



Let's talk about it:

Insights from Action for Children's Parent Talk Service

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Executive Summary

For most children, most of the time, their parents have the biggest impact on their quality of life and future outcomes. Every parent understands the importance of being a good parent but parenting is difficult. And too many parents are struggling to get the support they need with parenting challenges.

Parent Talk is a first-of-its-kind free online service which provides accessible and trustworthy advice, support, and reassurance for parents and carers of children aged 0-19. Parents and carers can access 1-to-1 advice from parenting coaches – trained family support workers – as well as support and advice articles across a range of common parenting challenges.

Between April 2021 and March 2022, nearly 9,000 parents and carers accessed specialist 1-to-1 support through the Parent Talk platform. In total, nearly 470,000 people accessed some form of support over the course of the year.

Parent talk is an early warning system for the challenges children and families face

Parent Talk conversation data provides insights into parents’ challenges, and the barriers they face accessing other services. This paper is focussed on three of the most common issues we helped parents with last year.

Advice Topic	1-to-1 support	Articles accessed
Mental health	4,612	98,751
Challenging behaviour	3,027	78,863
Parenting and Relationships	2,623	45,314
Special Educational Needs and Disabilities	2,321	130,217
Child development	2,230	29,829

1. There has been a huge increase in parents seeking support for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

- The number of Parent Talk users contacting the service for support with SEND issues rose from 962 in 2020-21 to 2321 in 2021-22, a 140% increase.
- In the last year, SEND was identified as an issue in 26% of 1-1 coaching conversations on the Parent Talk platform, compared to 9% in the previous year.
- Together, SEND advice articles on Parent Talk were viewed over 130,000 times last year, the most of any parenting topic.

2. Child mental health was the top issue that parents sought advice with via Parent Talk’s 1-to-1 coaching service

- Parenting coaches identified child mental health as an issue needing support in over 50% of conversations on the platform.
- Wider estimates from NHS figures suggest that an extra half a million children in England alone have developed probable mental health disorders in the last five years .
- Parents frequently describe long waits for accessing child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), including a period of no support, despite urgent needs.

3. After a spike in December 2020, there has been a steady increase in parents seeking help for a child who feels too anxious to attend school (“school refusal”).

- Last year, Parent Talk coaches supported 351 parents with issues relating to school refusal.
- Help dealing with school refusal was the second most accessed advice article on the website, used nearly 30,000 times last year.
- This corroborates national figures which show that the rate of unexplained and unauthorised absences in schools has risen by 50% since 2016.

Executive Summary

The Government could and should do more to support parents

Our experience of running Parent Talk has shone a light on several areas that the government could improve to help children and families before they reach crisis.

Recommendation 1: The government should create a national digital parenting support service.

Online parent support is a cost-effective way of helping parents to respond to challenges before they, or their children, need more intensive support. The government has announced that 82 new family hubs should provide online support to parents, and is considering the recommendation of the Independent Review of Children's social Care to invest £2bn in an expanded 'family help' service. A national digital parenting support service, like Parent Talk, would complement local digital services as well as help parents navigate their local support offer or provide support while they wait for face-to-face services.

Recommendation 2: Family hubs should provide a minimum guarantee of face-to-face services for children under five and their parents.

The demand for Parent Talk demonstrates the significant appetite among parents for trusted support. Parents face particular challenges when their children are young. The government should ensure that every family has access to key early years services in their local area. Those universal services should include programmes supporting child development, the parent-child relationship, and parenting skills.

Recommendation 3: Amend plans in the SEND Green Paper so parents can hold providers to account and ensure their children get the support they need.

The proposals to create national standards for SEND services is a positive step. However, local authorities and schools must receive adequate funding to deliver specialist services. And parents must be able to hold local authorities and schools to account when their children don't get the support they need.

Recommendation 4: The government must improve access to specialist mental health services for children and young people.

The government has made strides towards increasing the availability of early intervention mental health support in schools. Following the recommendation of the 2017 Mental Health green paper, specialist Mental Health Support Teams (MHST) are available to 2.4 million school children in England (or approximately 27% of the total student body).

As those reforms are rolled out, it's crucial that the government thoroughly evaluates the approaches and interventions that are effective in reducing the number of children and young people with more severe mental health needs.

Parents need support

For most children, most of the time, their parents have the biggest impact on their quality of life and future outcomes. Every parent understands the importance of being a good parent but parenting is difficult.

The enduring challenge of parenting has been made harder by both the COVID-19 pandemic and, now, the cost-of-living crisis that is particularly stark for families with children. One of the ways Action for Children supports parents to deal with those challenges is through our Parent Talk service.

What is Parent Talk?

Parent Talk is a free online service which provides accessible and trustworthy advice, support, and reassurance for parents and carers of children aged 0-19, and up to the age of 25 for young people with special educational needs or a disability.

The Parent Talk website has information, advice and guidance available 24/7 on a range of topics. Including mental health, behaviour, development, special educational needs and disabilities, relationships, education, sleep and nutrition.

Parents and carers can also access 1-to-1 advice from our parenting coaches – trained family support workers – who provide advice that is tailored to their specific needs. Parents can access the service as often as they want and when it's most needed.

Typically, parents access advice and information articles and are then signposted to further information and given the option to contact us for 1-to-1 support. When we support parents through Parent Talk, family support workers record the nature of the issues they help with. This enables us to track trends in the problems parents are facing.

Parent Talk is more than just an advice service. It is an early warning system for the challenges parents and families face across the whole of the United Kingdom.

What are parents seeking support for?

Since launching in 2020, Action for Children's Parent Talk service has helped tens of thousands of parents and families across the UK manage challenges and access much needed 1-1 help and support. Between April 2021 and March 2022, 8,982 parents got specialist 1-to-1 support via the Parent Talk platform. A total of 20,539 parents have accessed 1-1 coaching support between launch and March 2022.

Over that period, the challenges that many parents face have become more stark. Our parent coaches have found that issues have become more complex and time-consuming to resolve. Many of the issues that parents face relate to the challenges children and families face getting the right support from public services – whether that is health services, social care services, or from schools.

