

FIGHT FOR ORDINARY

HOW TO HELP ME LEARN AND THRIVE

Disabled young people's views and experiences of failed support in the SEND system and how to fix it.

Research by the Disabled Children's Partnership and Kids with disabled children and young people, aged 11-25 years.

Published May 2026



**Disabled
Children's
Partnership**



**Disabled children
say we can**

CONTENTS

Summary	3
Methodology	4
Key findings	5-6
Recommendations from DCP and Kids	6-7
Recommendations in detail	8-12
Detailed findings	13
Introduction	13-14
Who took part in our survey?	14
Support at an education or training setting	14-15
Support to learn	15-17
Support to take part in clubs or activities	18-20
Workforce to make this possible	21-24
Support to attend	25-26
Support to belong	26-29
Conclusion	30
References	31
Appendix one - demographics	32-33

SUMMARY

Children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) want the same, ordinary things that other children take for granted, such as a nursery, school or college place where they are happy, belong, and can achieve. But this is not the reality of their lives right now.

The Government has recognised this and is currently consulting on reforms to the system of support for children with SEND. It has set out welcome ambitions for a system that is inclusive and where every child can achieve and thrive. They have promised to place the voices of children and young people at the heart of these reforms and the future system.

To inform the debates about the proposals and ensure the stated ambitions meet the reality, we wanted to understand what children and young people think is stopping them from learning and thriving. The findings paint a stark picture of how the system is currently failing them and the real barriers in the way of their aspirations.

In this report, we share the voices and experiences of 520 young people, and based on what they told us, we have set out some of DCP and Kids recommendations for SEND reform.



METHODOLOGY

The Disabled Children's Partnership - a coalition of more than 130 organisations campaigning for improved education, health and social care for disabled children and their families, and the charity Kids, developed an online survey to understand young people's current experiences and their ideas for solutions that could improve a reformed SEND system.

The survey was co-designed with disabled young people and was made available in standard and an easy read format for those aged 11-25. It took place in January and February 2026. The survey covered six key areas:

- Learning support
- Activities before, during and after school
- Attendance
- Workforce
- Friendships
- School or college community

A total of 520 young people from across England responded to the survey. We are grateful to everyone who took the time to tell us about their experiences.

KEY FINDINGS

Our survey reveals that young people rarely receive the correct level and type of support at their education or training setting, demonstrating the scale of change needed from the Government's reforms.

Just 28% of disabled young people say they have the right amount of learning support when at their educational or training setting.

A training or educational placement is more than just somewhere to study or learn vocational skills. It also presents the opportunity to interact with peers, disabled and non-disabled, and make friends during activities or clubs at school. However, just 1 in 5 young people told us they had the right amount of support to take part in clubs or activities before or after the school day.

In the absence of opportunities to socialise, it is not surprising that only a third of young people say that they feel part of the community at their education or training setting. Young people tell us they feel isolated and alone, even when attending school.

"I am not being stretched or progressing and my voice is being erased".

"I am very lonely. I haven't had a friend since I was 12 and have just turned 20. I've missed all my teenage years."

Three in four of those taking part in our survey have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and even with the current legal protections their EHCP should provide, young people tell us they are not receiving the right amount or type of support they need.

Sharing their experiences, it is clear that even those with support do not receive it in a comprehensive way. Fragmented support, for example during lessons but not at break times, or only during particular parts of the day, leaves young people on the margins of the school community. The solutions young people feel should be incorporated into a new SEND system have implications for the workforce.

Whole-school SEND training is the most common solution young people told us would improve the support they get from staff at their school or college. Young people want staff who listen and understand their needs, who help them to build their confidence to advocate for themselves. These trusted adults can unlock doors for young people to take part in learning, training and social activities that are truly inclusive. They can facilitate friendships and a sense of community.

Reduced or absent SEND support during such an important and formative stage of a young person's life leads to disengagement not only from education or training, but also later in adulthood. These young people, already vulnerable, become even more at risk of being excluded from wider society as they move into adult life.

Our survey gathered the views of disabled young people aged 11-25. However, through the work of the Disabled Children's Partnership coalition - supporting millions of children every day - we know that it is not only 11-25-year-olds who are being let down, losing out on learning and friendships. Children in nursery and primary school face the same barriers to learning, participation, and friendships as their older peers.

