolling of children by removing them from the school roll to 'game' school performance tables and relieve funding pressures by encouraging the parents to electively home educate (Parliament. House of Commons, 2020). This was experienced by 77% of parents who said that their school or LA suggested their child should be home educated (Figure 7).

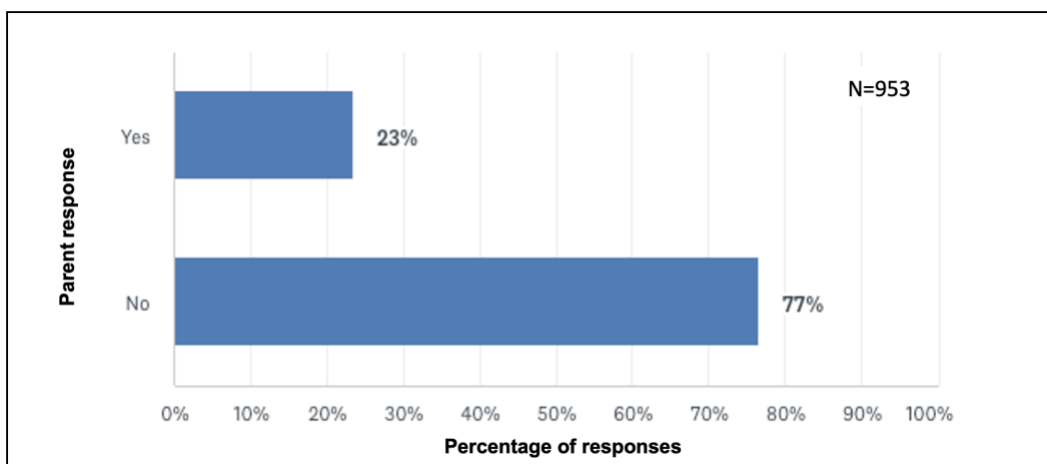


Figure 7. Responses when asked if the school had suggested to the parent that they should electively home educate the child

These results echo The Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman focus study (LGO) (2022) where the LGO upheld 89% of investigations into parent complaints about children missing education in 2021 and

confirming that some LAs are not adhering to their statutory duties leading to some children missing out on education.

EBSA Interventions

Although only 3 LA approaches to EBSA were explored within this study, it was found that the material published to give guidance to schools and parents was founded on current research. Although it should be considered if using the term 'EBSA' as opposed to 'School Refusal', when searching for LA interventions, may have introduced bias towards those using more up to date approaches. Of note, only WSCC published specific strategies to support autistic children with EBSA and signposts to the Autism Education Trust's (AET) Progression Framework (AET, 2022b) as a tool for reviewing the success of interventions. The LA review identified they are using interventions based on Kearney and Silverman's (1990) four reasons for school non-attendance and, although this study was over 30 years ago, there is no evidence to suggest it is not relevant today or that there is a single approach to resolving EBSA (Lee, 2019). However, there are clear guidelines on good autism practice in education (Guldburg, 2020) based on the statutory framework for the early years foundation stage (DfE, 2021a) and the approach to EBSA from these LAs, summarised in Table 3, are aligned with this. Further research should review the approach of LAs across the country to identify where there are differences and explore how these are implemented, comparing the outcomes.

Table 3. Key actions to support children with EBSA

| Approach | Approach detail |
|---|--|
| Early identification and action | Early identification of the risk of EBSA can enable preventative action to be taken. |
| Collaboration with parents to understand the absence | Be sensitive and actively listen to build a collaborative partnership to work together in the best interests of the child while maintaining regular contact with parents. |
| Collaboration with the young person | Person-centred approach acknowledging the difficulties and not dismissing the child's anxieties and worries. Empathy is important to ensure the child feels listened to and understood. Work towards increasing confidence and self-esteem and developing the child's feelings of safety and a sense of belonging. |
| Collaboration with other school staff | Consider if the child has unidentified special educational needs or a disability. |
| Graduated Response | Assess, Plan, Do, Review approach to interventions that are co-produced with parents, the child, and appropriate agencies. The outcome of reintegrating the child must be gradual, with realistic and achievable step by step goals. |
| Flexible and bespoke intervention based on understanding of the reason for EBSA | A strengths and interests-based approach with bespoke and specific interventions selected to support the reasons for the EBSA. All staff to be aware and support. All staff to stay with the plan and build trust. |
| Referral to other agencies, where needed | These include, but are not limited to; Educational Psychologist, outreach teams, GP, CAMHS. |
| Whole School positive approach to wellbeing and positive mental health | A positive approach to mental health and wellbeing should be adopted across the school as part of the school culture. |
| The head teacher may authorise absence from school for ill health where supporting medical evidence is provided | Evidence can include appointment cards, prescriptions, or medical professional reports. |
| Refer to Local Authority for an Education Health and Care (EHC) needs assessment | If no progress is made following the Assess, Plan, Do, Review cycles, then in some cases a child may require support above the SEN Support level. |

So, to find out what we can learn from parents about the current EBSA intervention approaches, the criteria detailed in Table 3 will be examined next in line with the parent responses.

Early Identification and Action

Baker and Bishop (2015) highlight the importance of a quick response and early intervention, yet the average time the child has been struggling with school attendance reported by parents is over 3 years (Table 1).

Collaboration with parents

Despite the research and guidance published by LAs, it appears schools are upholding the outdated view that EBSA is due to poor parenting (Archer *et al.*, 2003). This parent blame and judgemental view was recently highlighted in a 2020 survey from NFIS (NFIS, 2020). This same view was reflected in the parent survey with 67% of parents being made to feel as though the child's non-attendance was their fault (Figure 8) and only 30% feeling supported by the school (Figure 9) with just 15% knowing about LA EBSA support resources available on the 'Local Offer', a website available to parents with advice, support and guidance about education and other services the LA provide (Figure 10).

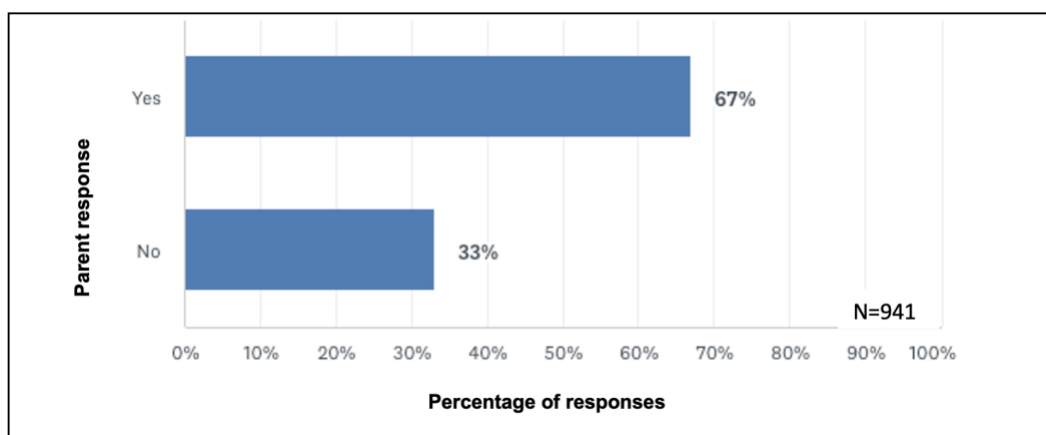


Figure 8. Parent response when asked if they had been made to feel as though the child's non-attendance was their fault

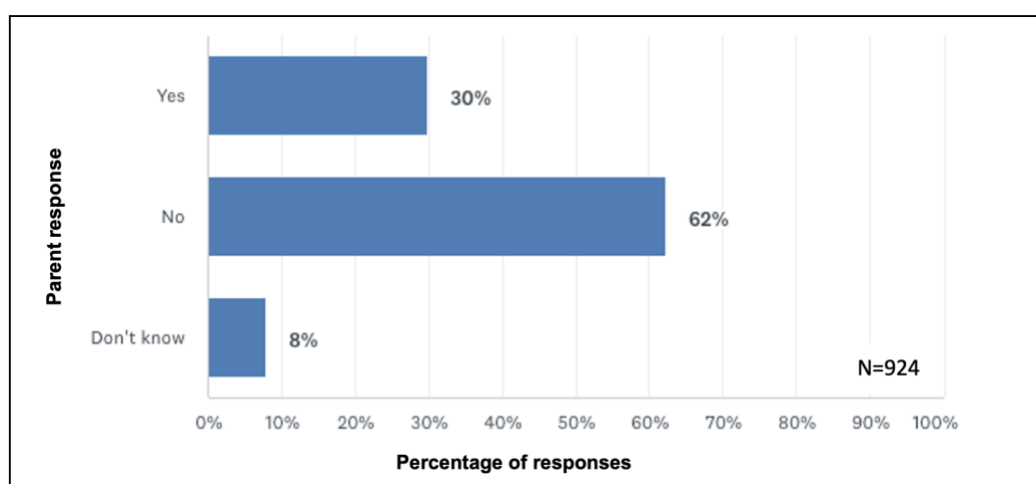


Figure 9. Parent response when asked if they felt supported by their child's school while the child struggled with school attendance

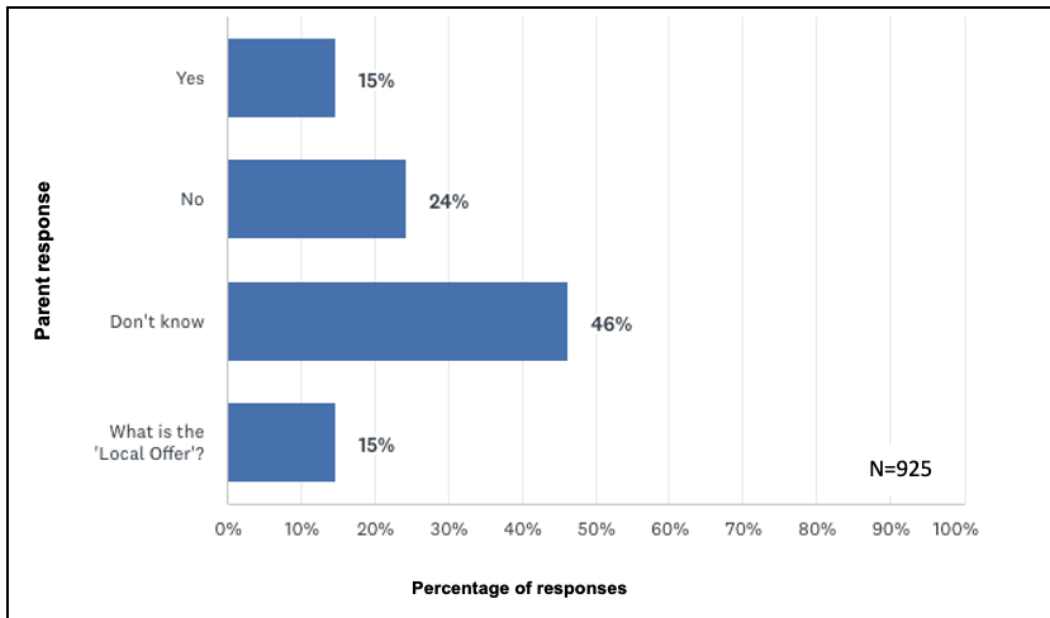


Figure 10. Parent response when asked if their Local Authority published support material for EBSA on their 'Local Offer'

Understanding the reasons for EBSA is critical in deciding which interventions are appropriate (Kearney and Silverman, 1990) and is the 'Assess' phase of the 'Assess, Plan, Do, Review' cycle recommended by LAs (Table 3). Yet less than half of parents reported that school had worked with them to understand the wider context and underlying causes of their child's non-attendance (Figure 11).

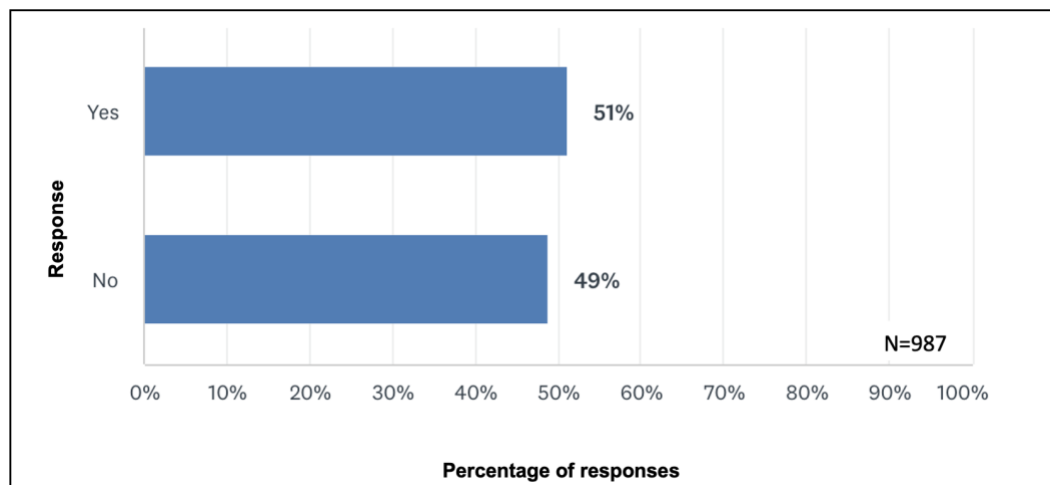


Figure 11. The percentage of parent's response to asking if the school had worked with them to try to understand the wider context/underlying cause of school non-attendance

Parent collaboration is crucial for understanding the reasons for EBSA and also to support the parents. In 85% of cases parents reported the period of their child's EBSA 'considerably increased their stress levels and impacted their life and the wider family' showing how families are adversely impacted by this experience (Figure 12).

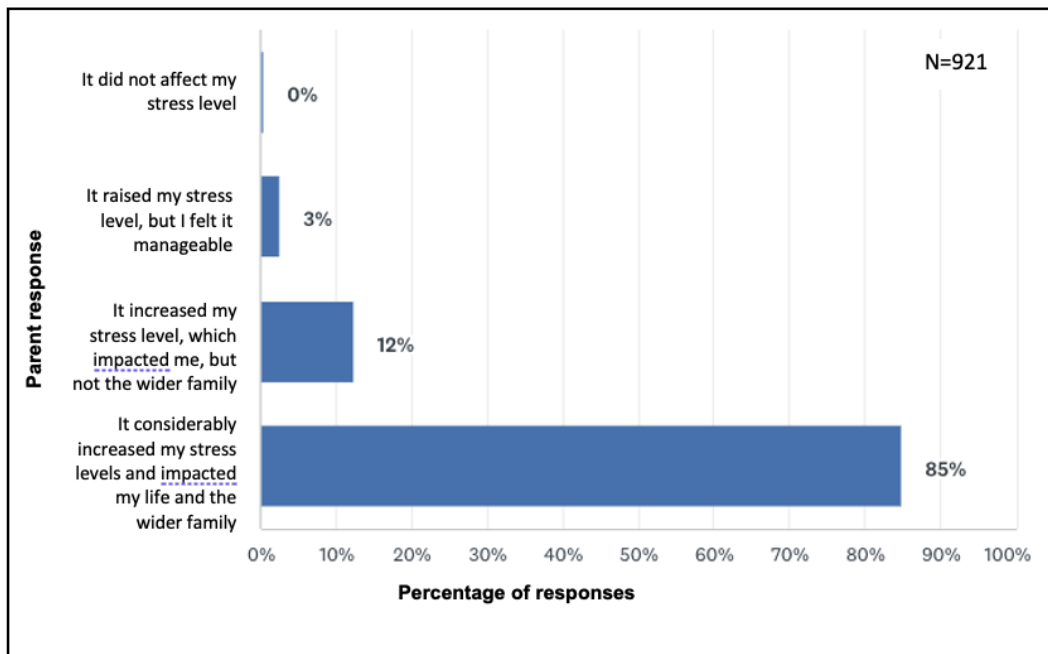


Figure 12. Parental stress levels during the school attendance difficulties

Due to the limitation of this study the correlation between how stressed a parent becomes and how supportive the school was felt to be was not examined and is an area where further research is needed as the parent responses to the open-ended questions strongly conveyed a message of the negative impact it has on their lives (Figure 13).

"It destroyed our family, with years of education lost and CPTSD now affects us every day"

"Once your child has tried to commit suicide because they are so unhappy at school you never really recover."

"It has taken over our lives. The impact has been indescribable, and our daughter is a shadow of her former self. I can't see an end to this."

"I feel like I'm drowning with zero support and my child is desperately unhappy."

"It has been a very difficult and stressful time for the whole family trying to get the correct support for my child, it's taken me 5 years to get him the correct support."

"We ended up forced to home educate as our son was suicidal - trying to run under buses or jump from windows. The experience of seeing him so distressed was horrific."

"I have not been able to work, and it's added a lot of extra expenses."

"Our whole house is constantly walking on egg shells as their mood is so volatile. We are all stressed, and my younger child now experiences high levels of stress and anxiety due to living in this environment. We all need therapy but can't afford it and none is available on the NHS."

"Exhausting Stressful worried lonely"

"The last three years have been the most challenging of my life so I'm not shy of challenges. Having a 12-year-old that is suicidal and self-harming because of their school experience is devastating. I really don't have the words to explain it but living with the potential loss of one of your kids day in day out whilst trying to get their needs met nearly broke me."

"The paperwork, emails, meetings etc particularly regarding fighting for tutoring and EHCP provision has taken huge amounts of time and has interfered with our ability to earn and also to spend time supporting our child."

"This affects the whole family adding stress and pressure as we are parent blamed."

"Our stress levels are extremely high. Our daughter is very academic but has had no access to education."

"I was set on committing suicide. I felt I had completely failed as a parent. One day my child broke down and said they felt the same. We both felt so broken and let down."

Figure 13. An extract of responses to 'Please use this space to share anything else you would like to about how EBSA affects you, your family and the child who experiences EBSA.'

Collaboration with the young person

Understanding the child's view is critical to discovering the reason for their EBSA and obtaining their viewpoint is firmly embedded in the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice (CoP) (DfE, 2014). Only 45% of parents reported the school had worked with their child to obtain their view and understand their difficulties (Figure 14), despite the LA guidance saying that a person-centred approach is essential, along with empathy and ensuring the child feels listened to and understood. In the context of Figure 15, where 62% of parents reported their child does not feel safe in school, it is clear that the child centred approach is not always being adopted in practice.

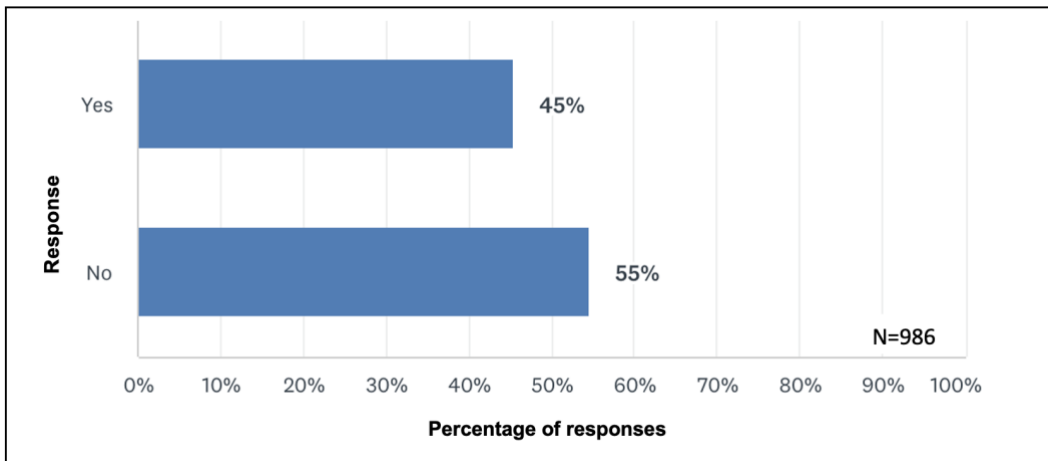


Figure 14. The percentage of parent’s response when asked if the school had worked with their child to obtain the child’s view and understand their difficulties with school attendance

Collaboration with school staff

This study did not specifically address this area, although it should be noted that pupils with disabilities are at higher risk of having school attendance difficulties (Kearney, 2008) and LAs note that unidentified SEND should be considered as a cause of EBSA. 78% of parents believe that unmet SEND needs were the cause of their child’s EBSA (Figure 15) so collaboration between school staff is essential to learn if this may be the case. Figure 15 supports the correlation between anxiety and EBSA (Adams, 2021) and highlights the complexity of multiple factors influencing the child’s school attendance.