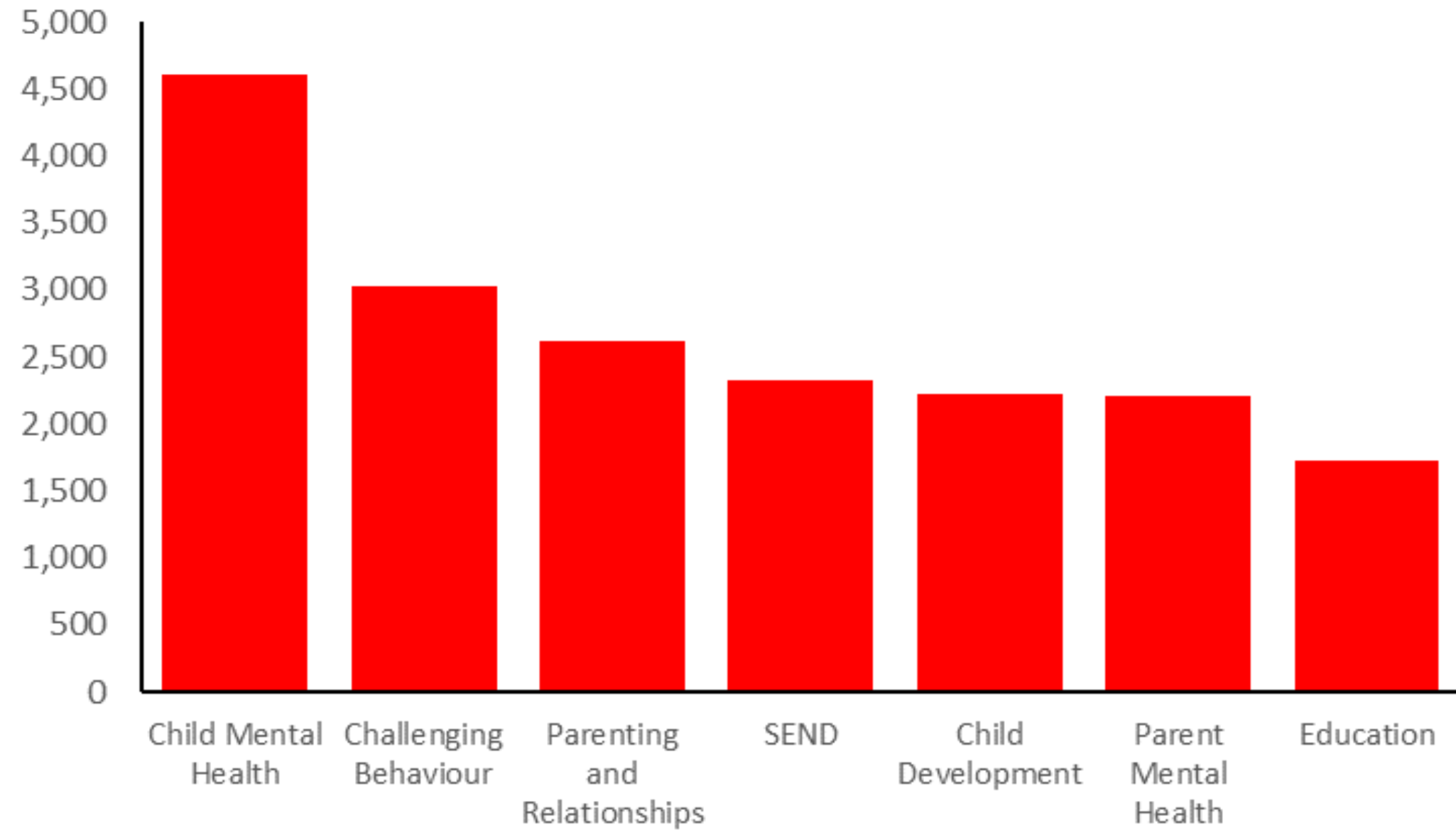
What data do we collect from Parent Talk?

When parents access the Parent Talk service to speak with a parenting coach, the conversation is tagged by the topics raised, and administrative or demographic details if available. This information then gets stored in a secure database. Tracking the frequency of conversation topics over time enables us to get an insight into the common issues parents are facing.

The most common issue that parents asked for 1-to-1 help with last year was child mental health. Over the course of the year, just over 50% of all 1-1 conversations on the platform were tagged with a mental health related issue. (See Figure 1)

'Challenging behaviour' and 'parenting and relationships' were the next most common topics – both coming up in approximately a third of the conversations.

Figure 1: Number of 1-to-1 conversations on Parent Talk by conversation topic. (April 2021-March



NB: Each 1-1 conversation can be tagged with multiple topics, meaning the sum of conversations in this diagram exceeds the total number of conversations held on the Parent Talk platform.

As well as the opportunity to speak with a specialist parenting coach, Parent Talk also provides specialist advice articles and links to resources to help parents manage their problems. Over the last financial year, 469,900 people accessed parenting support through the Parent Talk platform.

The most popular topics for advice articles accessed on the Parent Talk website are similar to the most common issues raised in 1-1 coaching conversations. Mental health and challenging behaviour are the second and third

most used advice topics. However, advice articles on special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are the most used across the platform, with at least 130,000 views over the course of 2021-22.

Table 2 : Most used advice article topics on the Parent Talk platform. (April 2021 to March 2022).

Topic of Advice Articles	Page Views
SEND	130,217
Mental Health	98,751
Challenging Behaviour	78,863
Activities	54,779
Nutrition	47,372
Parenting and Relationships	45,314
Education	40,985
Child Development	29,829
Sleep	29,417
COVID	16,544

NB: Page views are here calculated as the sum of unique users for every Parent Talk article within each theme in the table. This means that total page views are likely higher than is reported here, as users may access an article more than once.