That is why a reformed SEND system must be built around the voices and lived experiences of disabled children and young people. Their rights, needs and solutions must be at the heart of all changes to law, policy, and practice.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM DCP AND KIDS

Young people with SEND tell us that the most important things are to secure the right support consistently from staff who understand their needs, to be able to make friends, enjoy clubs and activities and to feel part of their school or college community.

We must all focus on removing barriers to learning and thriving, so that when it comes to their education and social life, they enjoy the same, ordinary things that other young people take for granted.

Based on what the young people told us in this research, the key recommendations from DCP and Kids are:

1. **Strengthened right to joined-up education, health and social care support and accountability** for when that support is not delivered, because young people have told us the right support is transformational.

2. **Truly inclusive nurseries, schools and colleges**, which are set up for children with SEND, whilst recognising and protecting the place for special schools to deliver the support young people say they need to learn and belong.

3. **More ambition to reduce the barriers to attendance for pupils with SEND** against a background of young disabled people telling us they feel unsupported and isolated from the school/college community.

4. **Increasing young people's inclusion in schools and colleges** by investing to promote a fundamental culture shift in education, local councils and wider society.

5. **A system that ensures young people are meaningfully included in every decision** about their support in education, health and care.

RECOMMENDATIONS IN DETAIL

1. Strengthened right to joined-up education, health and social care support and accountability for when that support is not delivered, because young people have told us the right support is transformational.

The current system is failing children and young people badly, with just 28% of disabled young people saying they have the right amount of learning support, even for those with an EHCP. This shows the absolute need for legal safeguards if the system fails. Yet the Government has proposed weakening some legal safeguards, alongside some strengthening of rights for children with lower-level support.

In the same way that we have a Court of Appeal to protect people when the criminal justice system fails, we need a strong legal framework to protect all young people's aspirations when the education system fails to deliver what is expected.

This means:

- Genuine accountability underpinning proposed Individual Support Plans (ISPs).
- No raising of the eligibility thresholds for Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs).
- No weakening of the powers of the Tribunal - the ultimate accountability for young people who have been denied support and placements they are legally entitled to.
- Health agencies are mandated to provide the workforce needed both for those children with ISPs and to deliver the support set out in an EHCP.
- The NHS workforce plan, currently in development, includes the workforce needed to deliver the Government's plans on SEND reform, including speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists and specialist nurses.

2.

Truly inclusive nurseries, schools and colleges, which are set up for children with SEND, whilst recognising and protecting the place for special schools to deliver the support young people say they need to learn and belong.

The Government has rightly set out a vision of schools, nurseries and colleges being more inclusive. Plans have been laid out for extra training, more funding for specialists and for inclusive practice, alongside the recruitment of more Educational Psychologists. But alongside these plans, to make inclusion a reality, we need:

- Ongoing evaluation of the new SEND training delivered to all staff in nurseries, schools and colleges and through teacher training, informed by what young people with SEND need them to know.
- The place of special schools in the system to be recognised, protected and properly funded for those children who will always need more highly specialist provision to thrive.
- Funding for special schools to share their expertise with the wider system, rather than assuming this can be resourced from already scarce resources.
- Accountability for the inclusivity of before and after-school activities and school trips, not just during the official school day.
- Increased recruitment of specialist teachers where qualifications already exist and new national qualifications for specialist teachers for all areas of development.
- Children only being taught in inclusion bases if they can meaningfully integrate with school life, rather than them being effectively isolated with a tiny group of peers.
- Mental health support teams in schools receiving enough training on how mental health issues intersect with different areas of SEND.
- A well-resourced “Experts at Hand” service, giving schools timely access to speech and language therapists, educational psychologists and other specialists so support can be delivered early and effectively.

3.

More ambition to reduce the barriers to attendance for pupils with SEND against a background of young disabled people telling us they feel unsupported and isolated from the school or college community.

The Schools White Paper says that issues around SEND and behaviour will be dealt with, but only proposes introducing guidance on reasonable adjustments, for example on issues such as uniforms. This is inadequate. We need a fundamental rethink of behaviour and attendance policies so that every child can thrive.