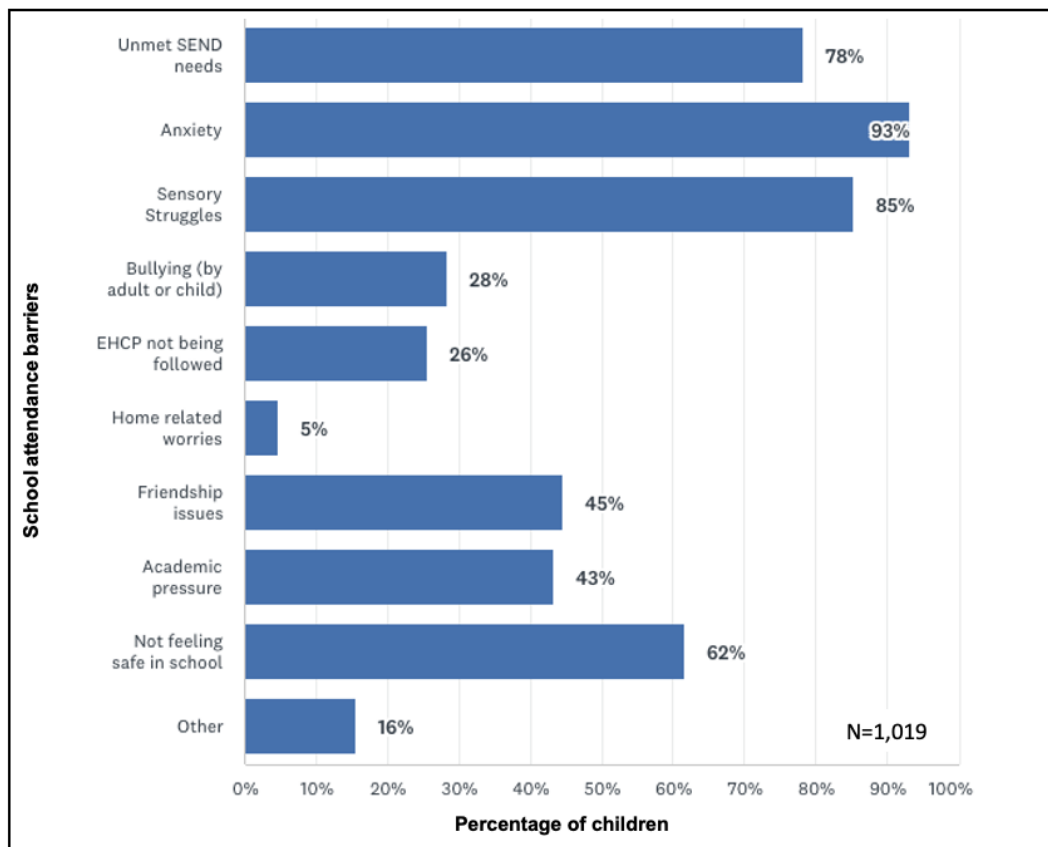


Figure 15. Parent view of the child's barriers to attending school

Flexible and bespoke interventions

Critical to deciding the right approach for support, is understanding the reason for the EBSA (Kearney and Silverman, 1990), yet 57% of parents reported that the school had not tried to understand the reason for their child's attendance difficulties (Figure 16) and only 31% felt as though support was personalised to their child (Figure 17).

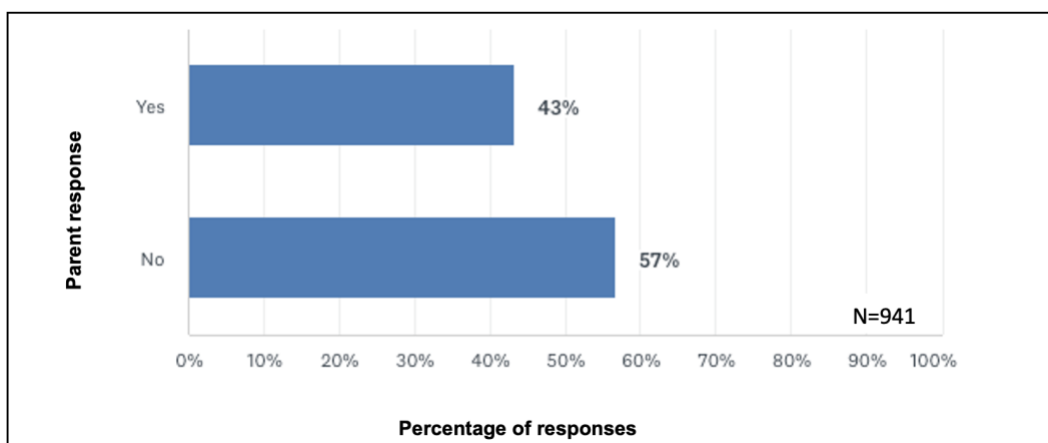


Figure 16. Parent response when asked if they felt the school had tried to understand the reasons for the child's difficulties in attending school

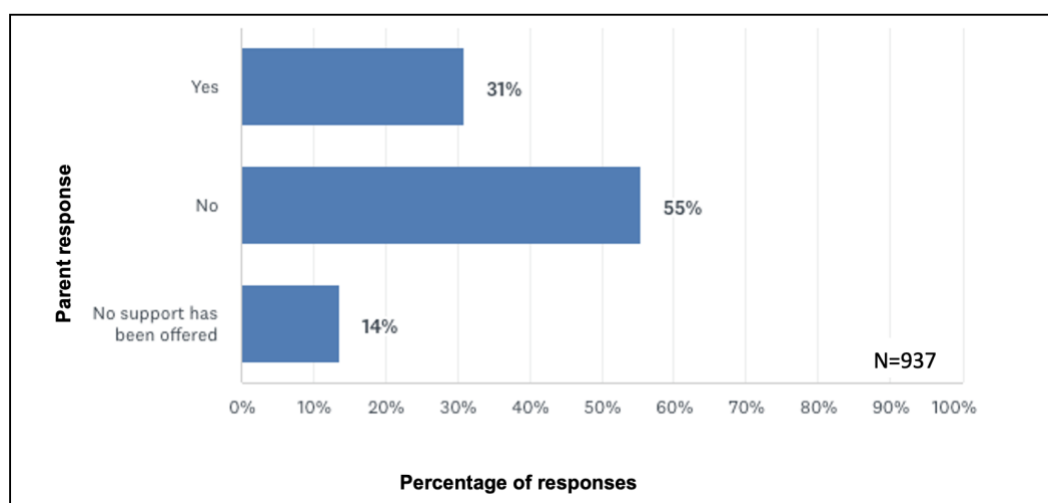


Figure 17. Parent response when asked if they felt the school's approach to supporting their child was personalised to the child

When interventions were delivered, 66% of parents said these did not help (Figure 18). In the context of only 31% of interventions being personalised to the child, it is not surprising that the interventions are not successful as they are unlikely to be the right approach if the reason for non-attendance is not understood and the intervention personalised.

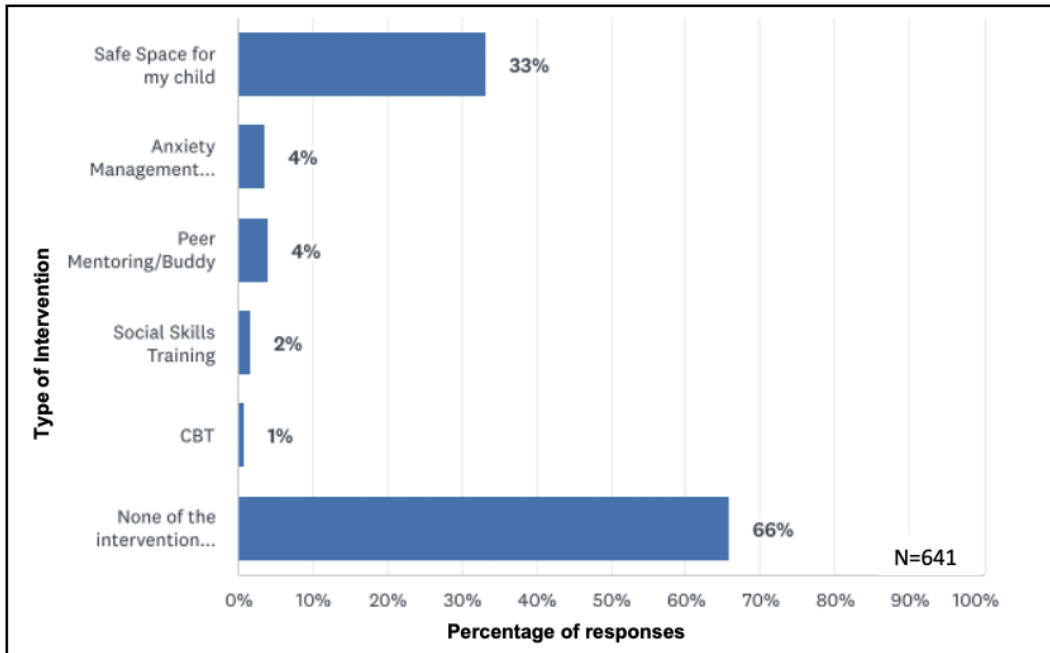


Figure 18. The interventions that the parent selected as helpful to reduce school non-attendance

Figure 19 is consistent with the findings of the LGO (LGO, 2022) as 31% of parents responded that no interventions were offered.

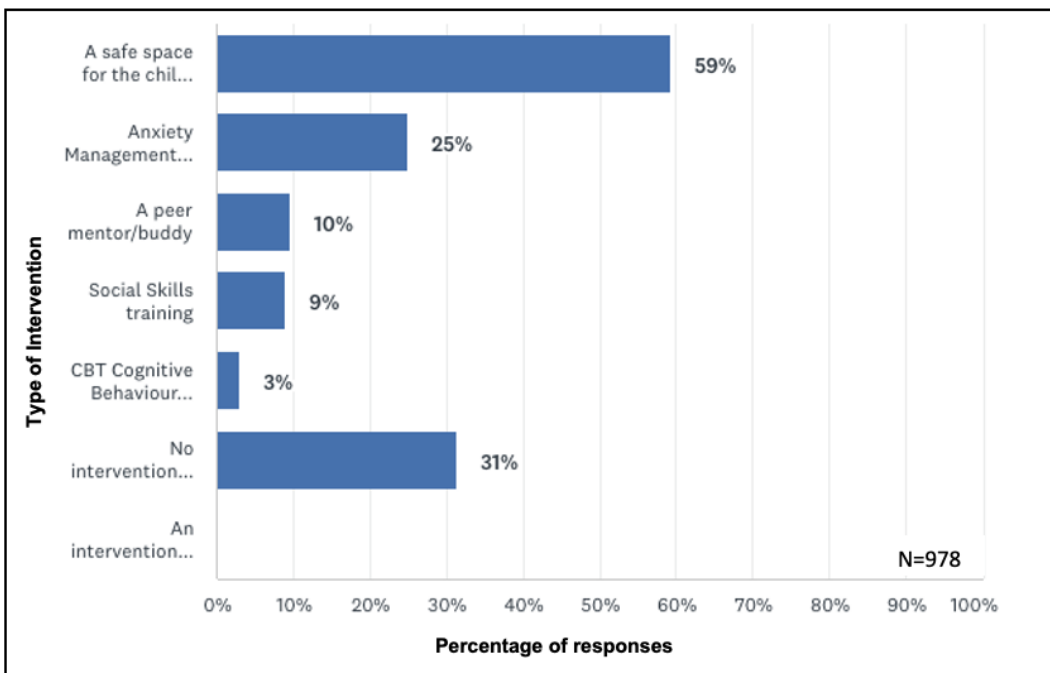


Figure 19. The interventions that were introduced to support the child
Appendix D shows the full detail of the interventions suggested that are not possible to clearly show in this figure

Parent interventions were offered in 51% of responses (Figure 20), of which 89% of parents reported that none of these helped resolve the problem (Figure 21). Again, this suggests that EBSA is being treated as truancy and the underlying causes are not being assessed in practice.

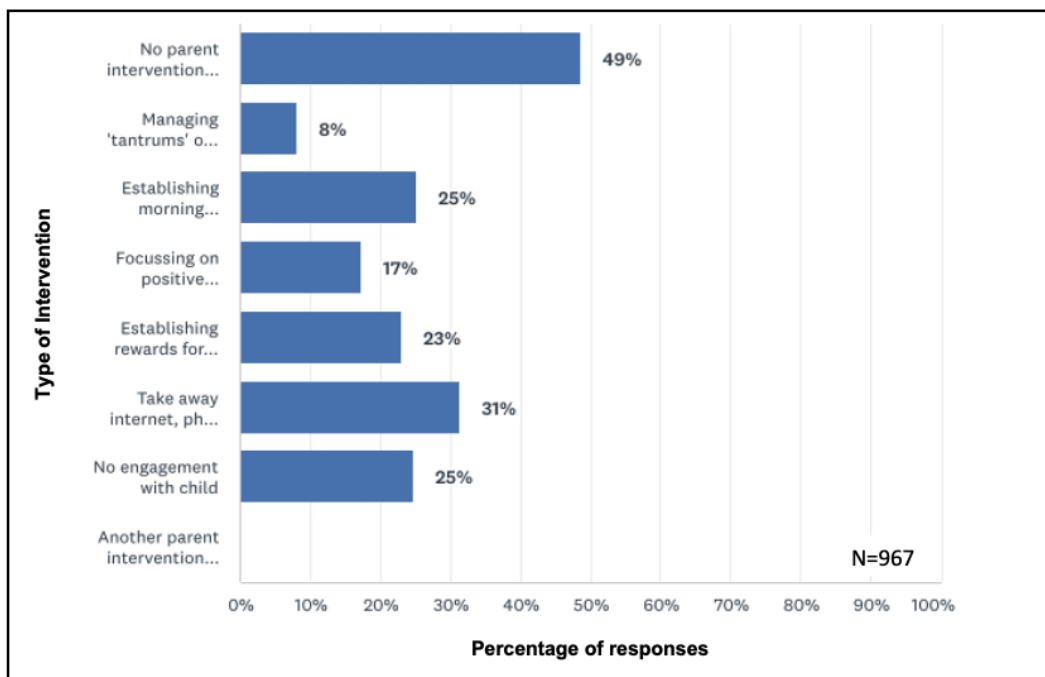


Figure 20. Parent interventions the school suggested for school non-attendance
Appendix D shows the full detail of the interventions suggested that are not possible to clearly show in this figure

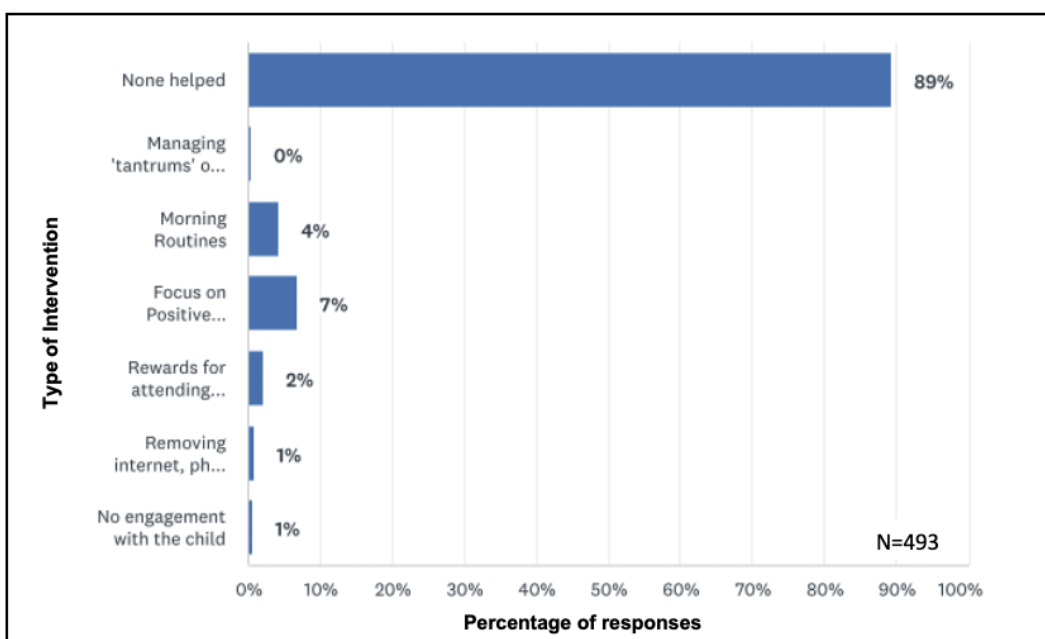


Figure 21. Parent interventions that were helpful in resolving school non-attendance

Whole School positive approach to wellbeing

Adams (2021) recognises the importance of positive mental health and how it correlates with improved school attendance and LA guidance says a positive approach to mental health should be adopted across the whole school. 68% of parents reported their school are not doing this (Figure 22) and 80% responded that they felt their school did not give equal weight to physical and mental health difficulties (Figure 23).

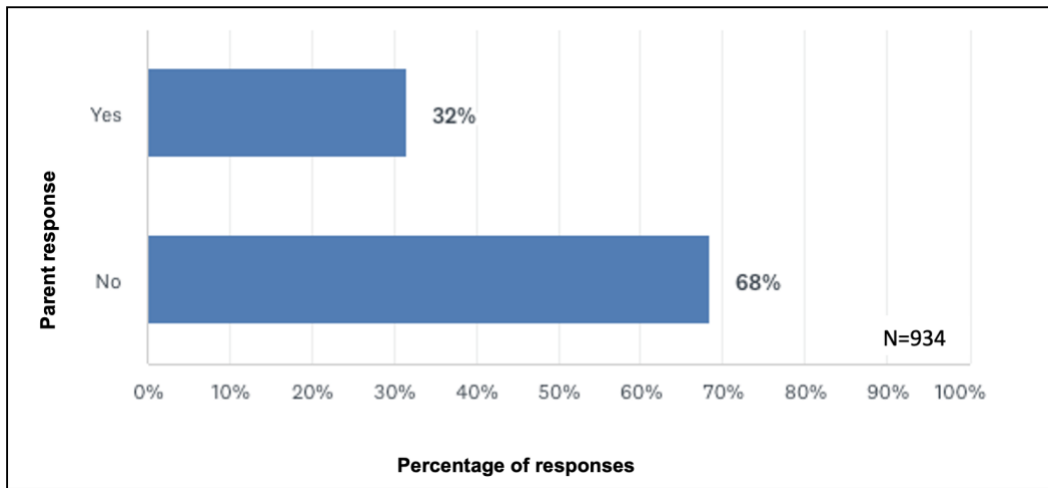


Figure 22. Parent response when asked if they felt the school promotes a positive approach to children’s mental health

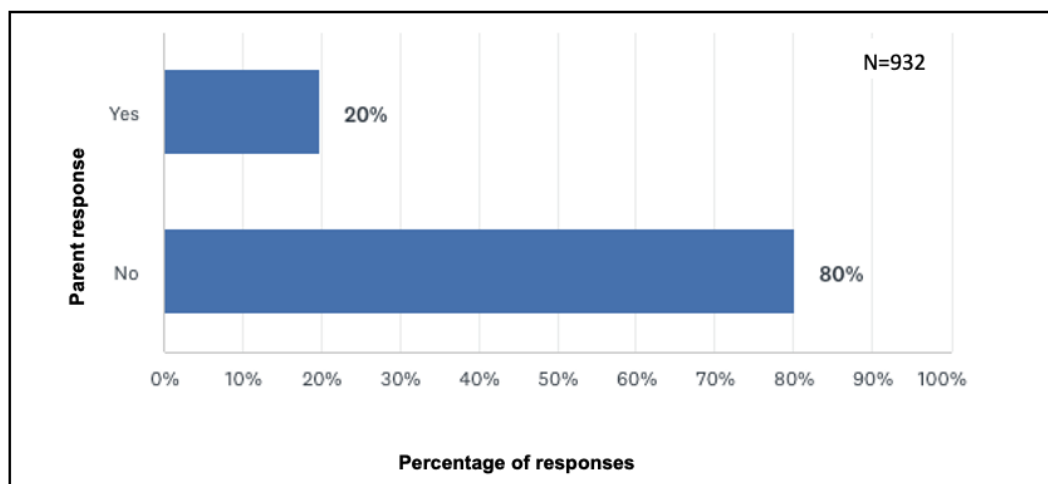


Figure 23. Parent response when asked if they felt the school gave equal weight to physical and mental health difficulties

EBSA guidance published by the LAs reviewed offered training to ensure school staff understand EBSA yet only 12% of parents felt their child’s school had a good understanding of EBSA (Figure 24) and 6% felt their LA had a good understanding (Figure 25).

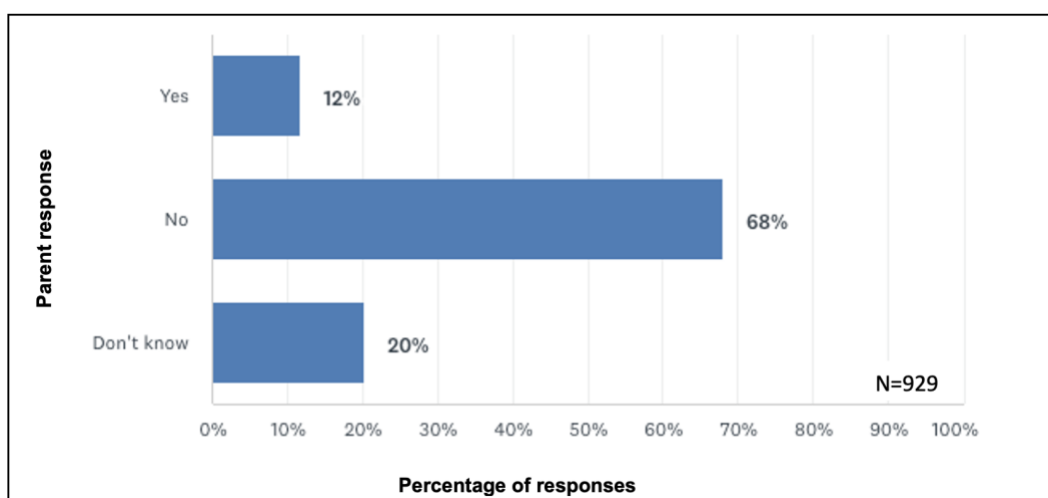


Figure 24. Parent response when asked if they felt their child’s school had a good understanding of EBSA

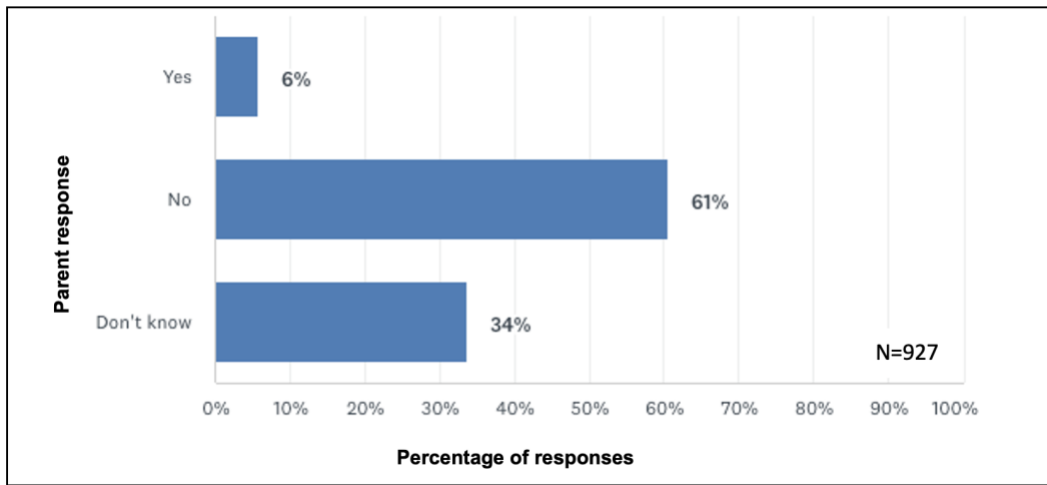


Figure 25. Parent response when asked if they felt their Local Authority had a good understanding of EBSA

This lack of understanding is highlighted by 74% of parents reporting they have been told by the school that their child is ‘fine’ when in school (Figure 26).

