

Royal College of Nursing Submission to the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

The Royal College of Nursing is the largest professional body and trade union for nursing staff in the world. We represent 450,000 members who are registered nurses, midwives, students, and nursing support workers.

Overview

1. Learning disability nurses, community children's nurses, health visitors, school nurses and mental health nurses are specialist nursing roles that play a major role in leading the care of children and young people with SEND. They are uniquely placed to identify and support those with special educational needs and disabilities, their families, educational and support staff.
2. There has been an under investment in the services and workforce to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND. Greater investment is required to sustain and develop a nursing workforce to achieve safe and effective care. To do this we need more nurses to lead and deliver better care for this group of children and young people in their communities.
3. There is a crisis in nursing staffing levels with almost half (44%) of current practicing nurses set to reach retirement age within 10 years. This outlook has been made more difficult by removing the bursaries that many trainee nurses rely on to support themselves while they are in training. We are also concerned that budgets for on-the-job training (continued professional development), which helps nurses acquire new skills and meet regulatory requirements are being cut.
4. The RCN wants government to think again about funding, to make sure more people are able to choose nursing as their career. We also want more money made available for career development to help nurses fulfil their potential to the benefit of children and young people who require the additional educational, physical, and emotional support to fulfil their future life aspirations.
5. The coronavirus pandemic has magnified inequalities in learning disabilities (along with mental health and social care services) and places specialist nursing services under huge pressure.
6. The RCN have developed guidance in a wide range of areas including the support needs of children and young people who have additional support needs.

The Impact of the Pandemic on Children and Young People in Special Schools

1. The children and young people who access Special Schools have undoubtedly been affected by the pandemic. Our members have provided specific areas of focus and concern. One of the main areas of risk at the moment

is that children who require aerosol generating procedures-(AGP's) -oral suction, tracheal suction or those who require long term ventilation, are only able to access school if the school environment has adequate provision, the staff have been 'FIT' tested, the risk assessment supports their safety and that of their fellow class members. The guidance being followed is from Public Health England, but some of our members say that it is very difficult for the school to adhere to it. There is also guidance from the National Tracheostomy Safety Project at Great Ormond Street Hospital but not endorsed by Public Health England.

2. Some members are calling for specific guidance from Public Health England regarding the care of asymptomatic children who require AGPs in the Special School environment, so that they can access their education safely.
3. Emerging issues have highlighted an increase in self harm, hyper anxiety and reduced concentration spans.
4. Children with SEND who have returned to school are often hyper vigilant; anxious and irrational which means that cortisol levels will run high, and as research has shown, this will block memory imprint.
5. Transition in 2020 has been particularly difficult. The September transfer to a new school, into year7, has been traumatic for many children with SEND, and we already know that it is a trigger time for school refusal, especially in girls with Autism. Capacity and resource are vital, and non-judgemental responses for key agencies will be essential.
6. For children with SEND their learning, upon return to school, will be 'frail, fragile and fragmented ', and best judgement needs to be in place to inform the pace, style and content of curriculum delivery.
7. Our members tell us that there are also discussions, amongst paediatricians, about potential correlation between increased alcohol consumption during lockdown, more pregnancies, and a rise in Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD)

In summary

There are a number of reports currently identifying the impact of COVID-19 on this population which highlight the concern for mental health and high levels of anxiety.

Autistic people were singled out as 7 times more likely to be chronically lonely than the general population.

Families have highlighted as being less able to work due to caring responsibilities and that their children had difficulty understanding or completing schoolwork, thus restricting their ability to progress academically.

Feedback from RCN members

Our nursing members comments suggest that there is a complicated landscape without easy answers. There will be a mix of young people with SEND who are in mainstream schooling and some in specialist schooling, although specialist schooling placements have reduced significantly in recent years. There have been a number of “free” schools develop from independent providers and there may be considerations from these that need to be considered.

Considering the common needs of children and young people’s support, - the prominent issues include:

- People with learning disabilities find it very hard to survive without support (adaptive skills deficits). For many families attending school will be an essential form of respite. Without school, many families will need to give up work, much more so than families of children without SEND. Families will need to become full time caregivers.
- Many people with learning disabilities have smaller social networks than young people without SEND. Accessing school is a key part of learning social skills, making and maintaining friendships, and being part of a community, having self-value and confidence. They will not be able to use technology to stay in contact with friends. They will be less likely to take part in online gaming. They will be less likely to maintain social contacts and have limited other social opportunities.
- Many people with learning disabilities will struggle with using technology for online/distance learning. Zoom calls and video presentations may be a challenge for them to take part in and may challenge their learning styles, considering their disability in learning. They are therefore less likely to benefit from online learning resources so will have less access to education, and there will be more pressure on parents to be teachers and make this learning happen.

Transition from primary to secondary school children will have been greater impacted by not being able to have transition days and typical end of school/leaving activities not being the same. This may make the next school more frightening and will make the transition harder. Similarly, if leaving school for adult services or employment then the lack of transition is going to make this life event a lot more difficult for them.

Transition between nursery and pre-school provision should also not be forgotten as many have been closed during the pandemic.

A school nurses leader warned of a ‘tsunami’ of safeguarding and mental health issues for children.

In conclusion

The RCN and its members are pleased to have this opportunity to raise some of the issues in this paper and to be able to represent a particularly vulnerable population of children and young people. Our members have identified

increasing, unmet needs in this population who have significant vulnerability and complex health, social, educational and care needs.

Our key recommendations are:

1. To fully consider an effective and sustainable nursing workforce better able to meet the needs of this population. Current failures to tackle the nursing workforce crisis are leaving those most in need of care facing the biggest problems in accessing the care that they need.
2. To provide greater focus on the identified and unmet needs of this group of children and young people and adequate resourcing provided.
3. To strengthen the support for families who require greater help in the care that they offer to children and young people, particularly during this pandemic.
4. A recommendation for the APPG might include the promotion of the recently launched DfE Relationships, Sex, and Health Education curriculum; fast tracked to support children with SEND in particular, which would give heart to the curriculum, and a long term statutory framework. It was launched in July by DfE.

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<https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/news/coronavirus-report>

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