That means:

- The Department for Education clearly stating that zero-tolerance behaviour policies conflict with their aspirations for all children and specifically for children with SEND and from areas of socio-economic disadvantage.
- Requiring all nurseries, schools and colleges to explain the links between each of the proposed areas of development (e.g. sensory or speech, language and communication) and behaviour and attendance issues in their policies.
- Requiring any teacher giving a sanction for behaviour to record the possible cause of this behaviour, to allow patterns to be spotted early and effective support to be put in place.
- An end to fines for non-attendance at school for parents of children with SEND, which are counter-productive and can be discriminatory.
- Close working between education, health and care professionals to identify when behaviour or attendance is linked to unmet developmental or health needs, ensuring assessment and support are joined up rather than punitive.

4

Increasing young people's inclusion in schools and colleges by investing to promote a fundamental culture shift in education, local councils and wider society.

Children with SEND and their families are too often caught in the culture war crosshairs. Debates about 'over-diagnosis' or school transport costs obscure the reality that, as they have told us, too many young people's needs go unidentified and unsupported. Education, health and care professionals may bring their own assumptions, shaped by societal attitudes, into practice, which will influence the support children receive.

The Government should set out to shift discriminatory attitudes, otherwise children with SEND and their families will continue to experience isolation and exclusion.

The Government should:

- Listen to and act on young people's experiences and ideas for achieving truly inclusive cultures at every stage of their education.
- Set out a strategy to tackle the attitudes and behaviours that isolate disabled young people, with clear measures to influence and improve public attitudes.
- Extend new SEND training investment for staff in nurseries, schools and colleges to also encompass all Local Authority decision-makers and relevant health and social care professionals.
- Invest in public campaigns similar to those that successfully shifted attitudes toward mental health, ensuring children with SEND are valued, respected and understood.

5. **A system that ensures young people are meaningfully included in every decision about their support in education, health and care.**

Young people need to feel valued, listened to and engaged in the design of their support. They tell us that they want teachers and education staff to listen to them and work with them to design effective support. Young people's voices must guide decision-making across education, health and social care.

This means:

- A trusted adult for every young person, providing pastoral support, listening to their concerns and aspirations, and championing their voice, particularly when things go wrong.
- Young people being fully involved in decisions about their support across education, health and care, including during updates and reviews.
- Clear guidance for schools on co-production with young people, supporting schools to meaningfully include them in the design of policies, activities and school environments.
- Training for staff on SEND to ensure they are equipped to recognise, sensitively listen to, and respond to the needs of young people.
- The proposed Experts at Hand service, intended to boost schools' access to speech and language teachers, educational psychologists, and other specialists, must be resourced and available to make a practical difference to young people's school experience.

True reform of the SEND system must mean enforceable rights, enough specialists, and happier children living in a more understanding society. Anything less risks deepening the crisis and failing a generation of children.

DETAILED FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

The current SEND system is renowned for its complexity, with low aspirations and delivering poor outcomes for the 1.7 million children who need it. Young people who should be at the heart of the system often find themselves overlooked or excluded when support is planned and provided.

With the Government planning the first major SEND reforms since 2014, it is vital that the voices of young disabled people are truly central to the changes proposed. These reforms will only work if they are deeply informed by young people's and families' lived experiences and solutions. The scale of the current system's failures, the lack of trust, the scarcity of public money - and the fact that young people repeatedly offer practical, value-for-money ideas - make their involvement a must-have, not a nice-to-have. Anything less sets the reforms up to fail.

The Disabled Children's Partnership and the charity Kids conducted an online survey with disabled young people in England aged 11-25 in January and February 2026. The aim of the survey was to understand their view of support available at their education or training setting, such as school, college, training placement, or university, and approaches that should be considered as part of a reformed SEND system.

The Disabled Children's Partnership (a coalition of over 130 organisations) and Kids campaign for improved support for disabled children, young people, and their families.



Narratives around the SEND system can often focus predominantly on support for learning or vocational activities, but for all pupils and students, experiences at school or college go beyond academic or vocational achievements. Time in between learning, such as break time or lunchtime, is just as important in developing young people's confidence and life skills. This down time from education or training, along with clubs and activities offer young people valuable time with their peer group, making friends and taking part in valuable opportunities to develop skills and pursue interests important to them.