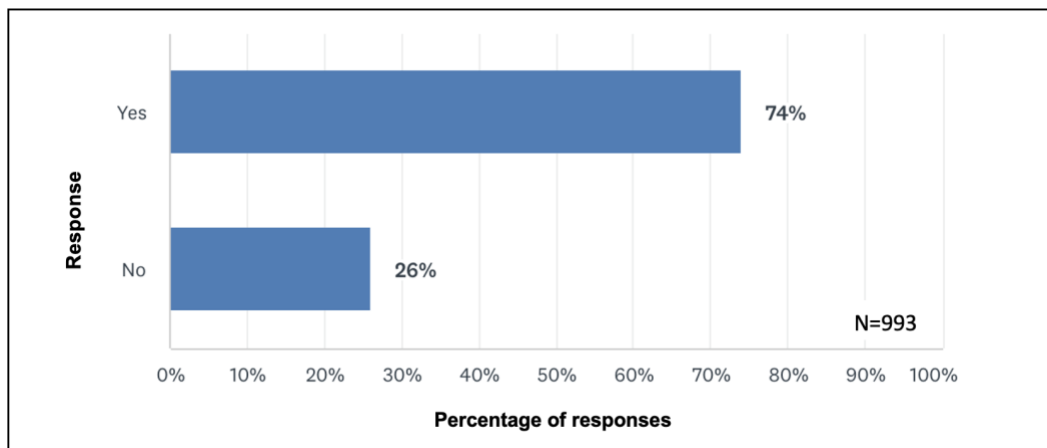


Figure 26. The percentage of parents who have been told by the school that their child is ‘fine’ when in school

Referral to outside agencies

The LA guidance says that schools should refer to outside agencies and services where needed, such as Educational Psychology, CAMHS and others, yet 39% of parents reported that no referral to outside agencies were made (Figure 27).

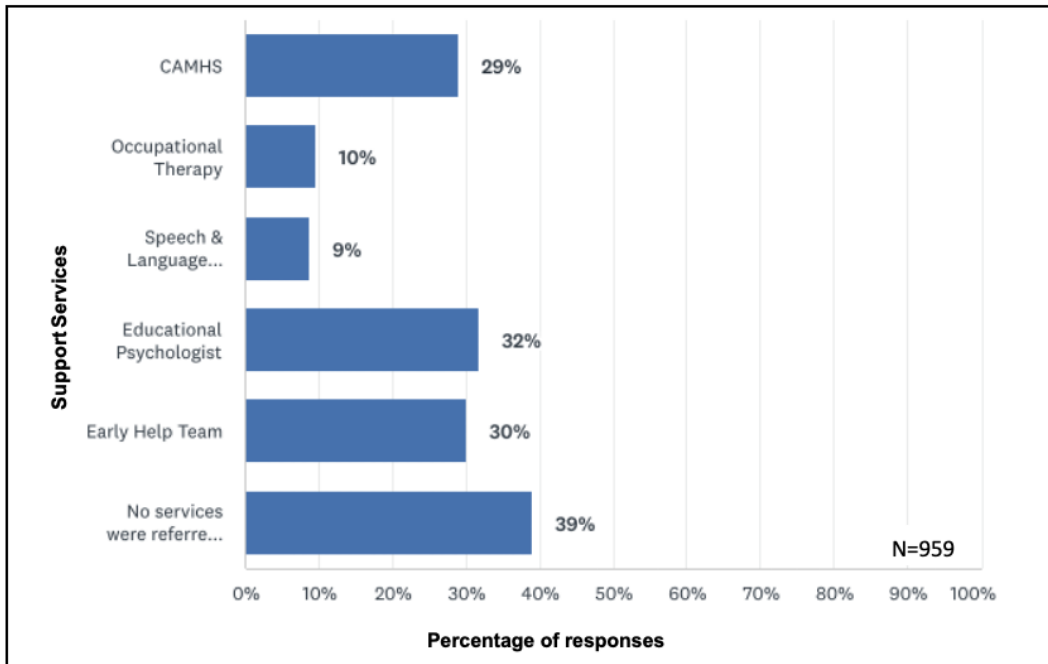


Figure 27. Other services that were requested to support with the school non-attendance

Parent Voice

A limitation of this study meant the open-ended questions could not be analysed. Figure 28 shows an extract from the 665 responses to asking parents what they wanted schools and their LA to know. These responses support the research and current approaches to EBSA yet highlight that these approaches are not always reaching those that need them. The extensive responses to the optional open-ended questions tell us that parents want their voices to be heard and require support, not blame and punitive measures.

"The LA needs to stop creating barriers and the blame culture needs to change."

"They need training and awareness, to not automatically blame parents. If a child didn't want to go home, they would blame home. If a child isn't able to go to school, the focus needs to be on school environment."

"Listen to children and families and have increased and up today knowledge of autism."

"Listen to parents. Don't gaslight them. They know their child best. Work with the parent instead of against them. Look at the child as an individual not label all autistic children the same."

"Looking fine is not the same as being fine. If a parent comes to you and says they are worried, then schools should listen and support."

"They need to read and act on their own policies and rule."

"Stop treating parents as criminals or child abusers"

"LA'S need to stop treating EBSA as a choice."

"For many autistic people the school environment is very hostile. You can have every strategy under the sun to get a child into school, but unless you change the environment then it will never work."

"Punishments and shaming DO NOT work! A softer more understanding approach with no timescales or pressure is likely to work much better than the threat of being taken to court! The obsession with attendance is scary and causes schools to overlook many other issues."

"Allow every approach to be as unique as the child."

Figure 28. An extract of parent responses to the question 'Please use this space to say anything you believe schools and Local Authorities need to know to improve the experiences of children and their families with EBSA'.

It should not be overlooked that while the data collected in this study is mostly negative showing many schools and LAs failing in their duty to follow the statutory guidance, there are also positive responses. For example, 30% of parents felt supported by their school (Figure 9), 51% of parents reported the school had worked with them to try to understand the reason for their child's non-attendance (Figure 11) and 45% of parents reported that the school worked with their child to obtain their view (Figure 14). Figure 29 shows an extract, from 821 responses, where the response was positive when asked 'What is the single most helpful thing that your school or LA has done while your child experienced EBSA?'. Without further analysis it is not possible to identify if these positive cases resulted in positive outcomes.

“Built relationships”

“Made referrals for communication interaction team and educational psychologist”

“Keep her connected even though physically absent”

“They agreed to fund a tailor made package for learning”

“Listened”

“Not fined us:

“Been patient, told us they were ‘there for the whole family’”

“Believed us”

“Had regular communication with me”

“Not judge him or us and accept his anxiety is real”

“Allowed my daughter to attend rehearsals for the school musical while not pressurising her to attend lessons”

“Listened when we have said what has not worked and what won’t work...”

“Removed pressure to attend and/or perform at school”

“Believe and support us - our SENCO was amazing”

“Having an Autism champion in school who understands autism”

“Not pressure me or my child with fines”

“Regular communication, reduced pressure, understanding, educating wider school”

Figure 29. An extract of parent responses to the question ‘What is the single most helpful thing that your school or LA has done while your child experienced EBSA?’.

The limitations of this study meant that further data was collected but it was not possible to analyse this (Appendix D). The data presented also requires further investigation, such as if there is a correlation between EBSA and Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) as shown in Figure 2. Future research should explore this to identify correlations and inform approaches to EBSA.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the legislation is clear on the parental responsibility for children to attend school, however there are safety nets in place to support children with SEND and clear statutory guidance published (DfE, 2013). The research into school attendance difficulties has evolved over the years with the recognition that these children are not truants and should not be treated as such. It is not the case that these children will not go to school, but they cannot (Wadlow, 2020) and they require support for the underlying anxiety and

implementation of the right interventions based on their individual needs. To achieve this the guidance published is clear and founded on the research. Yet when we reach out to the parents to gain their view of the current intervention approaches for EBSA it is clear that the interventions are not being implemented quickly enough or consistently, and that parent blame is still prevalent. The 2014 SEND reforms were introduced to provide a co-ordinated assessment for children's education, health and care needs, however the government acknowledges that this system is failing, and that tension is growing with delays in accessing support and the frustration of parents having to navigate a complex system to get the support they are entitled to for their children (House of Commons Education Committee, 2019). The publication of the government 'Right support, right place, right time' green paper (DfE, 2022) earlier this year sets out to introduce wider reforms to address this failing, yet the paper has met with strong criticism arguing that the existing law is clear and the failings are firmly in the inconsistent application of the legal framework by LAs and schools and the lack of accountability that they are held to (Independent Provider of Special Education Advice (IPSEA), 2022). This view is reflected in the parent survey in this study and in the LGO findings that LAs are not adhering to their statutory duties (LGO, 2022). From the parent survey we can also clearly see that many schools are failing to meet the needs of these children which could be due to balancing the rising numbers of SEN children (ONS, 2021) and the pressure of success in school performance tables. Research should be undertaken to find out why some schools seem to be successfully implementing the correct approaches, while others are not and the impact this has on the child's outcomes. So, it appears that these children are not in fact 'ghost children' as stated by the Children's Commissioner, as we learn from the parents that their voice needs to be heard and acted on as these are children who are being failed, with their needs not being met in education resulting in EBSA. In essence, the parents are informing us that it is not the law and the approaches to interventions where change is needed, but in the application of the much-needed understanding and support for these children and their families to ensure positive outcomes and for all children to thrive in school.

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APPENDIX A

PARENT SURVEY QUESTIONS

Please note – Italics show information not displayed on the survey screens to the participant.

About your child

(11 questions)

*If any of the responses marked with * were selected, the survey was ended and thanked the participant and explained that they do not meet the criteria for inclusion in the survey.*

The first set of questions are to find out a little bit about your child.

Q1. Is or was your child on roll at a school in England?

- Yes
- No*

Q2. What type of school is/was your child on roll at?

- Mainstream
- Special School
- Independent
- Other (please specify) - *Free Text box*

Q3. Is your child Primary or Secondary School age?

- Primary School
- Secondary School
- Other*

Q4. Does your child struggle with school attendance?

- Yes
- No*

Q5. If you know, please enter your child's attendance % in the last school year?

- Free text box*

Q6. How long has your child been struggling with attendance?

(Please answer in terms of years and months)

- Free text box*

Q7. In which school year did your child first start to struggle with attendance?

- Reception
- Year 1
- Year 2
- Year 3
- Year 4
- Year 5
- Year 6
- Year 7
- Year 8
- Year 9
- Year 10
- Year 11

Q8. Does your child have an autism diagnosis?

- Yes
- No*
- Waiting for, or undergoing Assessment
- I suspect autism, but we are not on a diagnostic pathway

Q9. Does your child have any other diagnosis, or do you suspect any of the below?

(More than one can be selected)

- No
- Attention Deficit Disorder/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADD/ADHD)
- Anxiety (any type)
- Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD)
- Sleep Issues
- Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA)
- Deaf and/or Blind
- Other (please specify) – *Free text box*

Q10. Does your child have an EHCP?

- Yes
- No
- Applied for, or in assessment stage

Q11. What do you believe are the barriers to your child attending school?

(More than one can be selected)

- Unmet SEND needs
- Anxiety
- Sensory difficulties in the school environment
- Bullying (by adult or child)
- EHCP provision not being delivered
- Home related worries
- Friendship issues
- Academic pressure
- Not feeling safe in school
- Other/s (please specify) – *Free Text box*

The School's Response

(19 questions)

These next set of questions are designed to find out what your experience was with the school's response to your child's EBSA.

Q12. Does/did the school mark absence as authorised or unauthorised?

- Authorised absence
- Unauthorised absence
- Don't know
- If you know the absence code please enter it here – *Free text box*

Q13. If absence is 'I' illness, then what did the school accept as evidence?

(If the code was not 'I' you can skip this question)

- School accepted parent reported illness
- School accepted a GP letter or phone call

- School would only accept a letter or phone call from a consultant or CAMHS
- School will not/did not accept medical reason for absence
- Other (please specify) – *Free text box*

Q14. Were you offered tutoring or alternative provision when it became clear your child would be absent for 15 days or more?

- Yes
- No
- Yes, but later than 15 days
- Other (please specify) – *Free text box*

Q15. Have you been told by the school that your child is 'fine' when in school?

- Yes
- No

Q16. Have you been told by the school to force your child to school?

- Yes
- No

Q17. If yes, did this resolve the attendance struggles?

- Yes
- No

Q18. Has the school worked with you to try to understand the wider context/underlying cause of the non-attendance?

- Yes
- No

Q19. Have the school worked with your child to obtain their views and understand their difficulties when in school?

- Yes
- No

Q20. Has the school provided a reintegration plan, such as a part time timetable?

- Yes
- No

Q21. If yes, was the reintegration plan successful?

- Yes
- No

Q22. Did the school introduce any of the below interventions for your child?

(You can select more than one)

- A safe space for your child to go to when needed
- Support to your child to learn about anxiety and management strategies such as relaxation, deep breathing exercises and/or a healthy minds course
- A peer mentor/buddy for your child
- Social Skills training
- Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) or adapted CBT
- No interventions were offered
- Please detail any other intervention offered – *Free text box*

Q23. Which intervention/s helped?

(You may select more than one)

- A safe space for my child to go to
- Anxiety management training
- Peer mentoring/buddy
- Social Skills training
- CBT
- None of the interventions helped
- Please detail any other intervention that helped – *Free text box*

Q24. Did the school provide information or suggest any of the below parent interventions?

(You may select more than one)

- No parent interventions were suggested
- Managing 'tantrums' or physical complaints
- Establishing morning routines
- Focussing on positive behaviours
- Establishing rewards for attending school
- Removing the child's access to internet, telephone or games when not attending school
- To not engage with your child while off school to make this time boring
- Please detail any other parent interventions that were suggested – *Free text box*

Q25. Did any of the parent interventions help?

(You may select more than one)

- No parent interventions helped
- Managing 'tantrums' or physical complaints
- Establishing morning routines
- Focussing on positive behaviours
- Establishing rewards for attending school
- Removing the child's access to internet, telephone or games when not attending school
- To not engage with your child while off school to make this time boring
- Please detail any other parent interventions that helped – *Free text box*

Q26. Has/did the school make a referral to any other services for support?

(More than one may be selected)

- CAMHS
- Occupational Therapy
- Speech & Language Therapist
- Educational Psychologist
- Early Help Team
- No referrals were made to any services
- Please state any other services that were engaged – *Free text box*

Q27. If your child does NOT have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), has/did the school make a request for the LA to undertake an EHCP needs assessment to further understand the support your child requires?

- Yes
- No

Q28. If your child DOES have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), are the school providing what is detailed in Section F of the plan?

- Yes
- No
- My child does not have an EHCP

Q29. If your child DOES have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and the school are providing what is detailed in Section F of the plan, have they requested that a reassessment is undertaken?

- Yes
- No
- My child does not have an EHCP

Q30. Has your school or LA suggested your child may be better suited to home education and/or suggested you electively home educate (EHE)?

- Yes
- No

The parent/caregiver experience

(14 questions)

The questions in this section of the survey are designed to understand more about your experience as a parent or caregiver to a child struggling with EBSA.

Q31. Have you been threatened with a fine or Attendance Order for your child's non-attendance?

- Yes
- No

Q32. Did the threat of a fine or Attendance Order improve your child's school attendance?

- Yes
- No

Q33. Have you/were you referred to the Education Welfare Officer (EWO)?

- Yes
- No

Q34. Did the EWO help to improve your child's attendance?

- Yes
- No

Q35. Have you been made to feel as though our child's non-attendance is your fault?

- Yes
- No

Q36. Do you feel the school tried to understand the reason for your child's difficulties to attend?

- Yes
- No

Q37. Do you feel that the school's approach to supporting your child was personalised to your child?

- Yes
- No

- No support has been offered

Q38. Do you feel that your child's school promotes a positive approach to children's mental health?

- Yes
- No

Q39. Do you feel that your child's school gives equal weight to physical and mental health difficulties?

- Yes
- No

Q40. Do you feel as though your school has a good understanding of EBSA?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Q41. Do you feel as though your LA has a good understanding of EBSA?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Q42. Does your LA publish support material on their 'Local Offer' to support parents of children who struggle with EBSA?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
- What is the 'Local Offer'?

Q43. Have you felt supported by your child's school?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Q44. How would you rate your own stress levels during the attendance difficulties?

- It did not affect my stress level
- It raised my stress level, but I felt it was manageable
- It increased my stress level which impacted me, but not the wider family
- It increased my stress levels and impacted my life and the wider family

Your thoughts...

(4 questions)

This final section of the survey is optional but is an opportunity for you to share your thoughts and views of the experiences you and your child have had with EBSA.

Your views are greatly valued and appreciated.

Q45. What is the single most helpful thing that the school or LA has done while your child experienced EBSA?

- *Free text box*

Q46. What is the single most unhelpful thing that the school or LA has done while your child experienced EBSA?

- *Free text box*

Q47. Please use this space to share anything else you would like to about how EBSA affects you, your family and the child who experiences EBSA.

- *Free text box*

Q48. Please use this space to say anything you believe schools and Local Authorities need to know to improve the experiences of children and their families who have a child with EBSA.

- *Free text box*

Completion Screen

Thank you so much for your time in completing the survey.

It's your voice that counts to inform research and ultimately make a difference to the outcomes for autistic children and their families, so your time is hugely appreciated.

APPENDIX B

UNIVERSITY ETHICS FORM

Ethics Form for PGT Students

This form is for all PGT students undertaking **MEd/MA dissertations as well as the 'Special Studies in Education' Module where data will be collected.** Students should consult with their supervisor before completing this form.

Students should complete Part A of this form then pass it on to their supervisor who should complete Part B. Supervisors are responsible for checking and confirming to the ethical guidelines and frameworks of other societies, bodies or agencies that may be relevant to the student's work.

For further guidance refer to the University's Code of Ethics

<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/university/governance/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-Approved-by-Council-April-2018.pdf>

or the BERA guidelines: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/resources-for-researchers>

Tracking the form – Put an X in the box

Part A completed by the student

- **Med/MA students submit the form with their Research Methods in Education assignment**
- **Students submitting a 'Special Studies' assignment should submit the form in accordance with their programme requirements**

Part B completed and approved by the supervisor

Part A: to be completed by the STUDENT

NAME: REDACTED FOR ASSIGNMENT SUBMISSION -- STUDENT NO. 2379421

PROGRAMME OF STUDY: MED SPECIAL EDUCATION (AUTISM) - Single Project: 11 05473
(level M)

DATE: 17th June 2022

NAME OF SUPERVISOR: ANGELA PURDY

PROPOSED PROJECT TITLE: What can we learn from parents of secondary school aged autistic children to inform Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) intervention approaches in England?

NOTE FOR STUDENTS

To avoid duplication, you can copy the relevant sections of your research study and attach them to this form. You should use the points 1 to 9 below to check that you have addressed all the ethical issues sufficiently in your Research Methods in Education assignment. If you have not done so, you should complete the relevant boxes below.

NB. You should type straight into these boxes – they will expand for your text.

Do you work for or within the NHS or a Social Services Department? NO

If yes, contact your supervisor BEFORE filling out this form.

BRIEF OUTLINE OF RESEARCH STUDY: (100-250 words; this may be attached separately)

This study is designed to identify current Government and Local Authority approaches to school attendance and supporting autistic secondary aged children who struggle with school attendance due to Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA). It then obtains the parent/caregiver's viewpoint and experience of these approaches to see what may be learnt from the parent/caregiver about the current approaches.

To obtain the Government and Local Authority approaches, current publications will be reviewed that are obtained from the government website (www.gov.uk) and then Local Authority policies and approaches will be researched using Google searches to explore Local Authority websites in England.

To obtain the parent/caregiver view data will be collected anonymously using a short online survey that is linked to from the following locations:

1. Facebook Groups that support parents and carers of SEND children
2. Facebook Groups that support parents and caregivers of children who are struggling with school attendance.

Participants that do not meet the following criteria will be excluded:

- Lives in England
- Is a parent or caregiver of a secondary aged child who is either suspected to be autistic or is diagnosed as autistic AND who struggles with school attendance.