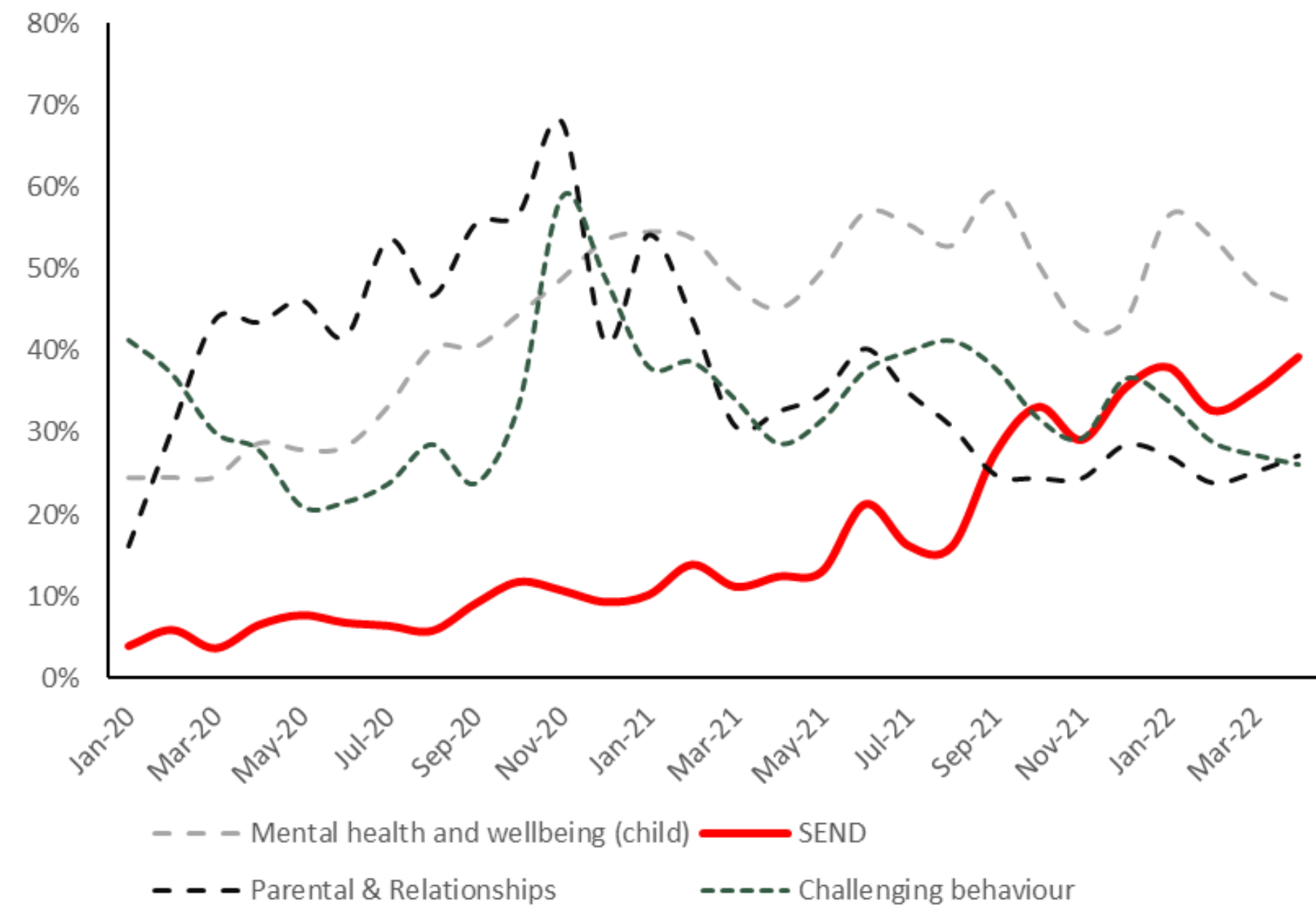
Behind these aggregate figures, the issues parents seek support with have changed over time. Based on 1-1 coaching conversations held on the Parent Talk platform, the next section highlights these emerging issues and how they reflected in broader societal trends.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

Issues related to SEND have become more common

The fastest rising issue facing parents using Parent Talk are concerns related to special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Across 2021-22, SEND issues were discussed in 2132 conversations, or 26% of all 1-1s. This is a 140% year-on-year increase from 2020-21 in which SEND issues were discussed in 962 conversations, or 9% of all 1-1s. By April 2022, SEND issues were the second most prevalent issue discussed on the Parent Talk platform, behind only Child Mental Health.

Figure 2: Prevalence of top 4 most common conversation themes on the Parent Talk website. (January 2020 to April 2022).