WHO TOOK PART IN OUR SURVEY?

A total of 520 disabled young people took part in the online survey, with many reporting several disabilities or health conditions. 29% of those responding to our survey attended a post-16 college or training setting, 18% attended special school, and 14% attended a mainstream school. 62% of young people responding had an EHCP, but an additional 14% had an EHCP but do not get the provision that should be provided. Additional demographic information is available in Appendix One.

SUPPORT AT AN EDUCATION OR TRAINING SETTING

Disabled children or young people may sometimes need more help than their peer group when attending an education or training setting. For example, they may need equipment to move around or to communicate with their friends or staff. A teaching assistant might provide support in the classroom or help when moving around the school.

In addition, disabled children may require access to support with personal care or support to take medication. They might need specialist interventions such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy, or speech and language therapy.

Disabled children need the right support so they can develop independent living skills, build social relationships, and where appropriate, move into employment as adults. As highlighted in our 2025 report, *Fight for Ordinary: How to Spend Less and Get Better Outcomes for Children with Speech and Language Challenges*, investing early in the right support delivers significant long-term benefits.

Previous research shows that supporting just **one in six children with SEND could generate £8 billion in economic benefits**. Ensuring that children receive an education that meets their needs is not only the right thing to do - it also makes strong economic sense.

This report is broken down into support across the school or college day. Findings are presented across six key areas:

- Learning
- Activities & clubs
- Workforce
- Attendance
- Friendships
- Sense of Community

SUPPORT TO LEARN

Once a young person is identified as having a specialist educational need, an assessment of that need should take place by a specialist SEND professional - like an educational psychologist - to understand how they can be supported to learn most effectively. For example, support recommended could be adaptive teaching strategies, regular support from a specialist or the use of equipment, aids or technological devices.

However, just 28% of disabled young people told us that they have the right amount of learning support when at their educational or training setting.

“Very little is in place to help me in an educational setting. I have very little access to education altogether apart from my own completely independent self-education.”

Young people that had support in place did not feel it was individualised or addressed their needs and described a one-size-fits-all approach.

“Disabled people don't necessarily need *more* support, they typically need *different* support.”

This created barriers to young people's learning, that inclusive approaches within the environment should alleviate. Young people reported working in corridor spaces for focused work one-to-one with a member of staff or when needing quiet areas.

“I need flexible lessons and less pressure, so I am not too tired and stressed.”

“I need less barriers to access and to be listened to. I need to be able to go at my own pace but also speed up or advance my learning in certain areas where needed, as well as take longer with some things.”

“There is a lack of planning, meaning sizes of classes have grown, overwhelming me and making the provision, at times, a place that is too busy, crowded, and loud.”

As figure 1 below illustrates, the majority of young people say that 1:1 support and inclusive spaces and reasonable adjustments to their timetable are the best way to support their learning.

Figure 1: What type of support helps young people learn?

What helps your learning?	Proportion (%)
1:1 support	71%
Smaller groups	63%
Adjustment to timetable	63%
Access to quiet areas	58%
Specialist support during the week	51%
Regular catch ups with pastoral or key worker	49%
Flexibility with sensory items	49%
Access to assistive technology	41%
Adjustments to uniform	38%

When young people were asked what would improve the support they need for learning, again, there was a similar pattern for what respondents said could be done better (see figure 2).

Figure 2: What type of support could be improved to help young people learn.

What helps your learning?	Proportion (%)
1:1 support	68%
Smaller groups	61%
Access to quiet areas	59%
Specialist support during the week	57%
Adjustment to timetable	51%
Flexibility with sensory items	49%
Regular catch ups with pastoral or key worker	49%
Access to assistive technology	45%
Visual support aids	40%
Adjustments to uniform	37%

SUPPORT TO TAKE PART IN CLUBS OR ACTIVITIES

Young people talked about the barriers within the learning environment that reduced the time available for a young person to take part in activities beyond the classroom.

The importance of the school environment in facilitating friendships for disabled children has been previously reported. In particular, when accessible activities are sparse in their local community, or they spend long periods travelling to school or college outside of their local community, there is less opportunity to spend time locally with their peer groups and make friends. Young people have previously told us about the poor availability of activities to participate in hobbies within and beyond their school environment. In addition, our previous research found that 1 in 4 young disabled people did not get the right support to take part in the hobbies they wanted to.