MAIN ETHICAL CONSIDERATION(S) OF THE RESEARCH STUDY (e.g. working with vulnerable adults; children with disabilities; photographs of participants; material that could give offence etc):

No children or young people will take part in this study and all adult participants will be voluntary.

The data obtained will be anonymous, so the participant is unable to be identified, even to the researcher.

The data collected will not include personal data, so the participant is unable to be identified, even to the researcher.

The data collected will not include any images or videos, so the participant is unable to be identified, even to the researcher.

To obtain the consent of the participants a summary will precede the survey questions as described in section 2 of this document. This will clearly state that consent will be obtained by proceeding with the survey and explain how the participant can withdraw their consent.

Please provide details on the following aspects of the research study:

1. What are your intended methods of recruitment, data collection and analysis?

Please outline (in 100-250 words) your methods and give what detail you can. However, it is not expected that you will be able to fully answer these questions at the proposal stage.

To obtain the parent/caregiver view a short online survey will be linked to from the following two locations:

1. Facebook Groups that support parents and carers of SEND children
2. Facebook Groups that support parents and caregivers of children who are struggling with school attendance.

Parents and caregivers will be invited through a Facebook post in these groups to take part in the anonymous online survey.

The survey will be hosted on Survey Monkey, or a similar online survey tool.

The questions are likely to use mixed methods of qualitative and quantitative data.

The data collected will be analysed to view the results of the parent view of current interventions and support they have received in relation to their child's EBSA.

The target number of respondents to provide a sample of data for the parent/caregiver view, within the time limitations of the study, will be 50-100 participants.

2. How will you make sure that all participants understand the process in which they are to be engaged and that they provide their voluntary and informed consent? If the research study involves working with children or other vulnerable groups, how have you considered their rights and protection? **[see note 1]**

The survey will have a summary for the participant to read and agree to before continuing to the survey questions.

It will include:

- The inclusion criteria of the study.
- Information about the researcher and why I am conducting the survey.
- An outline of the purpose of the research.
- An outline of what is required from the participant and how much of their time it will take.
- A statement to confirm that taking part is voluntary.
- A statement to confirm that their participation is anonymous, no personal data is collected so they are not identifiable, and anonymity is guaranteed.
- A statement to confirm that the data provided will not be used for any purpose other than this study and will not be shared with any 3rd party.
- Information on the participants right to withdraw their data and instruction on how to do this.
- A contact email if the participant would like to receive a copy of the study once completed or would like any further information.
- A statement to confirm that completing the survey is taken as the participant's consent for the information they provide to be used for the purpose of this study. If there is the option within the online survey tool to tick a box for consent before being able to proceed to the survey, then this will be used.

3. How will you make sure that participants clearly understand their right to withdraw from the research study?

The summary at the start of the survey will explain the participants right to withdraw their data from the study and describe how to do this.

4. Please describe how you will ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Where this is not guaranteed, please justify your approach. **[see note 2]**

The data collected will not include any personal details, therefore anonymity is assured.

5. Describe any possible detrimental effects of the research study and your strategies for dealing with them. **[see note 3]**

It is considered that there will be no detrimental effects of the research study to the participants or the researcher.

The survey will be reviewed by the course tutor before being published for participation.

6. How will you ensure the safe and appropriate storage and handling of data?

The data obtained for this study will be collected anonymously using Survey Monkey or a similar online survey tool.

The anonymous data obtained from the survey may be exported to the researcher's password protected computer for the purpose of this study only. This is located at the researcher's home address in the UK.

The data will not be used for any purpose other than described in this research study.

On completion of the study, the survey will be deleted, along with the data.

7. If during the course of the research study you are made aware of harmful or illegal behaviour, how do you intend to handle disclosure or nondisclosure of such information? **[see note 4]**

The participants of this study will not be identifiable, and the questions asked of the participants are not likely to identify harmful or illegal behaviour. However, if it became apparent that this was the case then the matter would be reported to the administrators of the Facebook groups.

8. If the research study design demands some degree of subterfuge or undisclosed research activity, how have you justified this and how and when will this be discussed with participants?

This is not applicable to this study.

9. How do you intend to disseminate your research study findings to participants?

The information given to participants before commencing the survey will include details of how to obtain a copy of the study if they would like to. This will be by emailing the researcher to request a copy of the research study once complete.

All UK students undertaking work with pupils or vulnerable adults should give the date of their most recent Disclosing and Barring Service (DBS) check (previously known as CRB).

Date of DBS: Not relevant to this study

Student's name (please print): REDACTED FOR ASSIGNMENT SUBMISSION – STUDENT NO. 2379421

Please send from your official University email address in lieu of signature.

Date: 17th JUNE 2022

Part B: to be completed by the SUPERVISOR

Feedback from supervisor on ethics form

| |
|----------------------------|
| 1 st submission |
| 2 nd submission |
| Subsequent submission |

1. If relevant, has the student assured you that they hold a current Disclosing and Barring Service Certificate for the participants they will be working with during their research **[see note 5]**

Not applicable

If not applicable, please state why:

2. Have you seen information and consent forms relevant to the present research study? [if not relevant at this time, please review this within 6 months]

Yes

Student has been asked to ensure I have seen and agreed these before data collection.

Yes

3. Is a referral to the University of Birmingham's Ethics Committee necessary? **[see note 6]**

No

4. Do you require a formal letter of approval from the University of Birmingham's Ethics Committee?

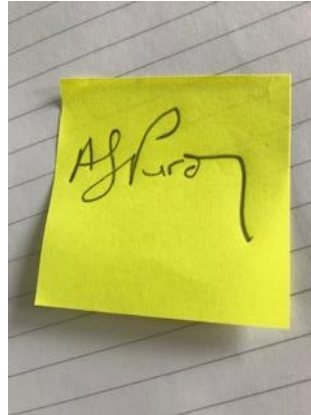
No

Declaration by Supervisor

I am satisfied that I have attempted to identify the risks that may arise in conducting this research and acknowledge my obligations as Supervisor and the rights of participants. I am satisfied that those working on the research study have the appropriate qualifications, experience and facilities to conduct the research study set out above.

Print name: ANGELA PURDY **Signature:**

Date: 24.06.22



Returning the form:

This form should be completed before any data collection:

MEd/MA students should submit it as an attachment to their Research Methods in Education assignment

Students submitting a 'Special Studies' assignment should submit the form in accordance with programme requirements

The form will be kept in the student's file.

Notes for completion of form

1. Please consider the 'chains' or hierarchies of consent that may be necessary for e.g. working with children and young people. There may be a number of people / agencies / organisations who may be required to provide consent or agreement to participate. For example, a research study undertaken in a Local Authority may require agreement from members of Senior Management before agencies/organisations may be approached. Involving children may then require agreement from (eg) Head teachers and parents/carers (as well as the child/young person themselves) plus professionals from other organisations.
2. This concern may arise, for example, in experimental or quasi-experimental designs where treatment is viewed as desirable and withheld from the control group. It might also arise in unpredictable ways in other intervention designs and, for example, in interview-based studies. Harm to the researcher if, for example, working with emotionally difficult subject matter or in potentially dangerous contexts should also be considered here including the forms of support that will be made available in such circumstances.
3. This may apply in circumstances where methods involve the use of e.g. video or photographs that could identify participants or in the case of interviews where the status / job role of the interviewee will enable them to be identified by others.
4. You may wish to refer to the BERA Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, 2004; paragraphs 27& 28, p.8 for more information about this issue.
5. When applying for a DBS make it clear whether the check is for children or vulnerable adults or both. Also, organisations/schools/ services may have different requirements for how recently a DBS

check should have been completed for it to be acceptable. You are advised to check the DBS web site for further information <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/disclosure-and-barring-service/about>

6. Supervisors wanting advice on ethical matters should refer the student's proposal to the Head of Department in the first instance. Also, if the methods, methodology and /or participant group(s) alter substantially from those outlined in this submission during the course of the research study, continued ethical approval must not be assumed. Under such circumstances, the student may need to complete an updated submission for consideration by the Supervisor. This may be particularly appropriate for longitudinal studies where research populations and indeed content/focus can change over time.

APPENDIX C

THE SURVEY – INITIAL SCREENS

Survey Screen 1:

About the Study

I am a parent of an autistic child who has been unable to access school for the past 3 years due to Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA), which is sometimes referred to as 'School Refusal'. I found this experience extremely stressful and support ineffectual and instead of improving the situation, caused further harm to my child and family. This experience inspired me to enrol in a Masters degree in 'Special Education Autism' at the University of Birmingham.

For my final assignment to achieve a Post Graduate Certificate I am carrying out a small-scale study to find out how parents and caregivers of school-aged autistic children can inform Government and Local Authority (LA) approaches to EBSA in England.

Your help to achieve this will be greatly appreciated by completing this short survey and together I hope we can make a difference to other children and families who experience EBSA.

Please be aware that this is a small study and has a limited number of participants. The survey will close once the required number of responses are received.

If you would like to receive a copy of the study once complete or would like any further information, please email me at ajg121@student.bham.ac.uk or my university tutor, A.J.Purdy@bham.ac.uk.

OK

Survey Screen 2:

About you

To take part in this study you will complete a short survey that will ask questions about your child and your experiences throughout the time they have struggled with EBSA. This experience could be in the past or current.

To take part you will need to be the parent or caregiver of a child;

- Who is, or was, on roll at a primary or secondary school in England
- Who is, or is suspected to be, autistic
- Who struggles, or has struggled, with school attendance

Taking part in the survey is voluntary and is expected to take 5-10 minutes to complete. A question will appear on each page for you to answer and then you click on 'Next' to move to the next question.

OK

Survey Screen 3:

My commitment to you:

- The data you provide will be anonymous with no personal data collected so you and your child will not be identifiable by anyone, including the researcher. Anonymity is therefore guaranteed.
- The data you provide will not be used for any purpose other than this study and the raw data will not be shared with any 3rd party.
- The data you provide will be deleted once the study is complete.
- You have the right to withdraw your data from this study at any time. If you wish to withdraw, please email: ajg121@student.bham.ac.uk to request your data is deleted – To do this I will need to ask for your IP address.
- Ethical considerations were given to this study with the completion of the University of Birmingham's Ethics Form. There were no objections to be considered.

By Selecting 'Next' you are agreeing with the information above and confirming you are happy to continue with the survey.

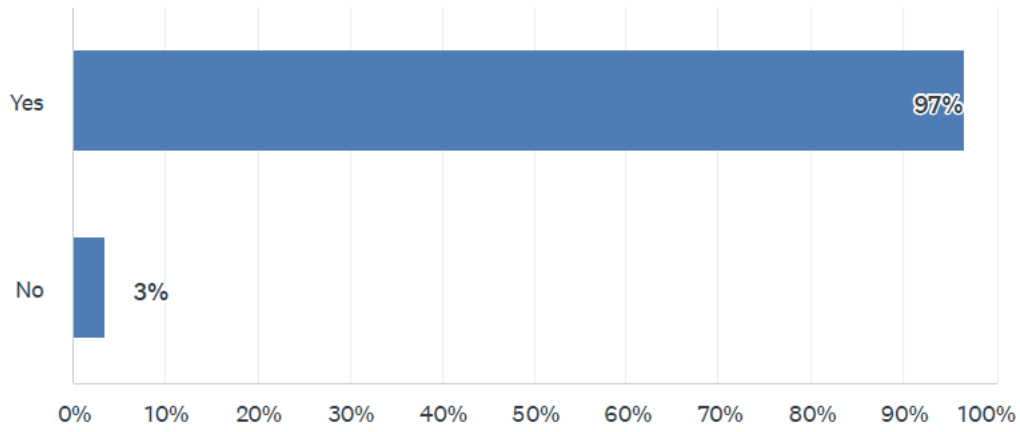
OK

APPENDIX D

Survey Responses Summary

Q1 Is or was your child on **roll** at a school in England?

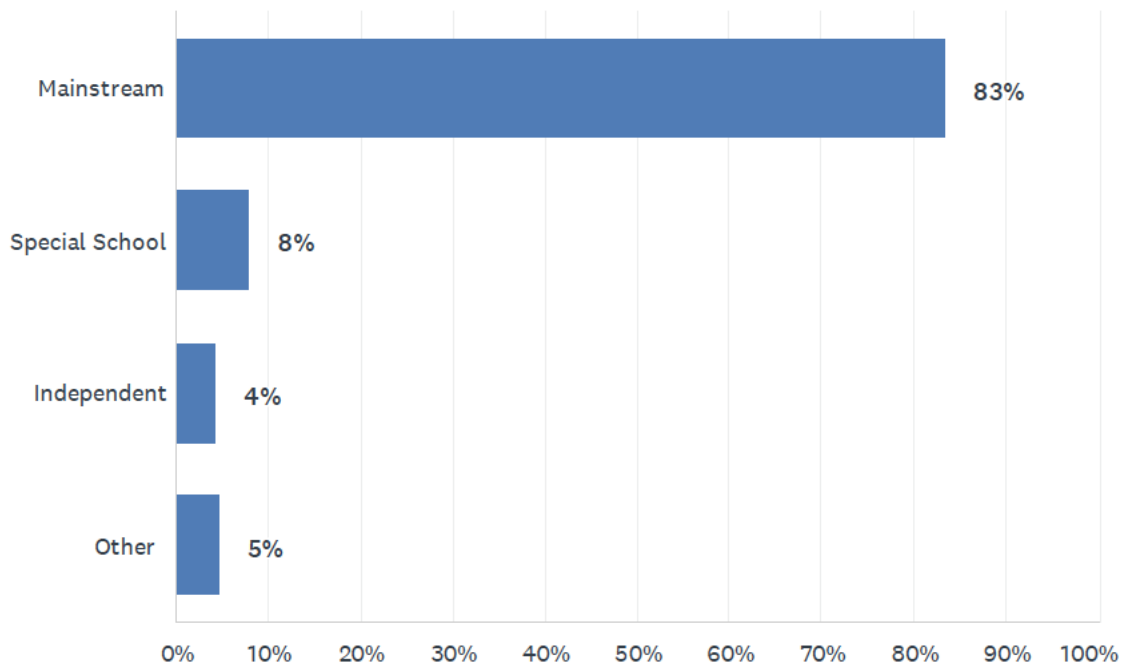
Answered: 1,200 Skipped: 0



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------|-----------|-------|
| Yes | 96.58% | 1,159 |
| No | 3.42% | 41 |
| TOTAL | | 1,200 |

Q2 What type of school is/was your child on roll at?

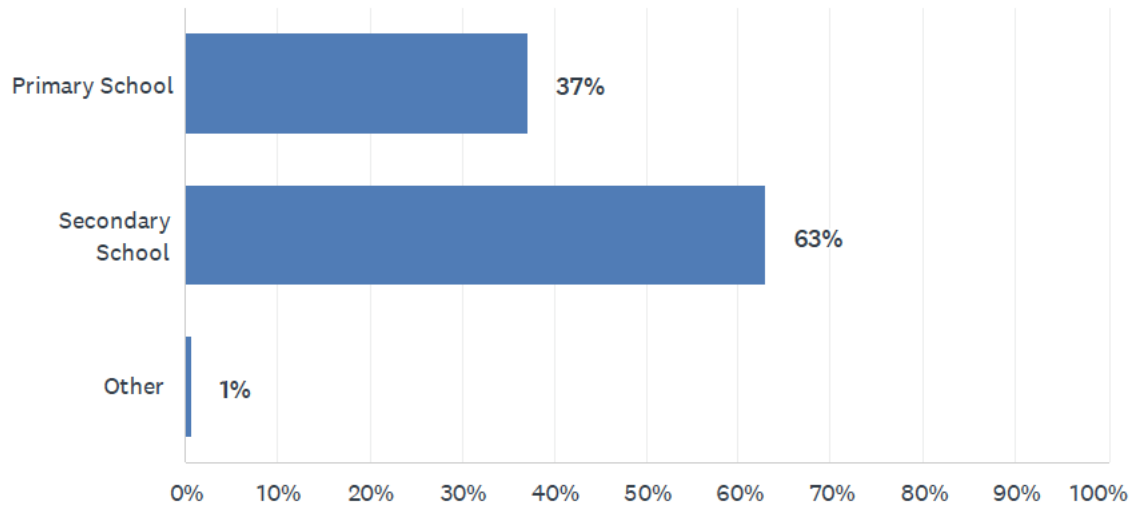
Answered: 1,154 Skipped: 46



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------|-----------|--------------|
| Mainstream | 83.28% | 961 |
| Special School | 7.97% | 92 |
| Independent | 4.16% | 48 |
| Other | 4.59% | 53 |
| TOTAL | | 1,154 |

Q3 Is your child Primary or Secondary School age?

Answered: 1,147 Skipped: 53

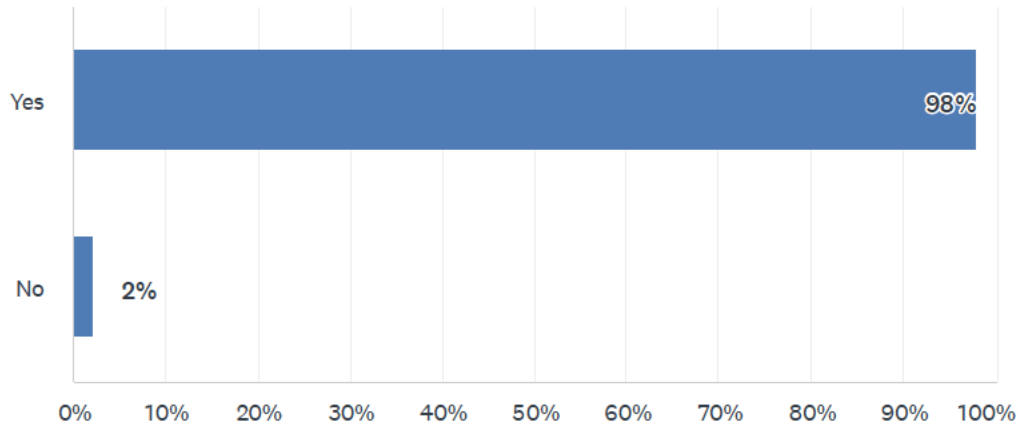


| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|------------------|-----------|-----|
| Primary School | 37.14% | 426 |
| Secondary School | 62.95% | 722 |
| Other | 0.70% | 8 |

Total Respondents: 1,147

Q4 Does your child struggle with school attendance?

Answered: 1,142 Skipped: 58



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------|-----------|--------------|
| Yes | 97.90% | 1,118 |
| No | 2.10% | 24 |
| TOTAL | | 1,142 |

Q5 If you know, please enter your child's attendance % in the last school year.

Answered: 942 Skipped: 258

| Valid Responses | Average | Range |
|-----------------|---------|-------|
| N = 916 | 41.98% | 0-97% |

163 respondents stated 0% attendance

Q6 How long has your child been struggling with attendance?

(Please answer in terms of years and months)

Answered: 1,047 Skipped: 153

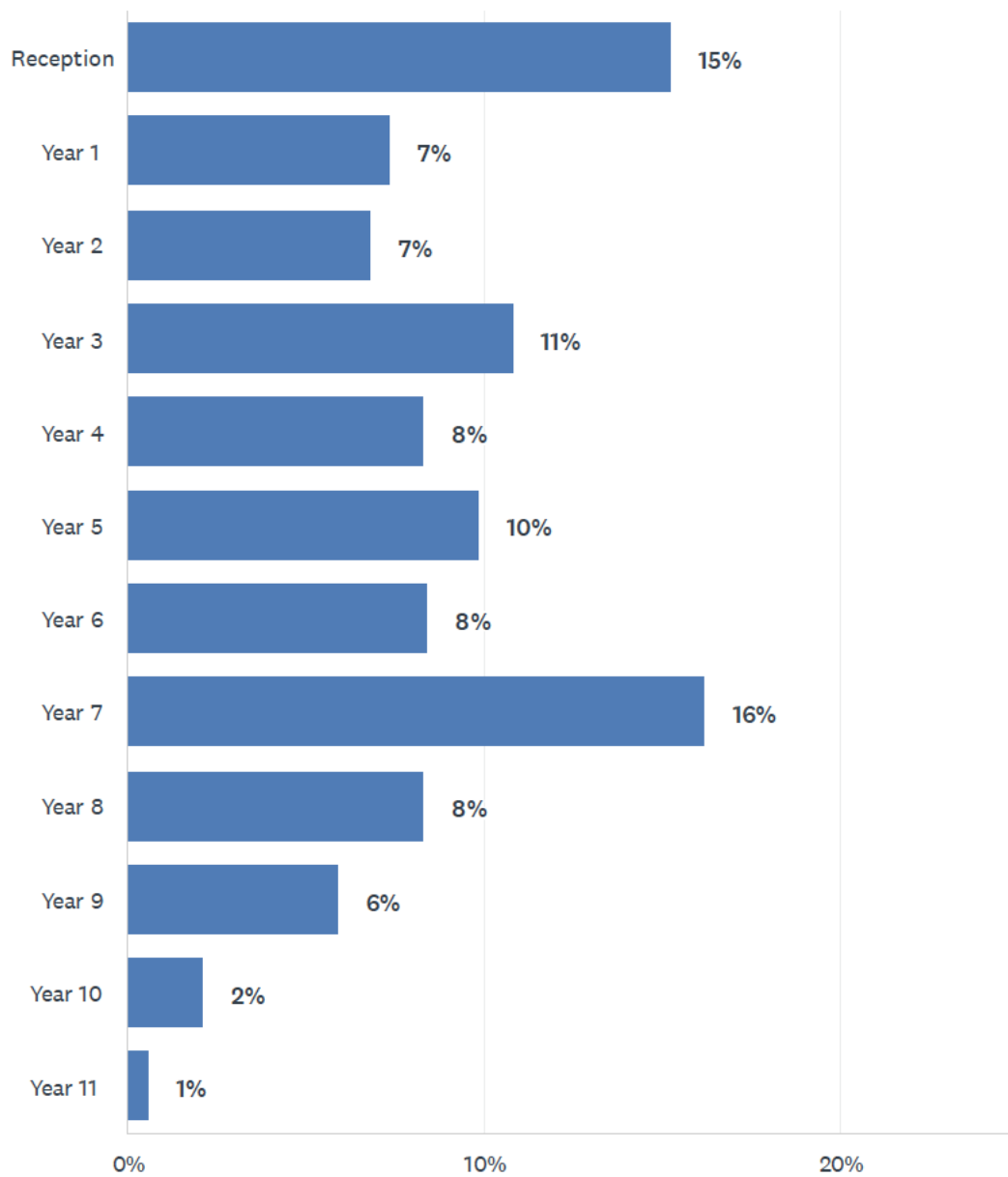
4 respondents stated their child has struggled with attendance for 144 months (12 years), their entire school years.