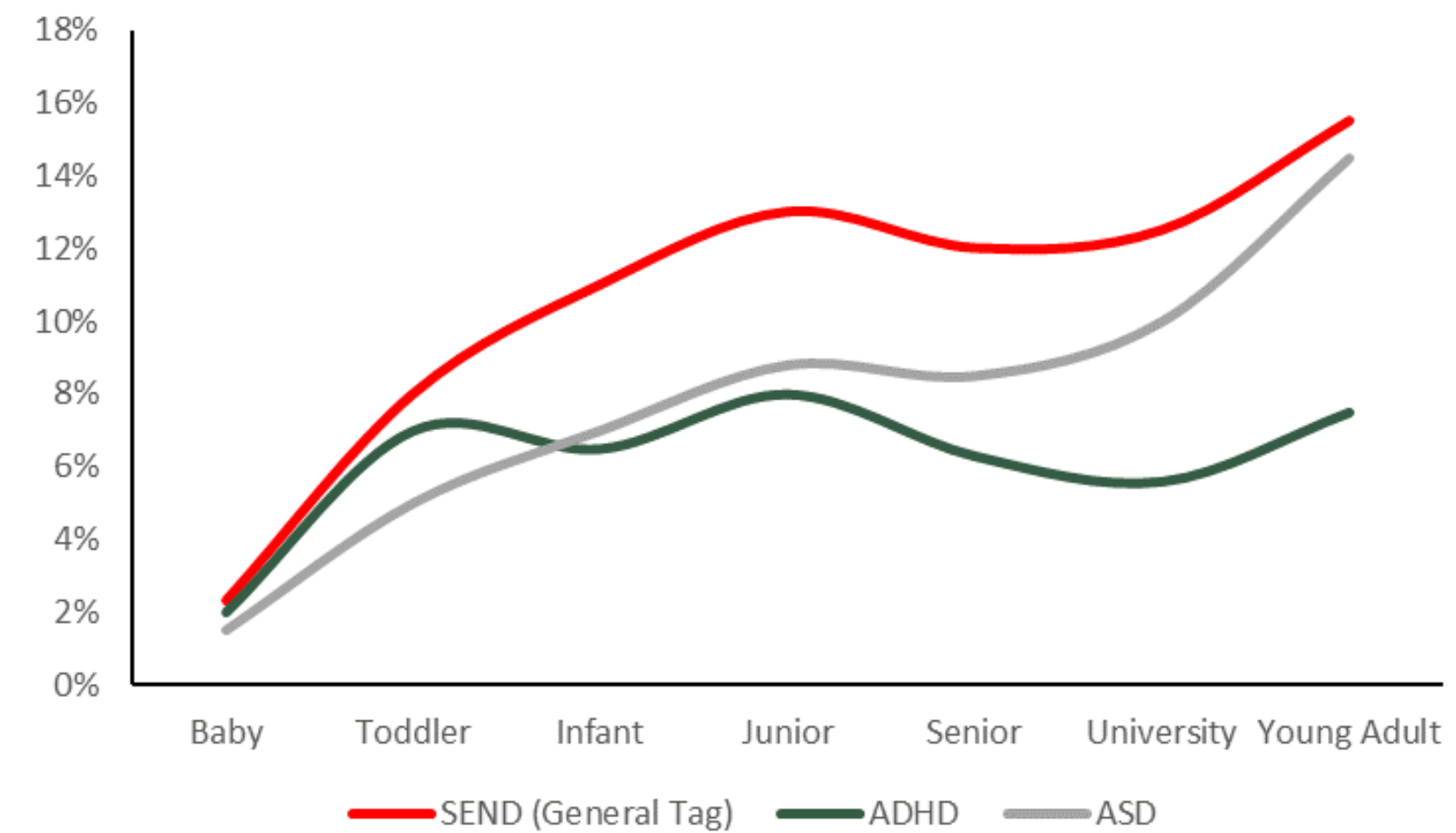


Parents with older children are more likely to need SEND support

In percentage terms, SEND issues are more common for parents looking for support for their older children, in late teenage years or young adults. This is likely due to a wider range of issues that parents face when their children are younger but might also reflect increasing severity of SEND related issues for older children.

However, as Figure 3 shows, during the toddler years, there is a spike in parents contacting Parent Talk for support with suspected Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and to a lesser extent, Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). These formative years in a child's development are the period in which parents may first notice differences in the way their child behaves and interacts with others, compared to their peers. However, it is also possible that lockdowns relating to the COVID-19 pandemic have impacted the social and emotional development of younger children, delaying important developmental milestones.

Figure 3: Proportion of 1-1 conversations where SEND issues were identified as a need, by stage of a child's development.



NB: Parent Talk does not routinely record data on the age of children, so these figures are based on estimates of a child's age implied by the language used in conversations.

Parents are struggling to get the support they need

Parents sought support with SEND issues through articles on the Parent Talk website. Articles relating to SEND issues were viewed at least 130,000 times between April 2021 and March 2022. The most commonly accessed article on the platform in this period provides advice on obtaining additional support for a child through an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) or Individual Education Plan (IEP). (See Table 4)

Table 4: Top ten most used advice articles on the Parent Talk website. (April 2021 to March 2022).

Article Title	Topic	Number of people accessing article
What is an EHCP and an IEP, and how can my child get one?	SEND	34685
How do I deal with school refusal?	Mental health	27808
Tips for when your child is a fussy eater	Nutrition	24214
Activity ideas for toddlers	Activities	23390
Activity ideas for children aged 5-12	Activities	22538
Does my child have ADHD?	SEND	17306
What should I do if I think my child has autism?	SEND	13786
Understanding and managing my child's behaviour	Challenging Behaviour	10890
How can I help when my child feels anxious?	Mental health	9847
How can I deal with an autistic meltdown?	SEND	9615

The headline figures mask the specific nature of the challenges that children and parents face. Through analysing the individual issues that parents have sought help with over the last year, a number of issues stood out.

Schools struggle to provide the support that children need

Children with SEND often require extra support from schools. Most often this is delivered via an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), which sets out the child's needs and the extra steps that schools and other partners should take to meet them.

There are many problems with the current approach to SEND support. We often hear from frustrated parents that schools struggle to provide enough support to children, in many cases due to stretched resources or a lack of expertise. This can leave parents feeling like their child's needs are being ignored. Parents must be able to access the extra support their child is entitled to.

The case below is an example of the type of support that parents are seeking.

Hello. What can I do about school constantly failing my child and not following their EHCP?

Coach: Can you tell me a little more about the support your child is meant to be receiving and what concern you have about these not being provided?

Since they first started school, my child has had funding for speech therapy, but I feel like even with the funding, there has barely been support. One service told us my child isn't getting anything out of the session because they can't concentrate.

A couple of years ago, we got a EHCP in place, which plans for specialist speech therapy multiple times a week. Every day a teaching assistant should monitor what the specialist has done so they can do the same work with my child. But there hasn't been any specialist speech work, and we go months without any help at all.

Coach: Do you know if the school have had the funding for a specialist speech therapist, or is it something the local authority are meant to be arranging themselves?

They should have funding. I've signed for funding several times. All they say is that Covid is preventing them getting the specialist. It was only when I spoke to said speech therapist that the school took me seriously about possible ADHD. We do not have a diagnosis for this.

I've had meetings and said how important it is that we get the speech therapy. My child can't even say their name. The only help they are getting is from me, and I'm not trained so I'm not enough.

The above extract is based on a real 1-1 conversation between a Parent Talk coach and a service user. The transcript was written by Action for Children with identifying details and phrasing from the original conversation altered to preserve anonymity. The support offered by Parent Talk coaches has been edited for brevity.

Parents find it difficult to hold schools and local authorities to account

There are mechanisms in place to hold schools and other organisations to account for providing support. But in some cases parents need help to navigate these systems which can be confusing from the outside, especially when parents don't know what support is available to them.

My son is struggling in school. He has been in trouble because the teachers don't have a proper awareness training about autism. They shouted at him and threatened to send him home without listening to his explanations .

Can somebody help me to get help for him The school are ruining his progress and self-confidence.

Coach: It is great that you have reached out for support. Have you had any meeting with the school about these issues?

I tried to talk with the head teacher and pastoral care but it made no difference.

Coach: It might be that you need to speak to the governors to make a complaint or talk to your local education authority to report that your child's needs aren't being met.