An inclusive SEND system enables participation from all pupils, not just within the classroom, but throughout the day. This includes sessions that may take place before the school day starts, such as at breakfast club, during break and lunchtimes, and also clubs or activities that take place at the end of the day. A coordinated, comprehensive level of support, available across all

subjects, classrooms, and break times, gives disabled young people the same opportunities as their non-disabled peers.

However, our findings reveal that just 1 in 4 (25%) disabled young people say that they have the right amount of support to take part in clubs or activities during the school day. This declines further when looking at activities that wrap around the school day. Just 1 in 5 (19%) disabled young people say that they have the right amount of support to take part in school clubs or activities before or after the school day. A common response referred to the lack of activities available to young people, not just the frequency but the type of activities provided.

“Our school offers no before school club and won't let pupils in until 9am. It is a special school. Lessons don't start at 9. The school wanted to charge £35 an hour for me to participate in an after-school club. My mum can't afford that!”

“There are no after school activities, breakfast clubs or extra-curricular activities available.”

“There are no breakfast clubs at my school.”

Inconsistent support is evident in the experiences young people shared with us. For example, those needing medical support during the day, do not receive it after the school day and therefore are unable to participate in clubs organised at that time. Young people also highlighted that funding, or staff were not available for clubs before or after school activities.

“I did attend an after-school swimming club, but I had to stop as there was no nurse on site after school hours.”

“I need people who know my needs and are trained to help with medical needs and know my triggers.”

“I don’t go to activities as I do not have 1:1 support to attend.”

Pre-session communication with young people was highlighted as particularly important. Young people described that understanding what sessions include and how their needs could be accommodated gave them confidence to attend. Young people also highlighted the benefit of facilitating their attendance with a trusted key worker.

“Being told what activities are on offer with examples helps. Being shown the place before/short visits before starting. 1-to-1 sessions or small groups. Knowing the staff.”

“Being allowed to leave when I become overwhelmed.”

“I take part in a Critical Thinking & Debate club, and what helps me is that I'm not forced to actively participate if I don't want to.”

Findings include implications for the workforce, in terms of young people having the confidence to attend sessions with staff who are trained to understand their needs, providing activities that they can participate in using equipment or devices they are familiar with. Figure 3 illustrates the approaches young people say would improve the support they have for clubs or activities.

Figure 3: Support that helps young disabled people to take part in clubs and activities at their education or training setting.

What support would help you to take part in clubs and activities at your education setting?	Proportion (%)
Activities delivered with my needs in mind	67%
Staff running sessions understand my needs	67%
Staff make sure I feel included in activities	64%
Asking what support would help before starting	62%
Staff make sure they let you know what to expect when I attend	57%
I have a 1:1	43%
I can use any equipment, aids or devices	38%

WORKFORCE TO MAKE THIS POSSIBLE

As the previous section highlights, education staff are critical to young people feeling confident to learn, socialise, and enjoy hobbies and activities. However, just 2 in 5 (41%) young people say they attend an education or training setting with staff who are trained to meet their needs. This includes staff working and learning from other professionals across health and social care and drawing on evidence-based practices to ensure a young person is supported appropriately.

“I need a teacher who has adequate training to understand my needs and can be bothered to listen and read advice from external professionals.”

“However often I explain that the 'help' I am given is NOT the help I need, they ignore it. They have one way of teaching and I must fit into that.”

“I need staff who know about my health and pain even when you can't see it.”

It is clear from the findings how important the attitudes and interactions with staff are for young people's experiences. Young people should be able to expect a workforce that ensures they are listened to, with their needs taken seriously. Negative experiences risk young people losing trust not just in education staff, but also in wider support services.





“I have a nice Teaching Assistant who helps me around school and sometimes my friends do.”

“I need help to understand who I can trust.”

“Lots of teachers don’t want SEND children in their class. That attitude has to be sorted.”

To participate in the school or college environment fully, young disabled people may need ongoing support from specially trained staff. For example, this may be for support with speech, language or communication issues, talking therapies for mental health needs, physiotherapy, or occupational therapy to support mobility or ensure young people are free from pain.