15 respondents stated their child has struggled with attendance for 3 months

| Valid Responses | Average | Range |
|-----------------|-------------|--------------|
| N = 1021 | 36.4 months | 3-144 months |

Q7 In which school year did your child first start to struggle with attendance?

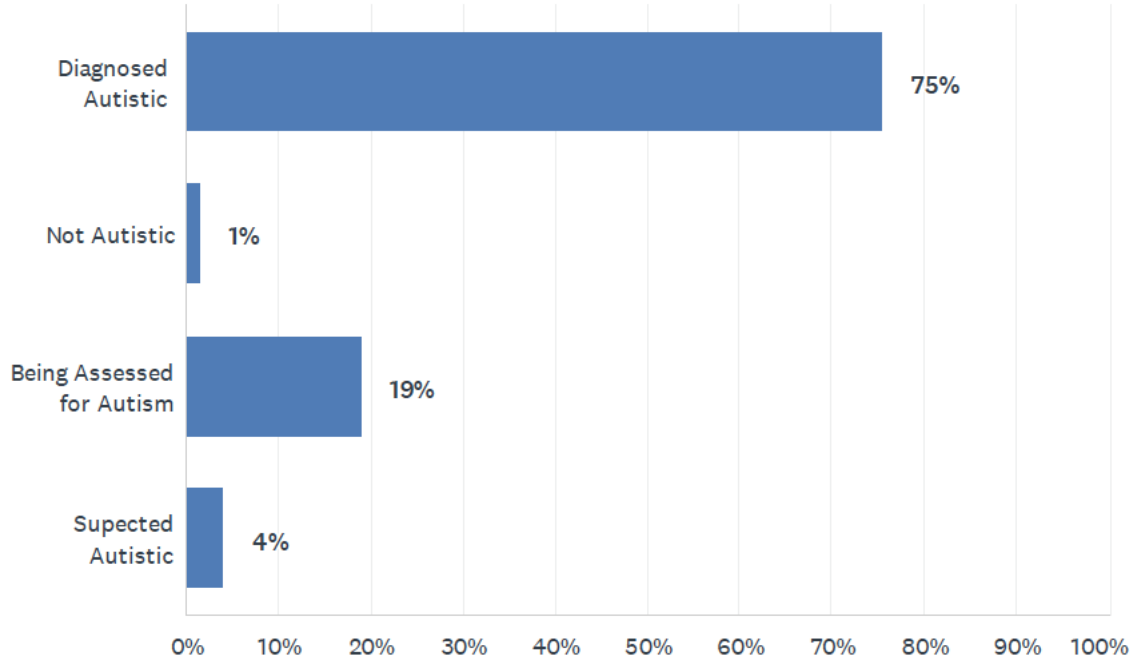
Answered: 1,044 Skipped: 156



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------|-----------|--------------|
| Reception | 15.23% | 159 |
| Year 1 | 7.38% | 77 |
| Year 2 | 6.80% | 71 |
| Year 3 | 10.82% | 113 |
| Year 4 | 8.33% | 87 |
| Year 5 | 9.87% | 103 |
| Year 6 | 8.43% | 88 |
| Year 7 | 16.19% | 169 |
| Year 8 | 8.33% | 87 |
| Year 9 | 5.94% | 62 |
| Year 10 | 2.11% | 22 |
| Year 11 | 0.57% | 6 |
| TOTAL | | 1,044 |

Q8 Does your child have an autism diagnosis?

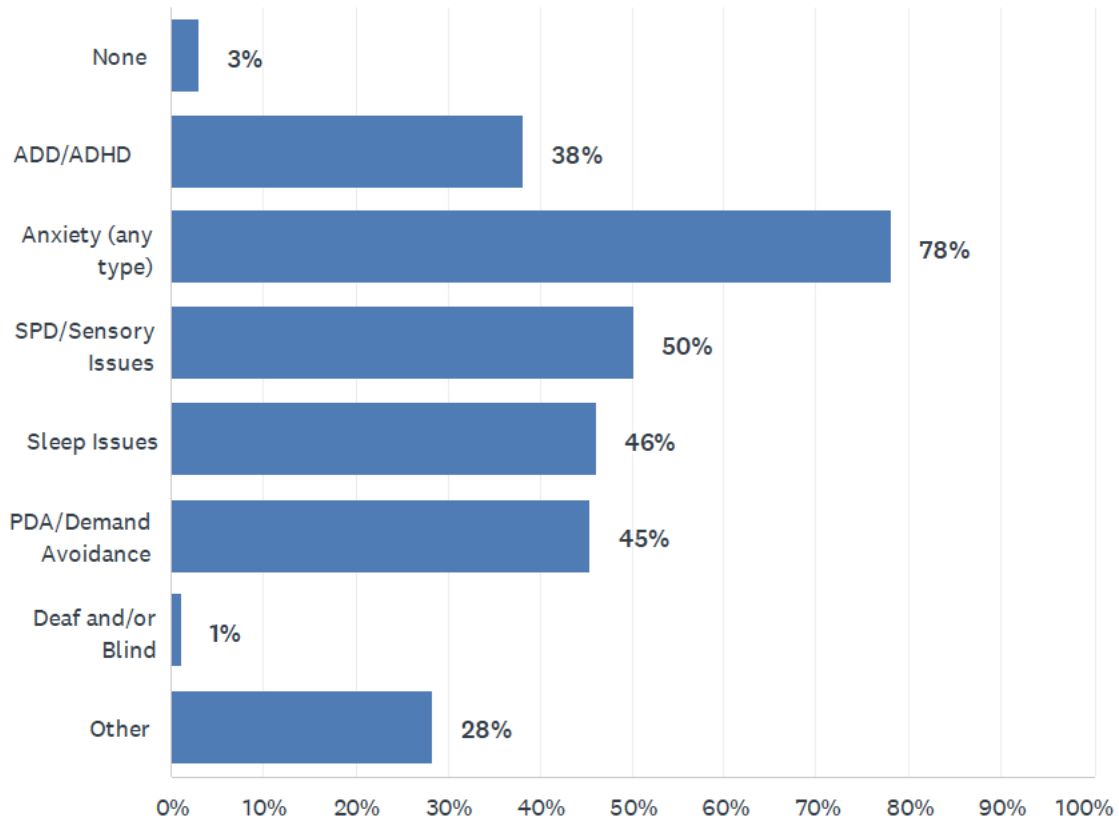
Answered: 1,043 Skipped: 157



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|--|-----------|--------------|
| Yes | 75.46% | 787 |
| No | 1.44% | 15 |
| Waiting for, or undergoing Assessment | 18.98% | 198 |
| I suspect autism, but we are not on a diagnostic pathway | 4.12% | 43 |
| TOTAL | | 1,043 |

Q9 Does your child have any other diagnosis, or do you suspect any of the below?

Answered: 1,026 Skipped: 174

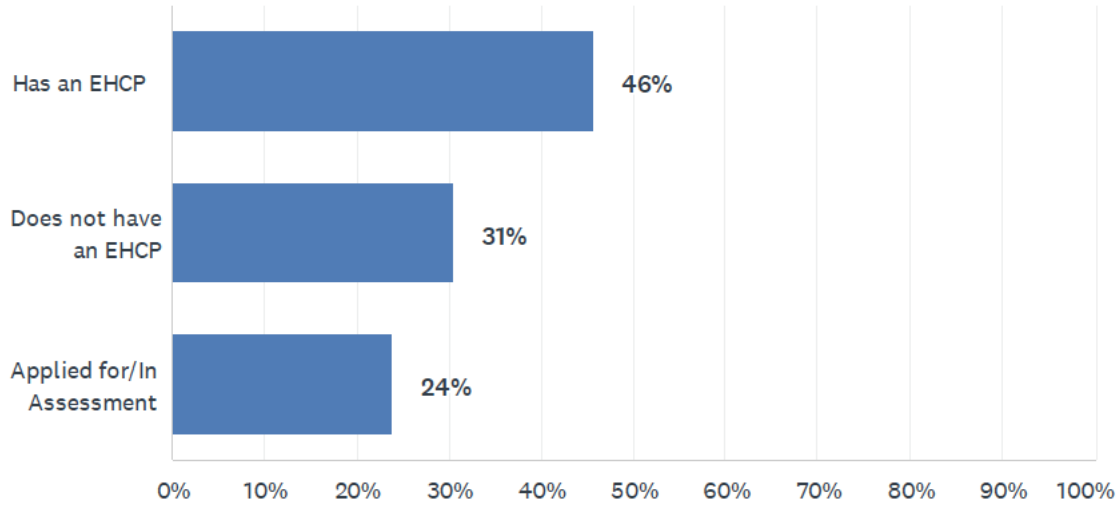


| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|--|-----------|-----|
| No | 3.02% | 31 |
| Attention Deficit Disorder/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADD/ADHD) | 38.11% | 391 |
| Anxiety (any type) | 77.97% | 800 |
| Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) | 50.00% | 513 |
| Sleep Issues | 46.10% | 473 |
| Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) | 45.32% | 465 |
| Deaf and/or Blind | 1.07% | 11 |
| Other (please specify) | 28.46% | 292 |

Total Respondents: 1,026

Q10 Does your child have an EHCP?

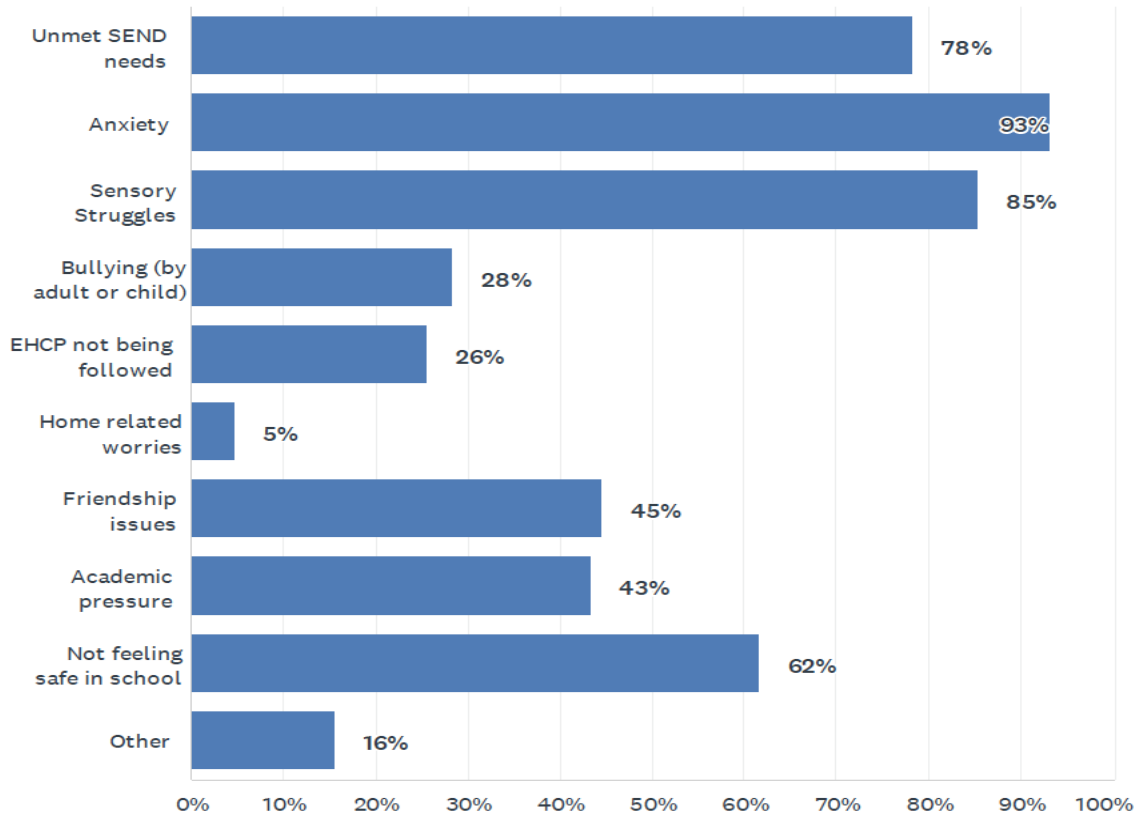
Answered: 1,024 Skipped: 176



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|--------------|
| Yes | 45.61% | 467 |
| No | 30.57% | 313 |
| Applied for, or in assessment stage | 23.83% | 244 |
| TOTAL | | 1,024 |

Q11 What do you believe are the barriers to your child attending school? (more than one can be selected)

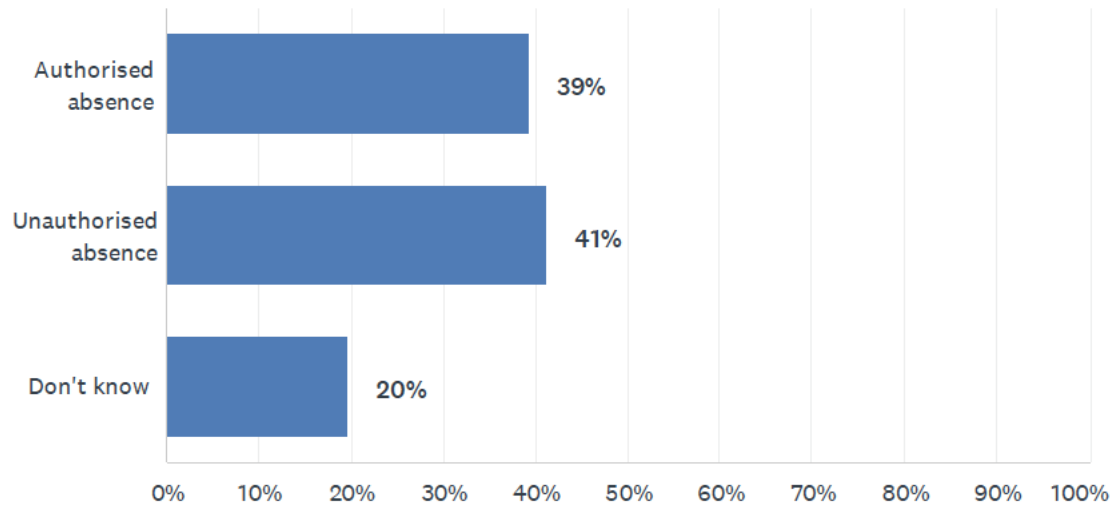
Answered: 1,019 Skipped: 181



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|--|-----------|-----|
| Unmet SEND needs | 78.21% | 797 |
| Anxiety | 93.13% | 949 |
| Sensory difficulties in the school environment | 85.28% | 869 |
| Bullying (by adult or child) | 28.46% | 290 |
| EHCP provision not being delivered | 25.52% | 260 |
| Home related worries | 4.71% | 48 |
| Friendship issues | 44.55% | 454 |
| Academic pressure | 43.38% | 442 |
| Not feeling safe in school | 61.63% | 628 |
| Other/s (please specify) | 15.51% | 158 |
| Total Respondents: 1,019 | | |

Q12 Does/did the school mark absence as authorised or unauthorised?

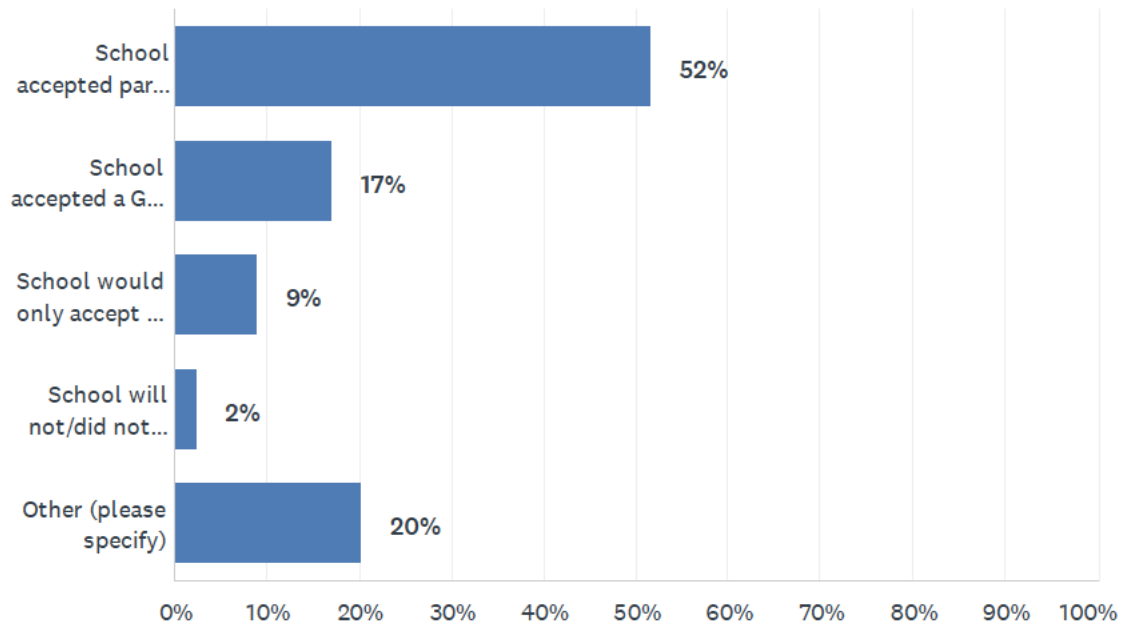
Answered: 1,013 Skipped: 187



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------------|-----------|--------------|
| Authorised absence | 39.19% | 397 |
| Unauthorised absence | 41.16% | 417 |
| Don't know | 19.64% | 199 |
| TOTAL | | 1,013 |

**Q13 If absence is 'I' illness, then what did the school accept as evidence.
(If the code was not 'I' you can skip this question).**

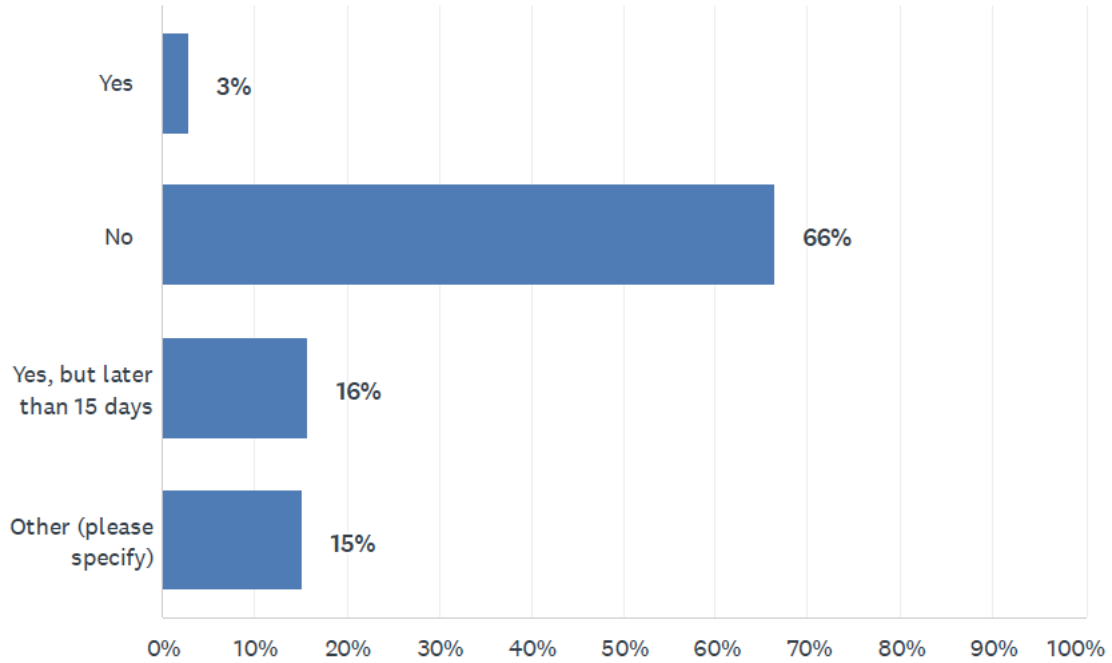
Answered: 401 Skipped: 799



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|--|-----------|------------|
| School accepted parent reported illness | 51.62% | 207 |
| School accepted a GP letter or phone call | 16.96% | 68 |
| School would only accept a letter or phone call from a consultant or CAMHS | 8.98% | 36 |
| School will not/did not accept medical reason for absence | 2.24% | 9 |
| Other (please specify) | 20.20% | 81 |
| TOTAL | | 401 |

Q14 Did the LA provide tutoring or alternative provision when it became clear your child would be absent for 15 days or more?