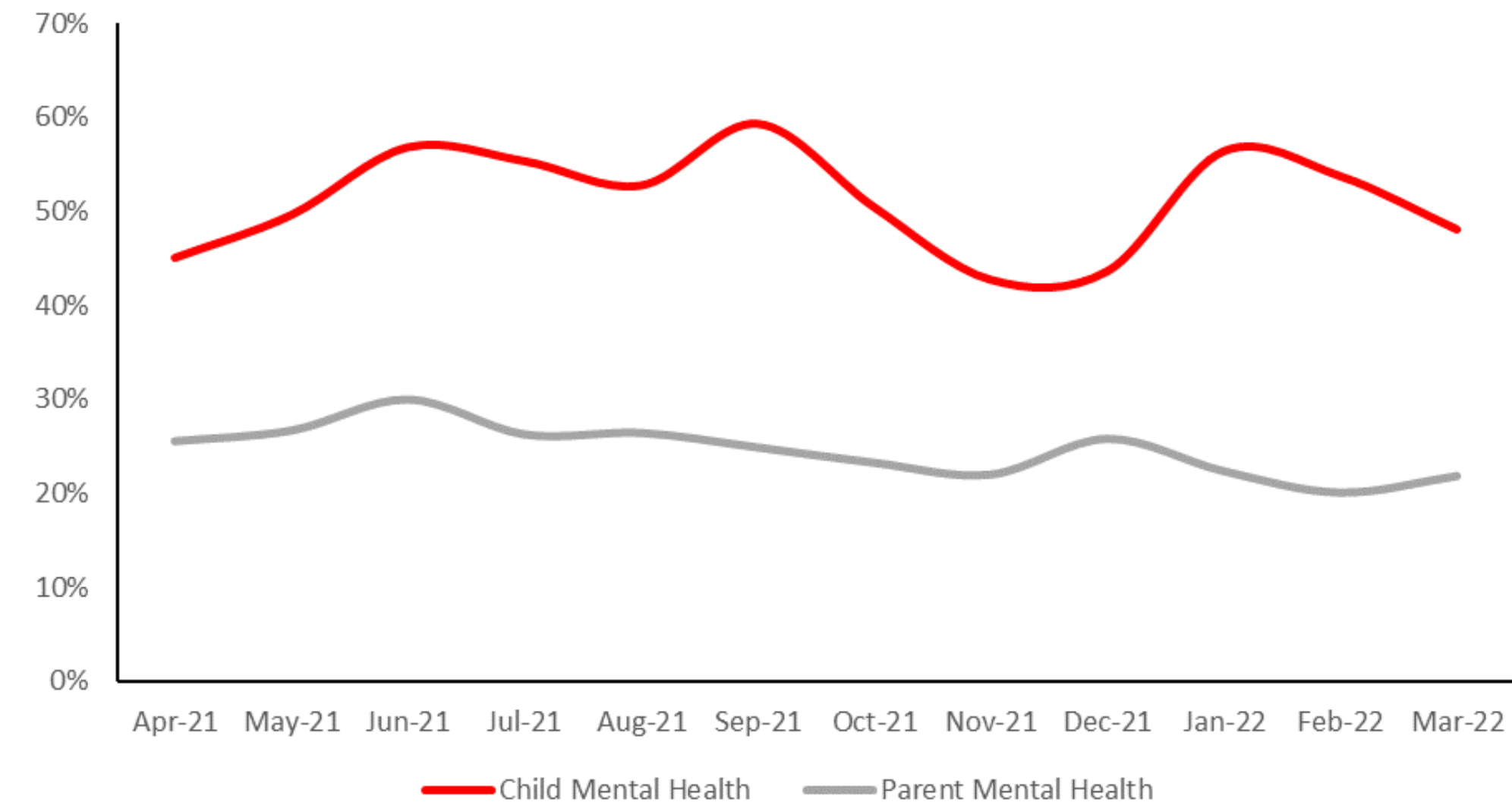
I think that's a good idea because we just feel so helpless and frustrated. Even though I'm trying my best, things are far from improving.

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Mental Health

Concerns about child mental health remains the most common topic of conversation between Parent Talk coaches and parents/carers. In every month of the 2021-22 year, child mental health was identified as a need in over 40% of conversations, with a high of 60% on conversations in September 2021. The mental health of parents also comes up frequently, being identified as a need in approximately one in four conversations across the course of the year.

Figure 4: Percentage of conversations identifying child and parental mental health as a need. (April 2021 to March 2022).



Within that, there are several issues that have been highlighted as a particular concern by Parent Talk coaches.

School refusal

Feelings of anxiety and low mood can negatively impact a child's education. A particularly challenging problem for many parents is school refusal, where a child refuses to go to school or attend lessons.

School refusal is often because the child is feeling anxious about some aspect of school life. The Parent Talk conversation below illustrates the pressures it can place on parents who have to weigh up their child's mental health against their education.

My son suffers with anxiety about going to school since he started there a few years ago. It seemed to settle down, but it has got really bad recently .

There's lots of tears before school and sometimes panic attacks. Sometimes he doesn't go to his lessons. We seem to have tried everything and I don't know what to do next.

Coach: I'm really sorry to hear that. Does your son have any support in place at the moment? I know it's so worrying to know your child is struggling.

He saw a counsellor for a while, but that ended. I have tried to get him support via the school nurse but that hasn't gone anywhere.

Coach: Is there something in particular that seems to be triggering this change for him?