This all contributes to ensuring young people are able to attend their setting ready to learn, participate in activities, make friends, and learn new skills.

However, just 1 in 4 (23%) disabled young people say they attend an education or training setting with the right support or access to the specially trained staff they need. Figure 4 provides an overview of what young people say works well so that they get the correct level of support from staff.

“I need people who read my EHCP and follow it.”

“I should have time in the hydrotherapy pool.”

Figure 4: Support from the workforce that works well for young disabled people at their education or training setting.

What works well so the people who work with you can meet your needs?	Proportion (%)
Staff that listen to my parent’s views	64%
Staff that build my confidence	64%
Staff that listen and act on my views and opinions	60%
Staff that help me and act on my view and opinions	60%
Staff that help me understand how to manage my needs	57%
Staff that set realistic and aspirational goals for me	54%
Teams that work together	53%
Teaching assistants	45%
Access to specially trained staff that I need, such as an occupational therapist	44%

Our findings reveal that 64% of young people responding to our survey state that whole-school or college training on SEND is the most effective way of improving how the workforce can meet their needs. Additional approaches they value are listed in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Improvements to improve the workforce that support young disabled people at their education or training setting.

What could be improved so that the people who work with you can meet your needs when you are at your education or training setting?	Proportion (%)
Whole-staff training on SEND	61%
Staff that listen and act on my view and opinions	61%
Access to specially trained staff that I need such as occupational therapist	58%
Staff that listen to my parent's views	58%
Staff that help me understand how to manage my needs	56%
Teams that work together	55%
Staff that set realistic and aspirational goals for me	53%
Teaching assistants	40%



SUPPORT TO ATTEND

The crisis in the SEND system and lack of support for young disabled people is a key factor in the increasing number of young people with low attendance, educated at home, or without a school or college place due to the provision unable to meet their needs. Disabled young people may also spend time away from school due to illness, appointments, and recovering from treatments.

As mentioned above, an effective SEND system ensures that young people can learn and take part in activities, with confidence in the staff that support them. The approach schools or colleges take in managing attendance of disabled young people is instrumental in how assured young people with intermittent attendance feel when returning from absence.

However, just 2 in 5 (39%) of disabled young people responding to our survey say they have the right amount of support to attend their education or training setting when they are able to. Young people tell us that the role of the workforce and the approach taken to support young people with their attendance is key for those with positive experiences.

7 in 10 (68%) young people state that staff who understand their needs are key to helping them attend education or training. Further approaches are listed in figure 6.

Figure 6: What helps young disabled people attend an education or training setting.

What helps you attend your educational or training setting?	Proportion (%)
Staff understanding my needs	68%
Being made to feel welcome when I come back	54%
Access to quiet areas, small groups and corridor passes	53%
Adjustments to the timetable	44%
Specialist support I need	42%
Flexibility with sensory items	42%
Access to assistive technology, up-to-date equipment and devices	35%
Adjustment to uniforms	34%

In addition, 3 in 5 (62%) reported that having access to specialist support would improve their attendance at school or college, emphasising the importance of co-ordination between education, health and social care.

SUPPORT TO BELONG

Young people who do not receive the correct level or type of support in a timely manner feel isolated from their peers. If support does not meet needs throughout each aspect of the school day, young people do not get the opportunity to make friends or feel part of their school or college community.

Sadly, less than a third of disabled young people say they have the right number of friends they would like at their education or training setting.

The SEND system is failing to ensure young people are supported to socialise with their disabled and non-disabled peers.

“I am very lonely. I haven’t had a friend since I was 12 and have just turned 20. I’ve missed all my teenage years.”

“I want a friend, I am lonely.”

“I don’t have friends and even providers for disabled children refuse me.”

Solutions to help young people socialise during the school day once again have implications for the workforce. Half of young people responding to our survey say activities that encourage young people to make friends, and staff supporting young people to do so, would improve things (see figure 7).

Figure 7: Approaches that would help young disabled people make friends at their education or vocational settings.