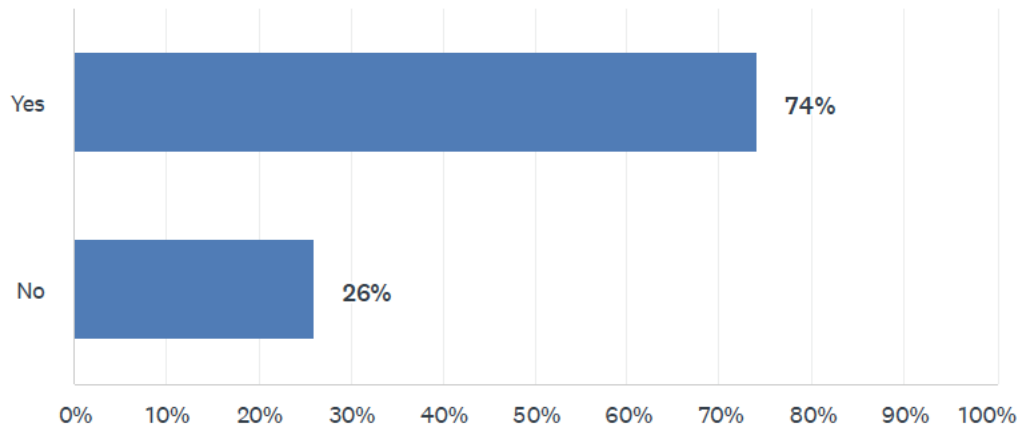
Answered: 994 Skipped: 206



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|-----------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Yes | 2.72% | 27 |
| No | 66.30% | 659 |
| Yes, but later than 15 days | 15.79% | 157 |
| Other (please specify) | 15.19% | 151 |
| TOTAL | | 994 |

Q15 Have you been told by the school that your child is 'fine' when in school?

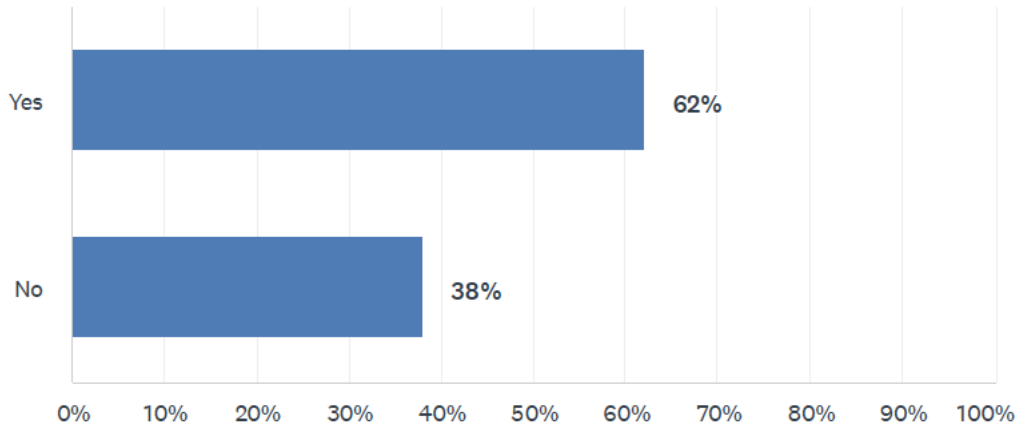
Answered: 993 Skipped: 207



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------|-----------|------------|
| Yes | 73.92% | 734 |
| No | 26.08% | 259 |
| TOTAL | | 993 |

Q16 Have you been told by the school to force your child to school?

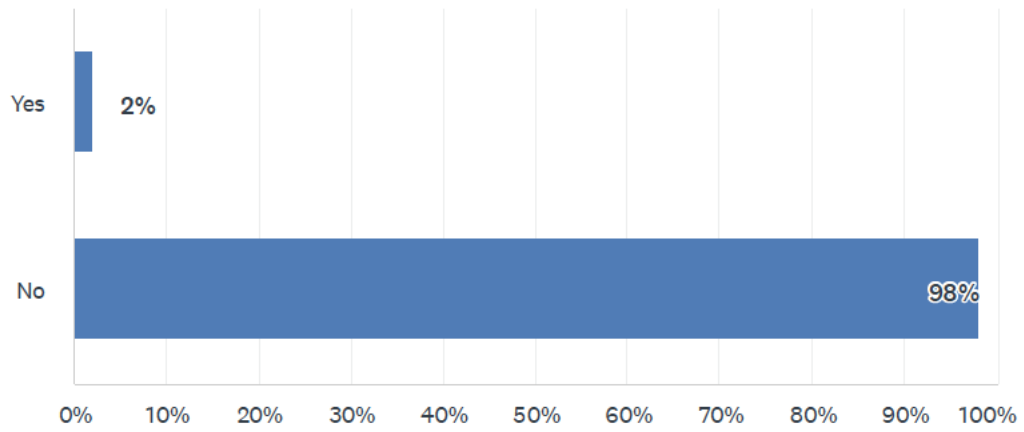
Answered: 989 Skipped: 211



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------|-----------|------------|
| Yes | 61.98% | 613 |
| No | 38.02% | 376 |
| TOTAL | | 989 |

Q17 If yes, did this resolve the attendance struggles?

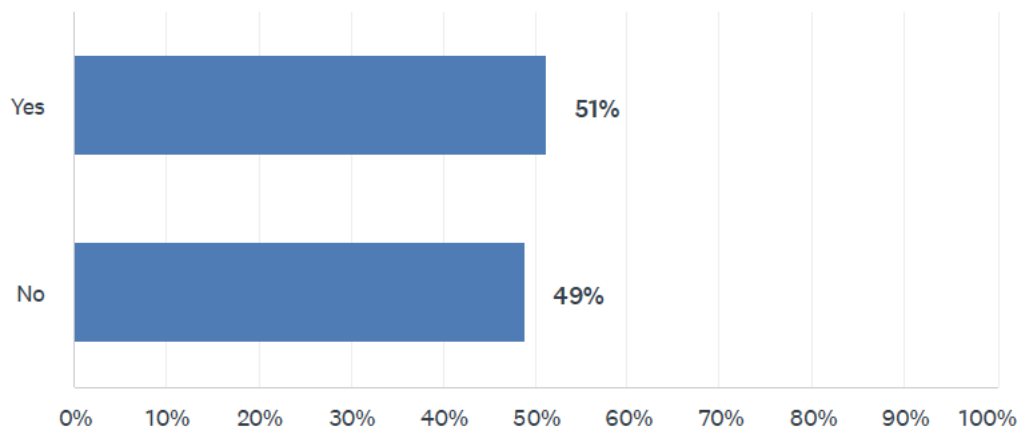
Answered: 613 Skipped: 587



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------|-----------|------------|
| Yes | 1.96% | 12 |
| No | 98.04% | 601 |
| TOTAL | | 613 |

Q18 Has the school worked with you to try to understand the wider context/underlying cause of the non-attendance?

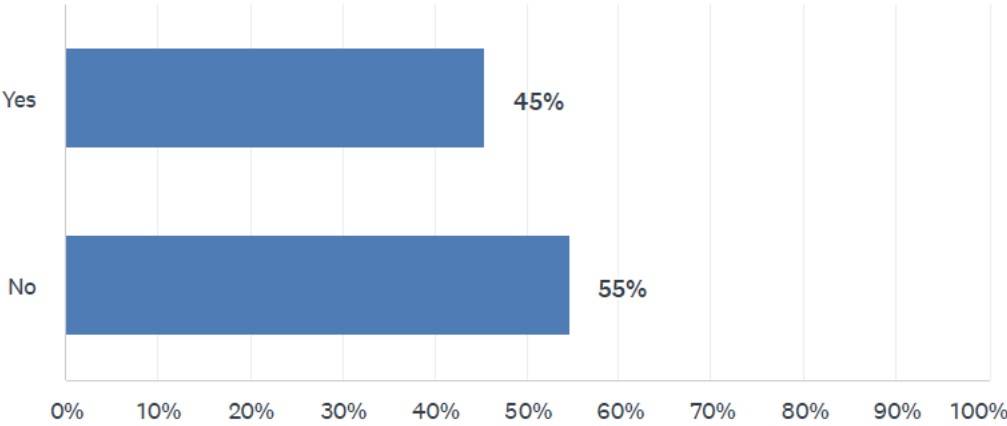
Answered: 987 Skipped: 213



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------|-----------|------------|
| Yes | 51.17% | 505 |
| No | 48.83% | 482 |
| TOTAL | | 987 |

Q19 Has the school worked with your child to obtain their view and understand their difficulties when in school?

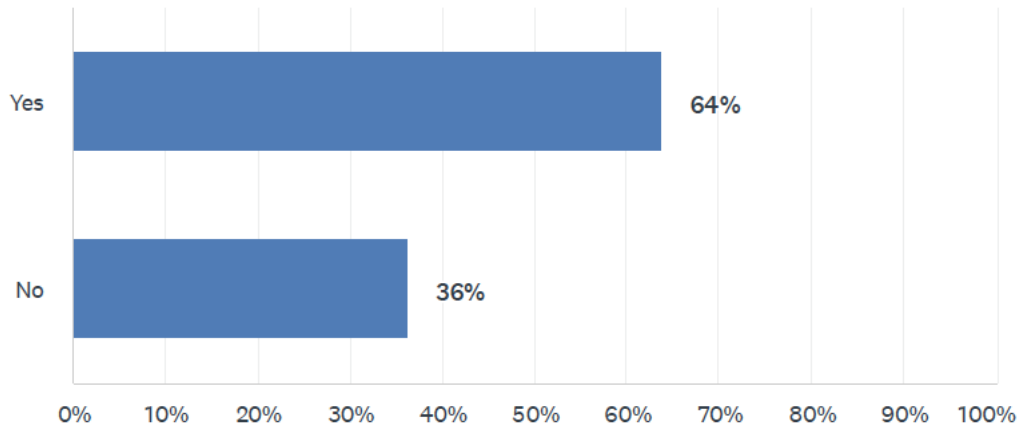
Answered: 986 Skipped: 214



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------|-----------|------------|
| Yes | 45.44% | 448 |
| No | 54.56% | 538 |
| TOTAL | | 986 |

Q20 Has the school provided a reintegration plan, such as a part time timetable?

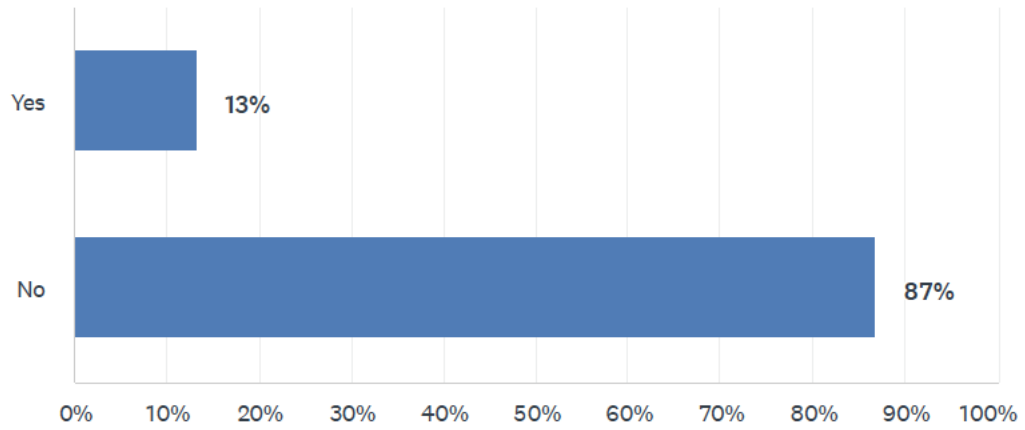
Answered: 983 Skipped: 217



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------|-----------|------------|
| Yes | 63.78% | 627 |
| No | 36.22% | 356 |
| TOTAL | | 983 |

Q21 If yes, was the reintegration plan successful?

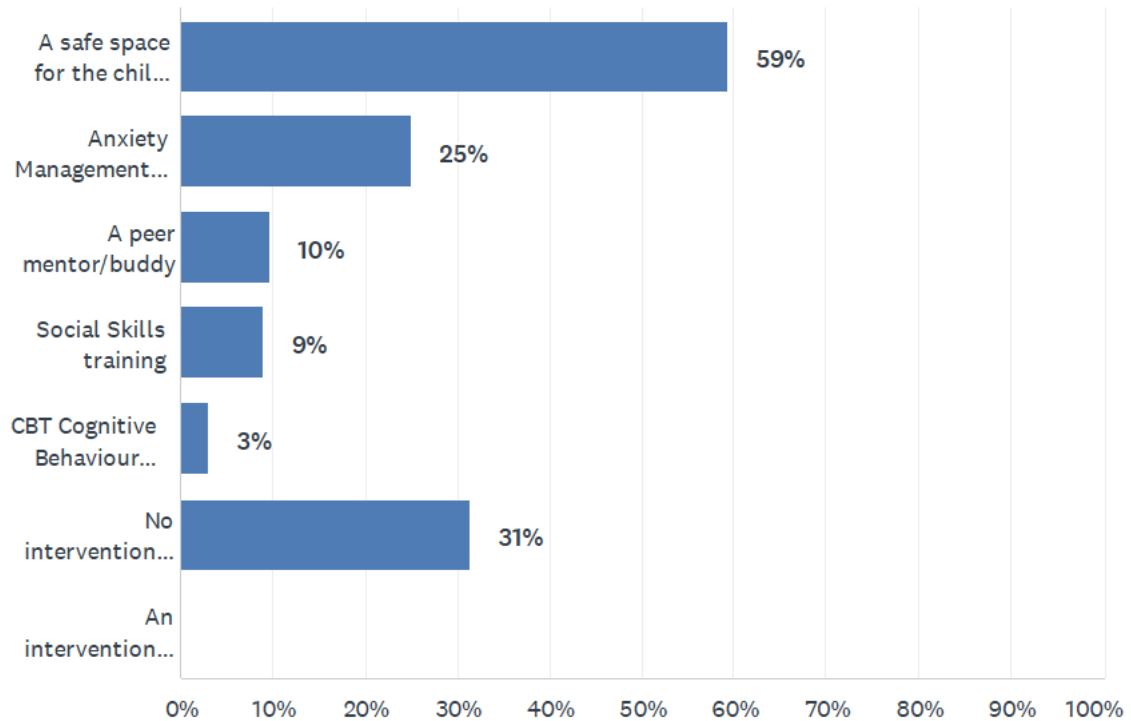
Answered: 622 Skipped: 578



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------|-----------|------------|
| Yes | 13.18% | 82 |
| No | 86.82% | 540 |
| TOTAL | | 622 |

**Q22 Did the school introduce any of the below interventions for your child?
(You may select more than one)**

Answered: 978 Skipped: 222

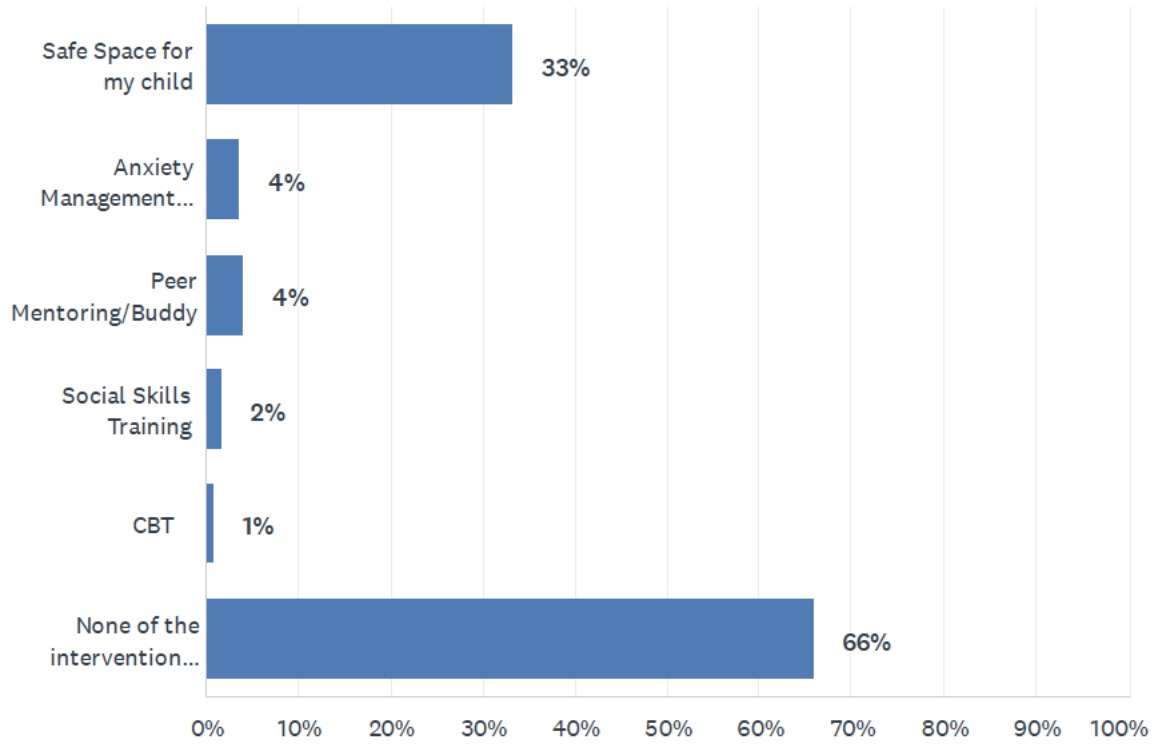


| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|---|-----------|-----|
| A safe space for your child to go to when needed | 59.20% | 579 |
| Support to your child to learn about anxiety and management strategies such as relaxation, deep breathing exercises and/or a healthy minds course | 24.85% | 243 |
| A peer mentor/buddy for your child | 9.51% | 93 |
| Social Skills training | 9.00% | 88 |
| Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) or adapted CBT | 3.07% | 30 |
| No interventions were offered | 31.29% | 306 |
| An intervention not listed was offered (please use the 'other' field to state what this was/is) | 0.00% | 0 |

Total Respondents: 978

Q23 Which intervention/s helped?
(You may select more than one)

Answered: 641 Skipped: 559

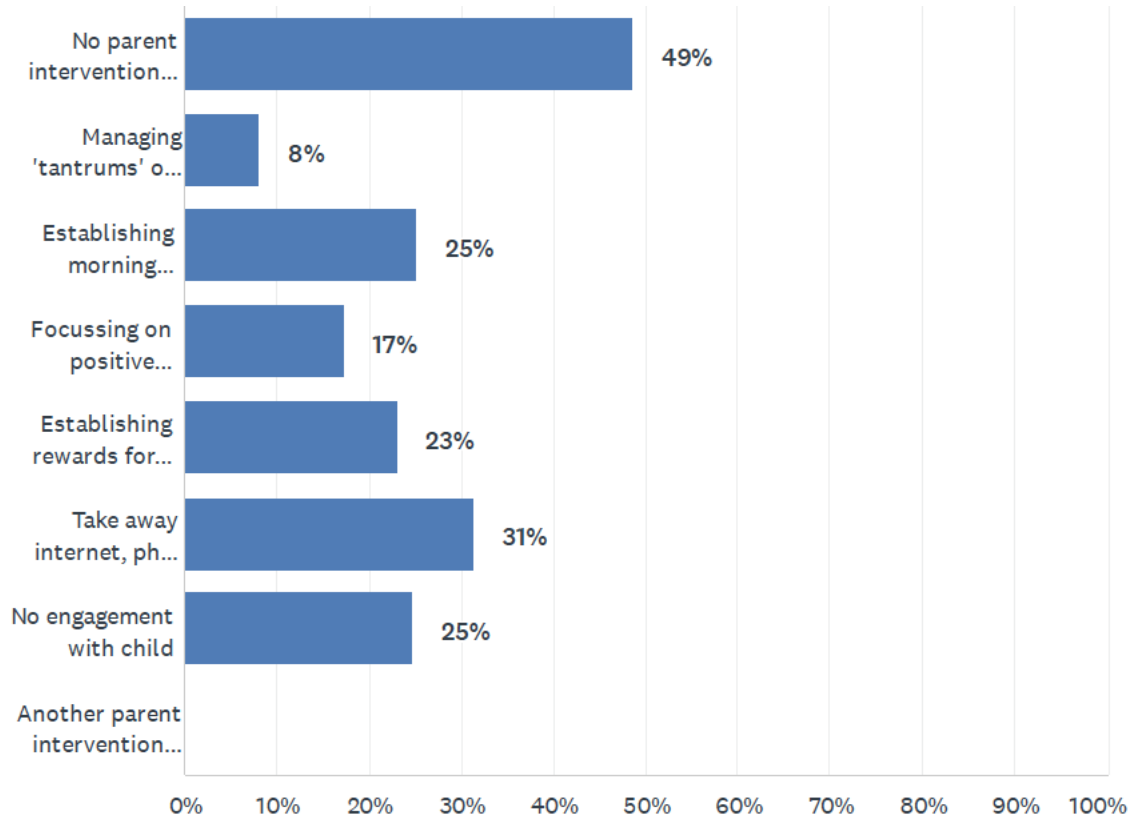


| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------------------------|-----------|-----|
| Safe space for my child to go to | 33.23% | 213 |
| Anxiety Management Training | 3.59% | 23 |
| Peer Mentoring/Buddy | 4.06% | 26 |
| Social Skills Training | 1.72% | 11 |
| CBT | 0.78% | 5 |
| None of the interventions helped | 65.83% | 422 |

Total Respondents: 641

**Q24 Did the school provide information or suggest any of the below parent interventions?
(You may select more than one)**