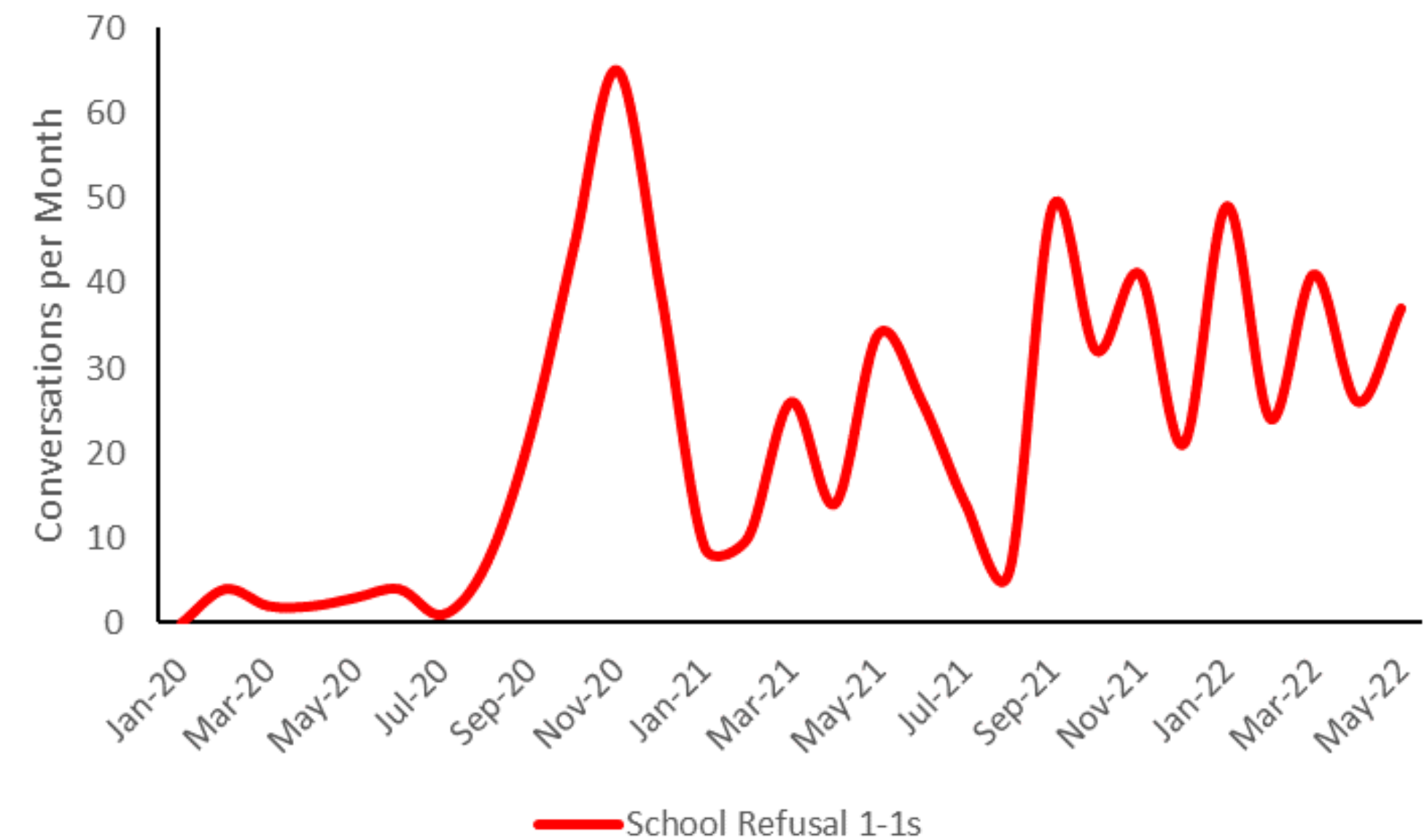
It's really hard to tell. Something that affects him one week can be unproblematic the next. Most of the time he will say he has no idea why he feels so anxious.

Skipping class is new though, and I am torn as to whether it right to send him to school when he is so distressed.

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The number of users contacting Parent Talk about school refusal has remained high since children went back to school in September 2020. School refusal conversations align with the school year – spikes happen at the start of the new school year, and at the beginning of a new term. The large spike towards the end of 2020 likely reflects understandable anxieties about going to school while mandatory COVID testing and isolation measures were still in full force.

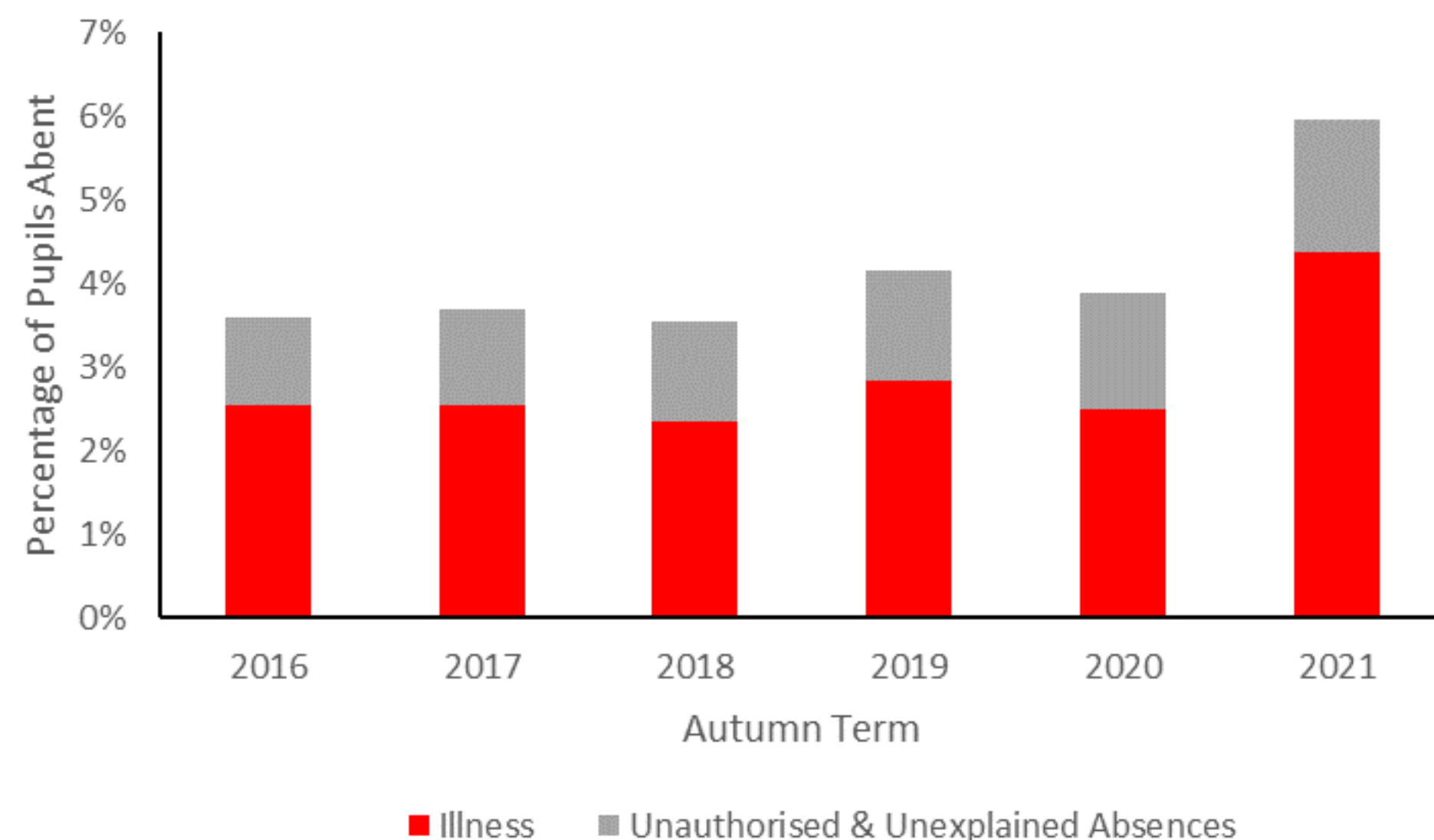
Figure 5: Number of 1-1 conversations identifying school refusal as a need. (January 2020 to May 2022).



These data reflect broader trends about school attendance which has declined significantly since the pandemic.

Absences due to illness and unauthorised absences (under which school refusal would be classified) rose significantly in the 2021 Autumn term. Since 2016, the rate of unauthorised and unexplained absences across all state-funded English schools, represented by the grey boxes below, has risen by 50%.

Figure 6: Rate of illness and unauthorised and unexplained absences across state-funded English schools in Autumn term. (2016 to 2021).ⁱ



Clearly it is very important that children are able to attend school unburdened by anxieties. School provides an environment to learn and develop friendships. But it also enables teachers and other professionals to spot issues the child may be facing and provide support. Parents of children that have anxieties about attending school often need support to talk about the worries their child faces, and to help them develop good routines. This is where Parent Talk comes in.

Waiting for specialist services

Parents accessing Parent Talk for help with their child’s mental health regularly face difficulty in accessing appropriate treatment and support. The last few years have seen an unprecedented rise in young people struggling with poor mental health. NHS figures for England show that the rate of probable mental health disorders in 6-16 years olds has risen from one in nine (11.6%) in 2017, to one in six (17.4%) in 2021.ⁱⁱ This means, in England alone, almost half a million more children have a probable mental health disorder, compared to only five years ago.ⁱⁱⁱ

This additional demand for mental health support has put a significant strain on Child and Adolescent Mental Health Support (CAMHS). In Scotland during the first quarter of 2022, only 73% of children were seen within 18 weeks of referral despite Scottish government targets of 90%.^{iv} In England the Children’s Commissioner estimates that only one in three children with a mental health disorder are able to access treatment.^v The following conversation represents the frustrations that many families feel in trying to access services that are struggling to keep pace with demand.

My nephew can be very violent. I am worried about the impact on my 12-year-old niece. This morning I took her to school in tears. She knows she can come to me to feel safe, but I am scared this is going to end bad .

Coach: It does seem like she and the family would benefit from that break and for her to be assessed by professionals. Has your nephew been referred to CAMHS?

CAMHS said his case was not bad enough. The social worker disagreed. But don’t know what’s happening with that. The waiting list is so long. We will all be dead by then

Our local early help services have refused my nephew too. You must be fed up with me whinging . I feel so helpless

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The wait to access services can be a particularly stressful time for families, as during this period issues can escalate without any help available. The following demonstrates the immense pressure this can put on parents.

My daughter has started hearing voices in her head. She is very distressed! I have called social services and her school but I am being completely ignored. She isn't showing this behaviour anywhere else. The GP said help could take up to a month!

Coach: If this is distressing them, I would continue to try and speak to your GP again about the wait and share with the school that your child has told you that she is hearing voices at school too.

The GP have just called back and said they will do an urgent CAMHS referral, but what can I do for now to help her I don't know what to do. Yesterday she threatened to seriously injure her siblings. CAMHS have just contacted social services again.

Coach: [After offering advice] Was anyone hurt? Have CAMHS been able to offer any help and support?

No one was hurt thankfully. But CAMHS have now closed the case.

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Impact on the parent

Being a parent is hard work. When children are facing challenges, parents can be negatively affected as well. It can feel very lonely when all your energies are focused into supporting your child. It can feel like you have no one to turn to for your own issues. Over the long term, this can make existing problems worse, as parents find it harder to support their child when they need help themselves.

Services like Parent Talk are vital. Both in providing emotional support to parents, making them feel listened to and heard, and also giving them the practical advice and confidence they need to effectively support their child. The following conversation illustrates how having someone to talk to impacts the child, and the whole family as well.

I'm hoping I can get some help and support please. I have a 7 soon to be 8 year old daughter, she is very challenging at home and at school. She has had a very good time at school for the past few months but today has been sent home and suspended for one and a half days.

I really find it difficult with my own mental health dealing with this and would really appreciate some help and support.

Coach: I'm wondering what support school have put into place for your daughter to support her in this. Does she have a behaviour plan that she works toward? Does the school work with you so that the support for her needs is followed in home and school?

I'm sorry to hear that you are finding it hard with your own mental health too. Have you been able to speak to a GP about this? I'm wondering whether they have offered you any counselling to support you?

Thank you for your reply. We have worked closely with someone from our local Children's Hub, but the case was closed as they could only work with us for a certain length of time. They really helped me and the school to put plans and strategies together. My daughter had really improved in school, but this has taken us a step back.

I went to the doctors a few months ago and was put on some medication which helps. But I just feel I need someone to talk to about things and get things off my chest. I will certainly look through the links you have sent me, thank you very much for these.

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The stigma of asking for help can sometimes prevent parents from accessing support when they need it. The conversation below demonstrates Parent Talk can provide an easily accessible route to finding support when parents don't want to engage in face-to-face services.

My partner and I really struggle with our 9 year old child's behaviour. They are 'an angel' at school according to teachers, and they behave well when staying with others, but for us, at home, their behaviour is very challenging.

Coach: I'm sorry to hear you're finding your child's behaviour particularly challenging, I can imagine you both must be exhausted!

Hopefully I can help. It's quite common for children to behave well in school and at other places, then to not continue this at home. This can often be due to having followed rules in school and managed their emotions all day long, so by the time they get home it's all let go. I also want to reassure you that parents do also find it hard to stay calm sometimes - especially when you're feeling drained and exhausted yourselves.

It is reassuring to know that it's quite common...albeit frustrating...but it's the extreme of their behaviour that we struggle with

Coach: [Provides a range of practical options for behaviour management]. Would you and your partner consider a parenting course? They can often be really helpful in understanding children's behaviour and strategies/techniques to help.

Those options look great. I think part of the problem is how my partner and I work together as parents as we have quite different expectations sometimes.

On the parenting course, I would consider it. My partner wouldn't! They hate the idea of being judged as a 'bad parent' or of 'airing dirty laundry'. I have broached the idea of seeing a family therapist to get some help and they were horrified at the idea

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Supporting Parents through the Day to Day

Parent Talk offers advice and guidance for parenting's most challenging moments. But parents also often need support with the day-to-day issues that all parents face. This might include dealing with temper tantrums, sibling rivalries, or potty training in the early years.