Answered: 967 Skipped: 233

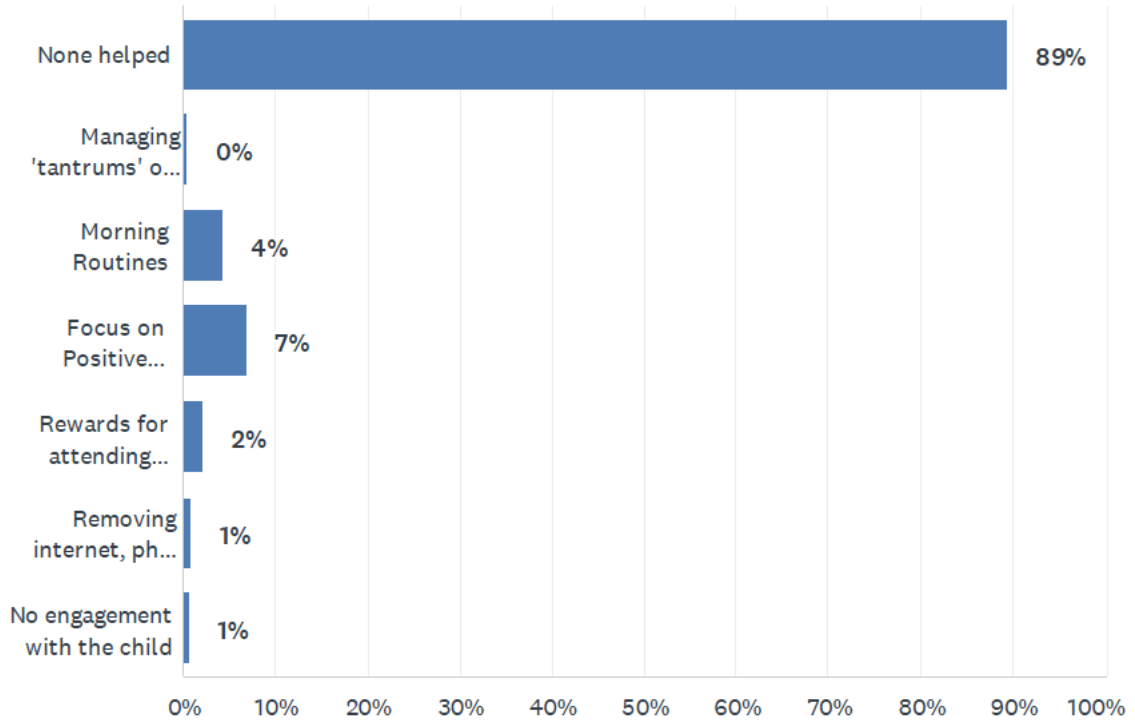


| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|---|-----------|-----|
| No parent interventions were suggested | 48.60% | 470 |
| Managing 'tantrums' or physical complaints | 8.17% | 79 |
| Establishing morning routines | 25.23% | 244 |
| Focusing on positive behaviours | 17.17% | 166 |
| Establishing rewards for attending school | 23.06% | 223 |
| Removing the child's access to internet, telephone or games when not attending school | 31.33% | 303 |
| To not engage with your child while off school to make this time boring | 24.72% | 239 |
| Another parent intervention not listed above (please use the 'other' field to state what this is/was) | 0.00% | 0 |

Total Respondents: 967

**Q25 Did any of the parent interventions help?
(You may select more than one)**

Answered: 493 Skipped: 707



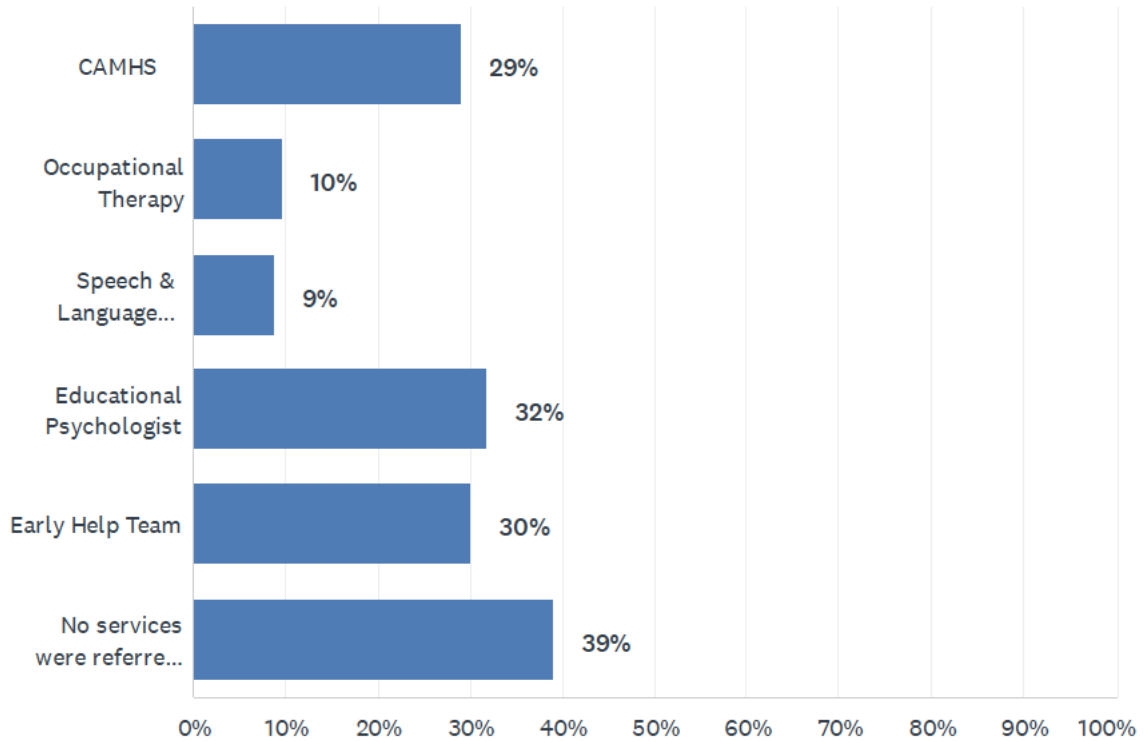
| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|---|-----------|-----|
| No parent interventions helped | 89.25% | 440 |
| Managing 'tantrums' or physical complaints | 0.41% | 2 |
| Establishing morning routines | 4.26% | 21 |
| Focusing on positive behaviours | 6.90% | 34 |
| Establishing rewards for attending school | 2.03% | 10 |
| Removing the child's access to internet, telephone or games when not attending school | 0.81% | 4 |

| | | |
|---|-------|---|
| To not engage with your child while off school to make this time boring | 0.61% | 3 |
|---|-------|---|

Total Respondents: 493

**Q26 Has/did the school make a referral to any other services for support?
(More than one may be selected)**

Answered: 959 Skipped: 241

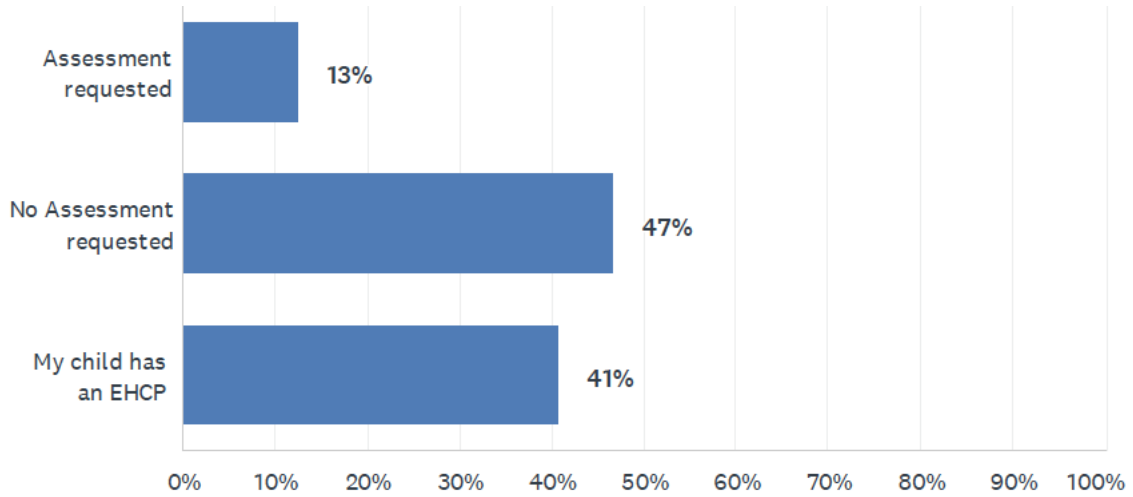


| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|--|-----------|-----|
| CAMHS | 28.99% | 278 |
| Occupational Therapy | 9.70% | 93 |
| Speech & Language Therapist | 8.65% | 83 |
| Educational Psychologist | 31.70% | 304 |
| Early Help Team | 30.03% | 288 |
| No referrals were made to any other services | 39.00% | 374 |

Total Respondents: 959

Q27 If your child does NOT have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), has/did the school make a request for the LA to undertake an EHCP needs assessment to further understand the support your child requires?

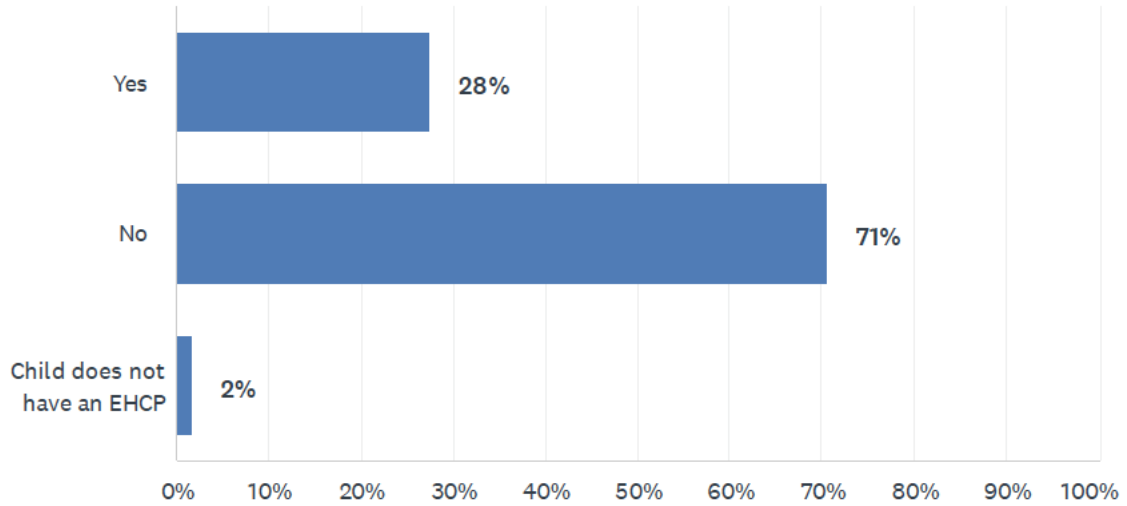
Answered: 958 Skipped: 242



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------------|-----------|------------|
| Yes | 12.53% | 120 |
| No | 46.66% | 447 |
| My child has an EHCP | 40.81% | 391 |
| TOTAL | | 958 |

Q28 If your child DOES have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), are the school providing what is detailed in Section F of the plan?

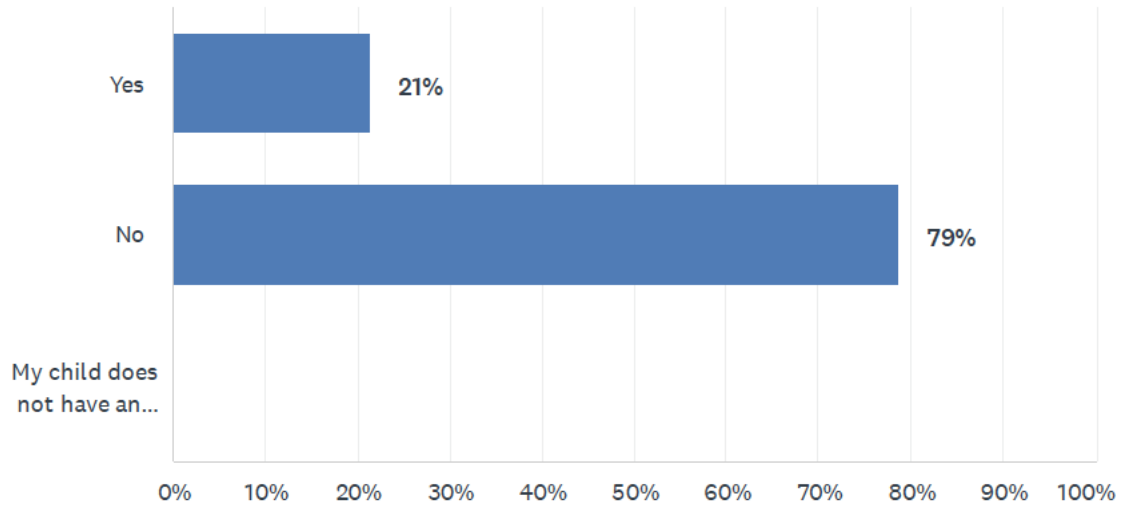
Answered: 388 Skipped: 812



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|--------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Yes | 27.58% | 107 |
| No | 70.62% | 274 |
| My child does not have an EHCP | 1.80% | 7 |
| TOTAL | | 388 |

Q29 If your child DOES have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and the school are providing what is detailed in Section F of the plan, have they requested that a reassessment is undertaken?

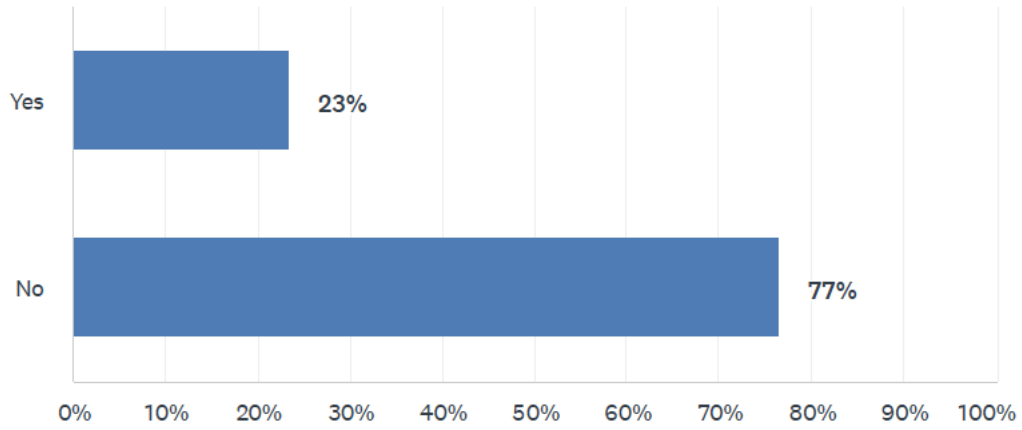
Answered: 355 Skipped: 845



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|--------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Yes | 21.41% | 76 |
| No | 78.59% | 279 |
| My child does not have an EHCP | 0.00% | 0 |
| TOTAL | | 355 |

Q30 Has your school or LA suggested your child may be better suited to home education and/or suggested you electively home educate (EHE)?

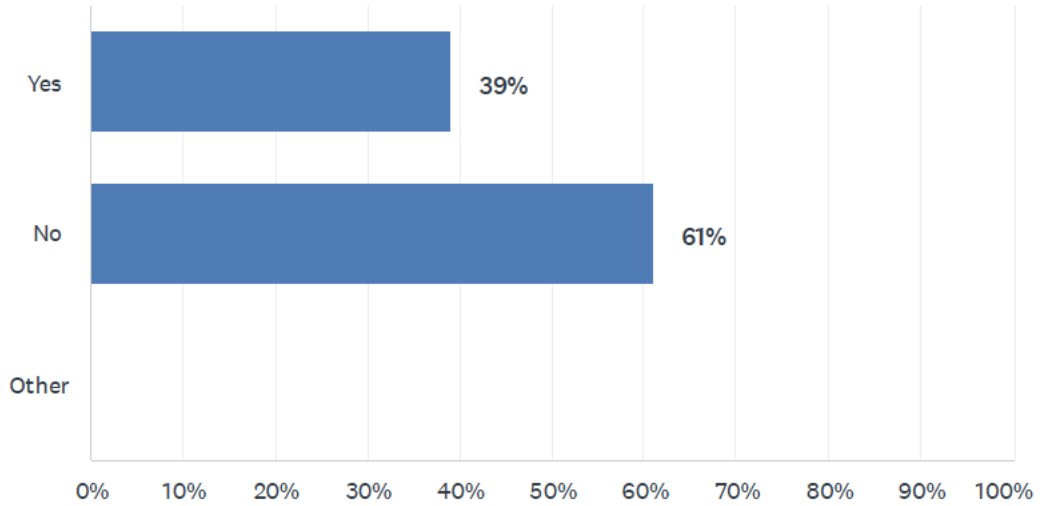
Answered: 953 Skipped: 247



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------|-----------|------------|
| Yes | 23.40% | 223 |
| No | 76.60% | 730 |
| TOTAL | | 953 |

Q31 Have you been threatened with a fine or Attendance Order for your child’s non-attendance?

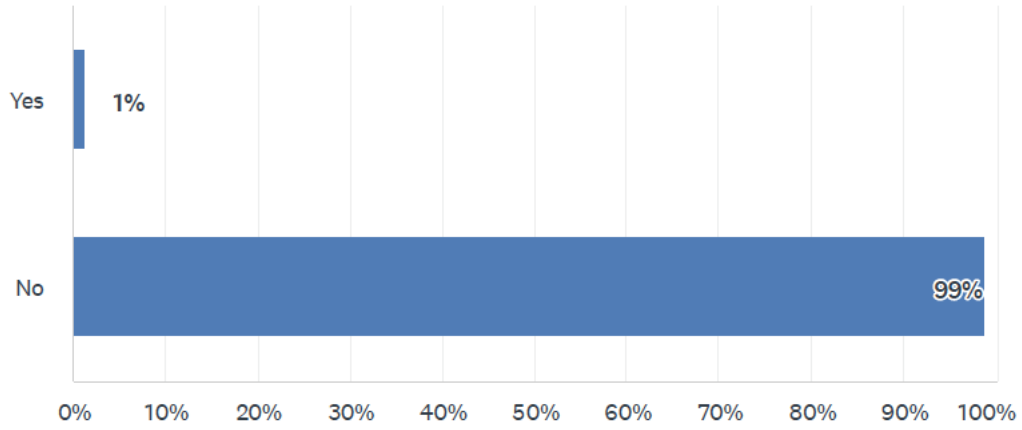
Answered: 948 Skipped: 252



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Yes | 38.92% | 369 |
| No | 61.08% | 579 |
| Other (please specify) | 0.00% | 0 |
| TOTAL | | 948 |

Q32 Did the threat of a fine or attendance order improve your child's school attendance?

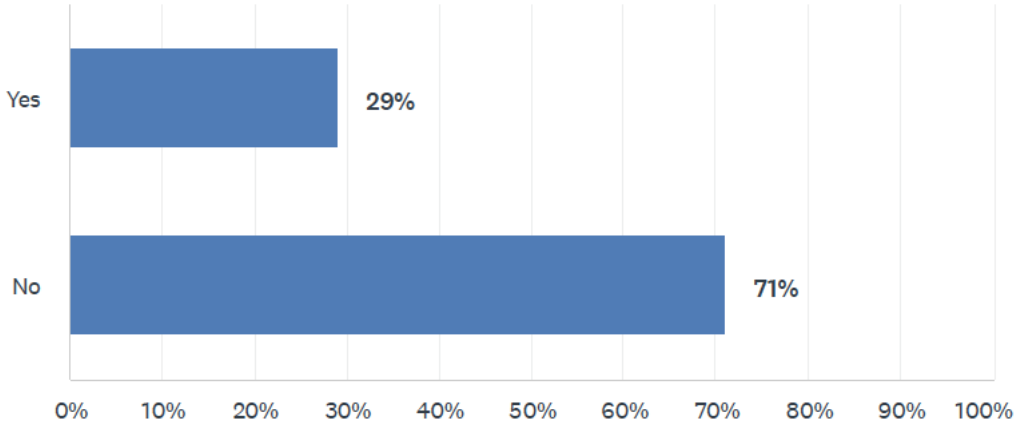
Answered: 368 Skipped: 832



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------|-----------|------------|
| Yes | 1.36% | 5 |
| No | 98.64% | 363 |
| TOTAL | | 368 |

Q33 Have you/were you referred to the Education Welfare Officer (EWO)?

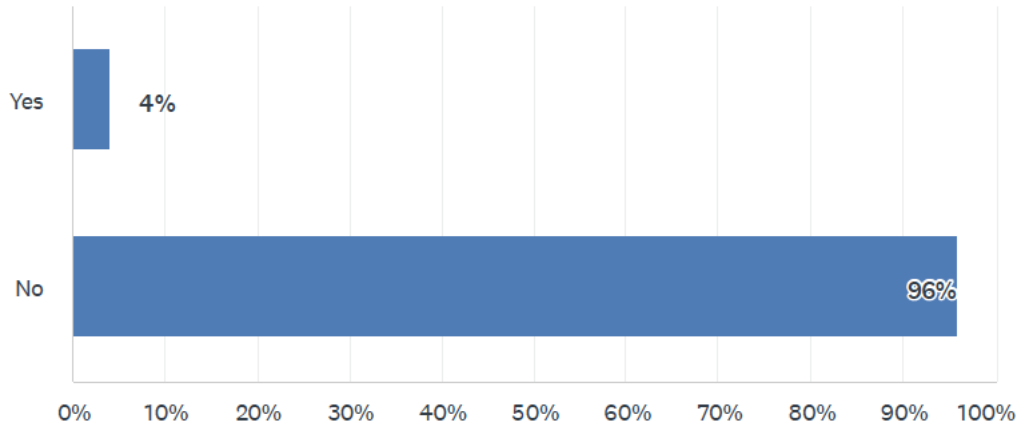
Answered: 944 Skipped: 256



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------|-----------|------------|
| Yes | 29.03% | 274 |
| No | 70.97% | 670 |
| TOTAL | | 944 |

Q34 Did the EWO help to improve your child's attendance?