Services like Parent Talk can provide an invaluable resource for parents to get advice and support on these more conventional issues. Especially as spending cuts have reduced access to children's centres and other forms of parenting support.

Hello, I am looking for some direction. Our 5-year-old has started really acting up. Doing the opposite to what we ask. This has been going on for many weeks now, it's not just a phase. We feel like whatever we are doing isn't working.

Coach: Hello. Thank you for sharing that. Like you said it could be a bit of a phase but it's brilliant you and your partner support each other. There are some really good courses out there. I can share some tips too.

Well we do try to support each other, but mid tantrum my partner will say to me 'What shall I do now?' Which obviously our little girl is listening to. Knowing that she is pushing us to the limit.

Coach: Children are so clever aren't they. It does sound like your daughter loves your attention so that's good. Children are so clever at working out what gets them the most attention. Whether it's through negative or positive behaviour. So there are some things you can try. It will be about making small changes so it's manageable for you all to be consistent with.

Sometimes we aren't consistent. For example, if my partner is telling her to brush her teeth and she is categorically saying no, they will only take so much and then end up offering our daughter a compromise. Which she says yes to, then plays up again. So we will end up compromising again.

Coach: It could be that you are changing the goal posts and boundary, which she is inevitably going to push against and test. A natural reaction for children. It's about finding a way to help you all feel confident in what you want her to do and how she reacts and not giving in. Though still picking the right battle it is hard.

She definite enjoys my partner's company. They played together in the garden nicely for quite a while. Then as soon as she came in and the word 'bath' was mentioned she turned in an instant. And the next hour was tantrums and tears, and telling us no.

Coach: Sounds like your partner and your daughter have a great time together. Perhaps a reward system may help and preparing her for what is to come can too. You may do this already. A reward system often works the best when set up well and the child feels included and it's achievable. As she loves time with you both, a great reward could be an extra story with him or 5 mins playing before.

It can also be good if you acknowledge why she may not like the bath and see if you can include her in ideas to change it. You may do this already.

We can't work out any real reason at the moment, so I really think it is a case of playing up.

Coach: It does sound like she may be playing up for some reason. It's always good to chat about what will be happening in terms of routine and continuing to give her planned control. Which you can do by letting her choose bubble bath, toys in it for example. She can choose night clothes ready. Whether to wash her body or hair first

Yes that does make sense. We will try using some of those ideas tonight.

Coach: I will email some courses and tips to you in a moment, and you can look at them together.

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Recommendations

Some parents need support during a crisis. Some want advice on the everyday challenges of being a parent. Whatever the need, access to expert advice and support can help parents manage challenges, nip problems in the bud, and help their children to thrive.

There are a wide range of policy changes the government could make to improve family lives. Including making families more financially secure through the benefits system, improving parental leave entitlements, and improving access to affordable childcare. Through supporting parents directly with the challenges they face, we've gathered evidence that would help resolve some of the most severe challenges that parents commonly face. These four changes would help parents and children to get the support they need before their problems escalate.

Recommendation 1: The government should create a national online parenting support service

Online parenting support is a cost-effective way of helping parents to respond to challenges before they, or their children, need more intensive support. It would complement existing services by *filling the gaps* while parents wait for face-to-face services. And help parents navigate the often-confusing array of public services available to them.

As the government responds to the recommendations of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care, it should consider the important role that digital services can play in widening access and making the wider family help system work most effectively. It would also support the roll out of local family hubs, which are required to provide digital access to parents. As with Parent Talk, a national service could help families find the right local face-to-face support for them, as well as providing advice and guidance on common parenting challenges.

Recommendation 2: Family hubs should provide a minimum guarantee of face-to-face services for children under five and their parents

The demand for Parent Talk demonstrates the significant appetite among parents for trusted support. Parents face particular challenges when their children are young. The government should ensure that every family has access to key early years services in their local area. Those universal services should include programmes supporting child development, the parent-child relationship, and parenting skills. The government's commitment to family hubs is a huge opportunity to implement this. Where services are not already delivered, they could be offered through family hubs.

Recommendation 3: Amend plans in the SEND Green Paper so parents can hold providers to account to ensure their children get the support they need.

The government's 2022 Green Paper highlighted that the SEND system is not delivering good results.^{vi} A key problem remains a lack of faith, among parents in particular, in the mainstream schooling system. This places extra pressure on specialist and alternative provision leading to longer wait times and frustration.

The government's remedy – nationally consistent standards for how children's needs are met and identified – is a positive step. But this must be met with sufficient funding for mainstream schools to meet the needs of children on IEPs and EHCPs.

Alongside funding, reforms must give parents better access to redress. That could include giving the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman greater powers where children's needs aren't being met

Outside of the education system, parents and carers of children with SEND need to be able to access appropriate support. Local authority spending on disability services for children has fallen by 43% since 2014.^{vii} The SEND Green Paper should ensure that parents and young people can access non-schooling based services such as 'short-breaks' that they are entitled to.

Recommendation 4: The government must improve access to specialist mental health services for children and young people.

Children and young people are facing an unprecedented mental health crisis. The government has made strides towards increasing the availability of early intervention mental health support in schools. Following the recommendation of the 2017 Mental Health green paper, specialist Mental Health Support Teams (MHST) are available to 2.4 million school children in England (or approximately 26% of the total student body).^{viii}

As those reforms are rolled out, it's crucial that the government thoroughly evaluates the approaches and interventions that are effective in reducing the number of children and young people with more severe mental health needs.

Endnotes

ⁱ Office for National Statistics, *Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn term*. Action for Children calculations. Data accessible at <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-autumn-term>

ⁱⁱ NHS Digital, *Mental Health of Children in England 2021*. Accessible at <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2021-follow-up-to-the-2017-survey>

ⁱⁱⁱ Action for Children calculations, based on ONS mid year population estimates.

^{iv} <https://publichealthscotland.scot/publications/child-and-adolescent-mental-health-services-camhs-waiting-times/child-and-adolescent-mental-health-services-camhs-waiting-times-quarter-ending-march-2022/>

^v Children's Commissioner, *Children's Mental Health Services 2020/21*. Accessible at <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/cco-briefing-mental-health-services-2021-22.pdf>

^{vi} Send Review: Right support, right place, right time. Accessible at <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/send-review-right-support-right-place-right-time>

^{vii} Action for Children calculations based on local authority Section 251 returns to the Department for Education.

^{viii} Department for Education figures. Accessible at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/transforming-children-and-young-peoples-mental-health-provision>



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