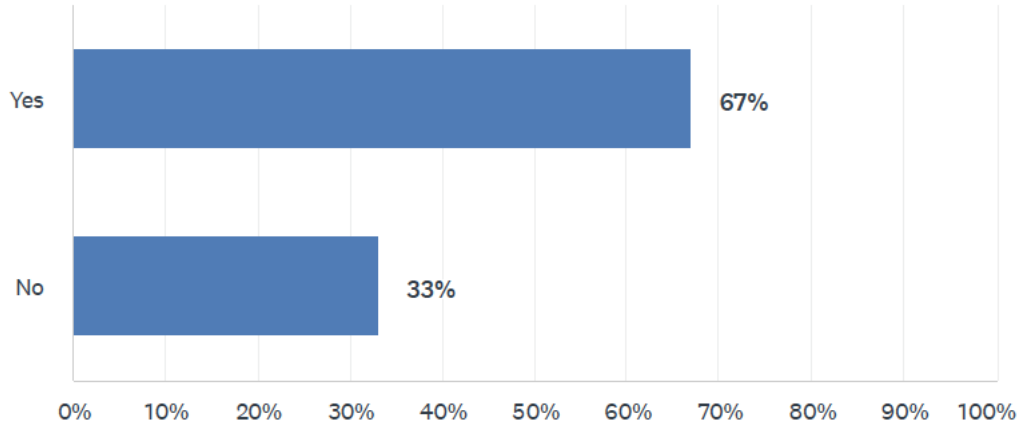
Answered: 274 Skipped: 926



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------|-----------|------------|
| Yes | 4.01% | 11 |
| No | 95.99% | 263 |
| TOTAL | | 274 |

Q35 Have you been made to feel as though your child's non-attendance is your fault?

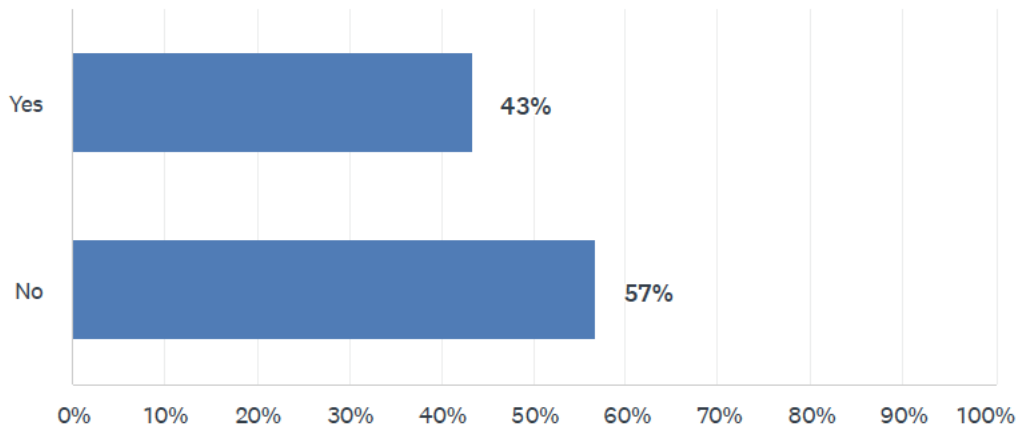
Answered: 941 Skipped: 259



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------|-----------|------------|
| Yes | 67.06% | 631 |
| No | 32.94% | 310 |
| TOTAL | | 941 |

Q36 Do you feel the school tried to understand the reason for your child's difficulties to attend?

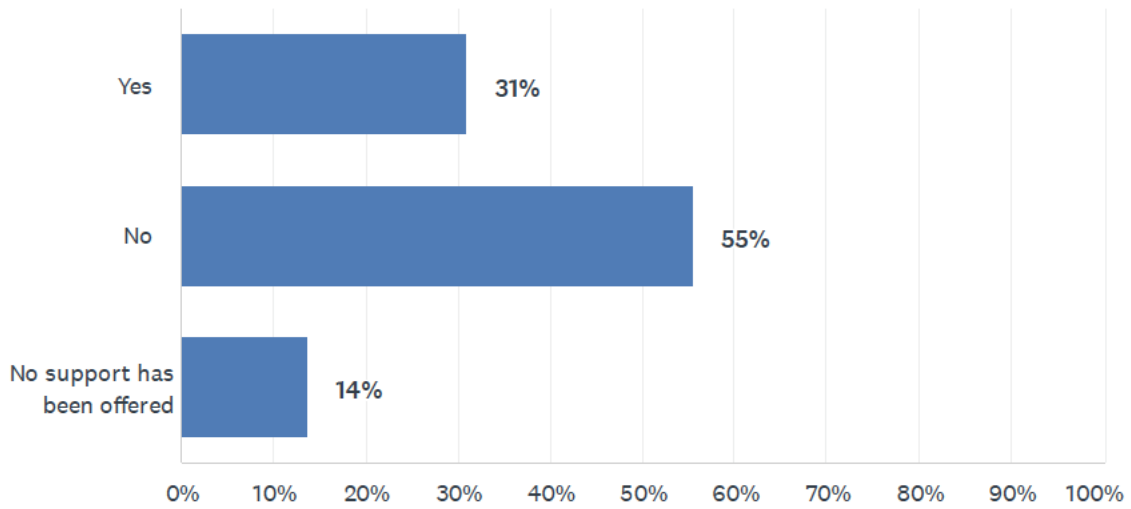
Answered: 941 Skipped: 259



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------|-----------|------------|
| Yes | 43.36% | 408 |
| No | 56.64% | 533 |
| TOTAL | | 941 |

Q37 Do you feel that the school’s approach to supporting your child was personalised to your child?

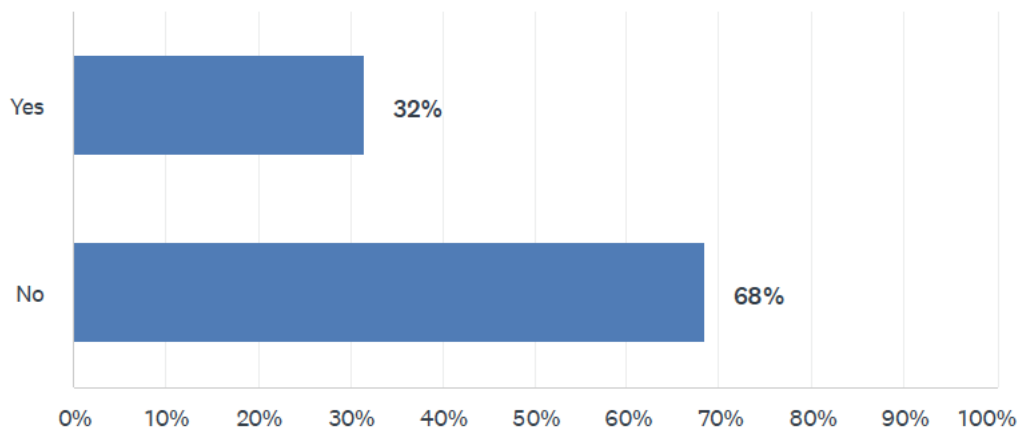
Answered: 937 Skipped: 263



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|-----------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Yes | 30.95% | 290 |
| No | 55.39% | 519 |
| No support has been offered | 13.66% | 128 |
| TOTAL | | 937 |

Q38 Do you feel that your child's school promotes a positive approach to children's mental health?

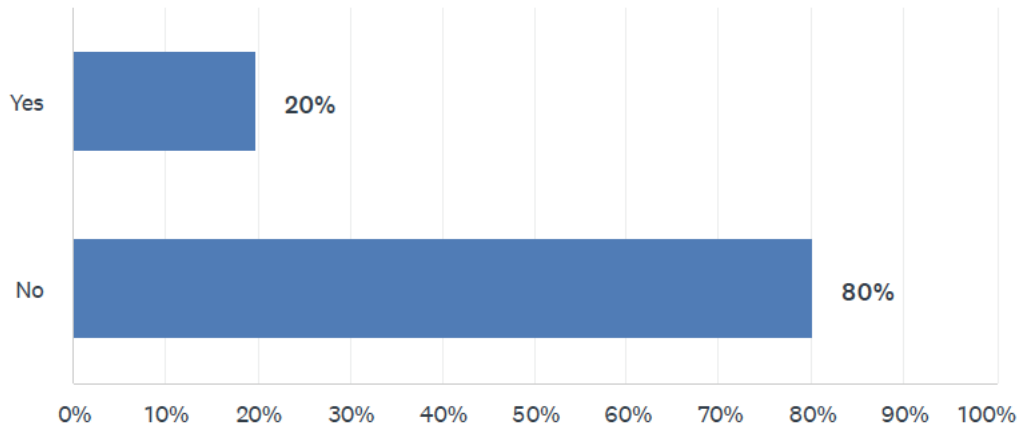
Answered: 934 Skipped: 266



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------|-----------|------------|
| Yes | 31.58% | 295 |
| No | 68.42% | 639 |
| TOTAL | | 934 |

Q39 Do you feel that your child's school gives equal weight to physical and mental health difficulties?

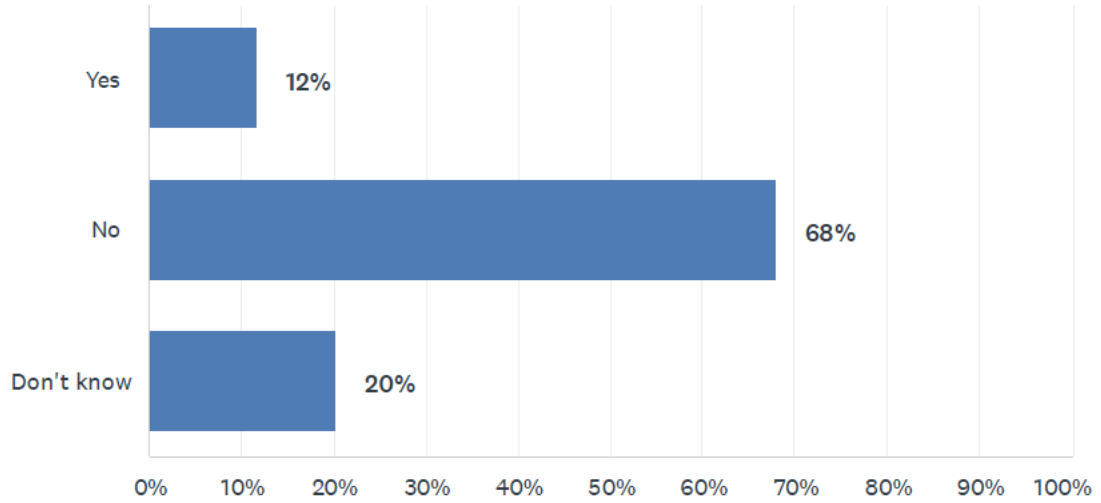
Answered: 932 Skipped: 268



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------|-----------|------------|
| Yes | 19.85% | 185 |
| No | 80.15% | 747 |
| TOTAL | | 932 |

Q40 Do you feel as though your child's school has a good understanding of EBSA?

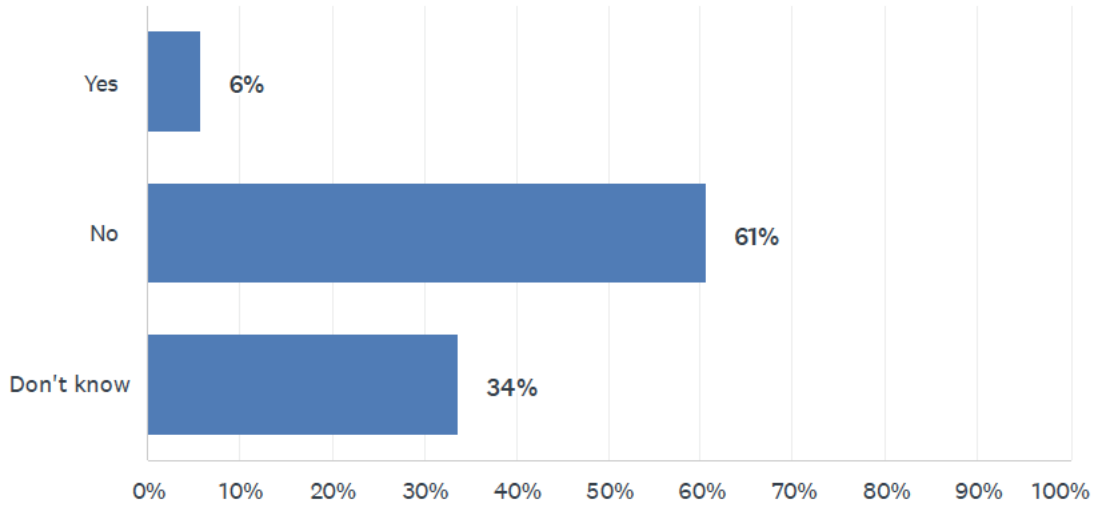
Answered: 929 Skipped: 271



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------|-----------|------------|
| Yes | 11.73% | 109 |
| No | 68.03% | 632 |
| Don't know | 20.24% | 188 |
| TOTAL | | 929 |

Q41 Do you feel as though your LA has a good understanding of EBSA?

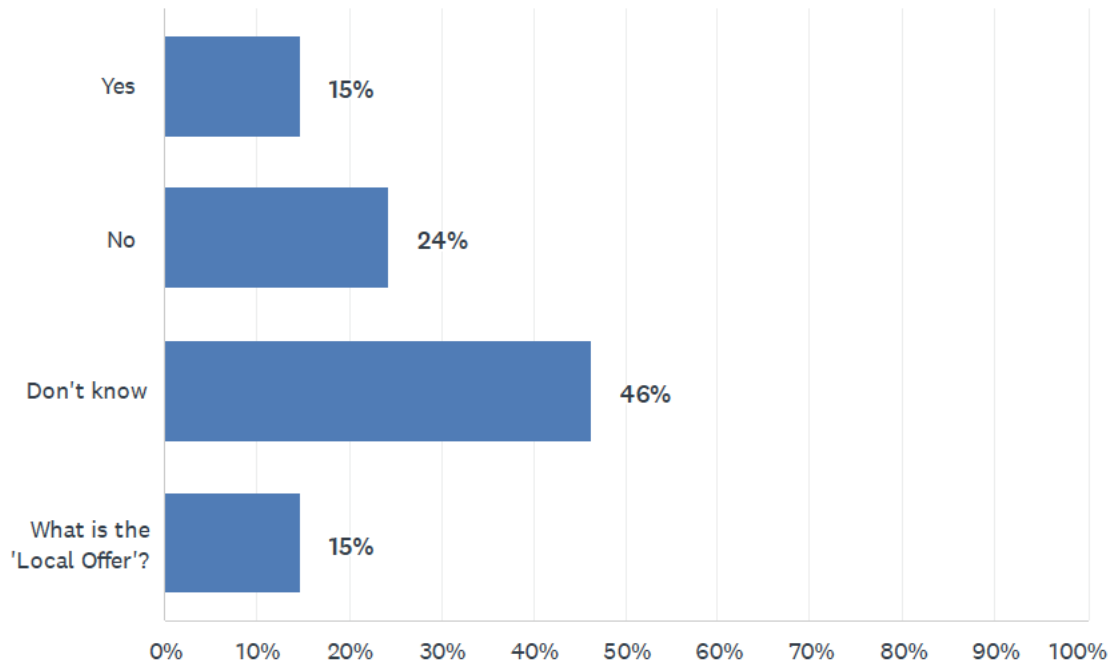
Answered: 927 Skipped: 273



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------|-----------|------------|
| Yes | 5.72% | 53 |
| No | 60.52% | 561 |
| Don't know | 33.76% | 313 |
| TOTAL | | 927 |

Q42 Does your LA publish support material on their 'Local Offer' to support parents of children who struggle with EBSA?

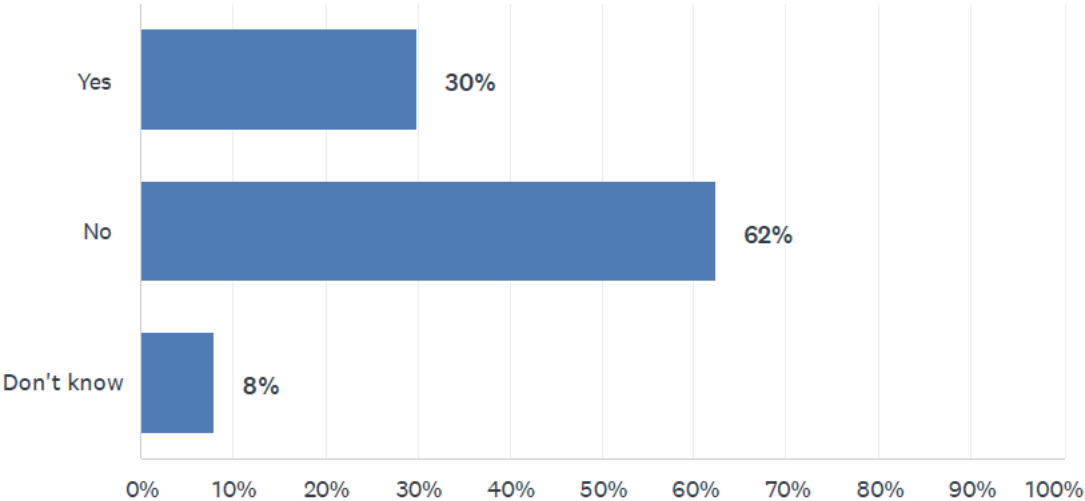
Answered: 925 Skipped: 275



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Yes | 14.70% | 136 |
| No | 24.22% | 224 |
| Don't know | 46.27% | 428 |
| What is the 'Local Offer'? | 14.81% | 137 |
| TOTAL | | 925 |

Q43 Have you felt supported by your child's school?

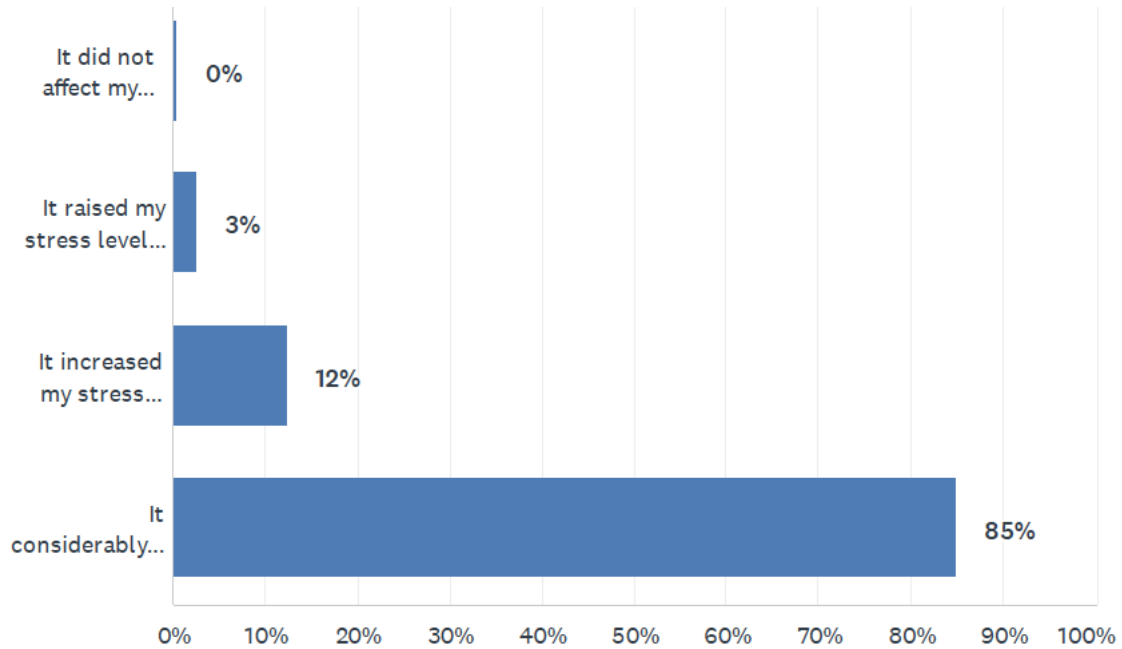
Answered: 924 Skipped: 276



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------|-----------|------------|
| Yes | 29.87% | 276 |
| No | 62.34% | 576 |
| Don't know | 7.79% | 72 |
| TOTAL | | 924 |

Q44 How would you rate your own stress levels during the attendance difficulties?

Answered: 921 Skipped: 279



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|--|-----------|------------|
| It did not affect my stress level | 0.33% | 3 |
| It raised my stress level, but I felt this was manageable | 2.61% | 24 |
| It increased my stress level, which impacted me, but not the wider family | 12.27% | 113 |
| It considerably increased my stress levels and impacted my life and the wider family | 84.80% | 781 |
| TOTAL | | 921 |

Q48 Please use this space to say anything you believe schools and Local Authorities need to know to improve the experiences of children and their families who have a child with EBSA.

Answered: 665 Skipped: 535

Below is a word cloud displaying a visual representation of the most frequently occurring words in response to this question.



Appendix H, not provided with this study, contains all anonymous responses to this question

This is available upon request.