What would help you make friends at your educational or training setting?	Proportion (%)
Setting provides activities to encourage young people to make friendships	55%
Staff at settings to support pupils to make friendships	49%
Same opportunities to play and socialise at breaks and lunchtimes as my peer groups	44%
A buddy system at my setting	36%
I can take equipment, aids or devices to activities	30%

The survey findings demonstrate the inter-connections between all parts of school life and the outcomes on young people with poor SEND support. Sadly, it is not surprising that there is a negative impact on how young people relate to their education or training setting, from the findings already described, that leave them feeling overlooked by staff and isolated from their peers.

Just a third (36%) of disabled young people say that they feel part of the community at their education or training setting. Responses demonstrate how young peoples' voice is overlooked in the SEND and school / college system.

"I am isolated and receive very little support."

"I just want to feel included."

"I don't know what I can/can't ask my SENCO (special educational needs co-ordinator) to do to put in support."

Reduced support affects young people not just in the short-term but also in the long-term. Poor experiences of support limit young people's confidence and therefore, the options they consider moving forward into adulthood.



"I don't have an EHCP because I meet my education targets, but I struggle with emotional and social skills. So, what is going to happen to me if I decide to go to college and university? What support would I get because I think I would struggle in a new environment like travelling, meeting new people, and social interaction with people. I think I would struggle with all these things."

"I only go to school or home. I don't go out."

"I don't want to be treated like I'm naughty."

The solutions young people say would improve their sense of belonging, illustrate approaches that place the young person at the centre of the support provided. 3 in 5 young people say that being included in decisions about their support or interventions by staff would help them feel part of the community at their education or training setting. The same proportion would like support from staff to advocate for themselves (see figure 8 for more approaches to improve young people’s sense of community).

Figure 8: Approaches to help young people feel part of the community at their education or training provision.

What would help you feel part of the community at your education or training setting?	Proportion (%)
Staff including me in decisions made about my support or interventions	57%
Having support from a trusted member of staff to help me advocate for myself	57%
Confidence building sessions	56%
Include me in meeting or communications about my support beyond annual reviews	48%
Being able to mix with other pupils with similar needs	48%
Open communication from staff	43%
Support from staff that does not interfere with me making friends	37%
Spending more time with non-SEN pupils	32%
Spending more time with SEN pupils with different needs to mine	32%
Having a pupil buddy system	31%



CONCLUSION

The findings from our survey reveal the importance of ensuring children and young people's rights and legal protections are at the heart of a reformed SEND system. Despite the majority of young respondents having an EHCP, a legal document that contains their needs and the provision to meet those needs, just 28% of young people say that they have the right amount of learning support when at their educational or training setting. This disparity shows how badly the education system can fail children with SEND and why legal safeguards remain essential in a reformed system.

Even those young people who have support in place describe it as fragmented, intermittent throughout their day at school or college. The inconsistency of SEND support underpins the challenges they face to pursue the ordinary things that other children may take for granted. Just 1 in 5 disabled young people say that they have the right amount of support to take part in clubs or activities before or after the school day. This has a detrimental impact on their opportunities to make friends, with a third of young people telling us they do not feel part of the school or college community.

This report is a snapshot of the views and experiences of 520 young people regarding their learning, activities and clubs; workforce; attendance, friendships, and sense of community. In every area, they present practical ideas and solutions to transform SEND support and create truly inclusive schools, clubs, and communities. Their experiences and expertise must now drive and shape all aspects of the Government's proposals to reform support for children and young people with SEND.

REFERENCES

- HM Government (2026) Every Child Achieving and Thriving.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/every-child-achieving-and-thriving/every-child-achieving-and-thriving-html-version>
- HM Government (2022) The Government SEND Green Paper “Right Support, Right Place, Right Time.”
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/624178c68fa8f5277c0168e7/SEND_review_right_support_right_place_right_time_accessible.pdf
- House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (2025) Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs.
<https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/127/public-accounts-committee/news/204725/send-emergency-unviable-system-will-end-in-lost-generation-of-children-without-reform/>
- Office of National Statistics (2022) Educational Experiences of Young People with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities in England: February to May 2022.
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/educationandchildcare/bulletins/educationalexperiencesofyoungpeoplewithspecialeducationalneedsanddisabilitiesinengland/februarytomay2022>
- Disabled Children’s Partnership (2024) This Is My Life: Hear Me, Help Me.
<https://disabledchildrenspartnership.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/THIS-IS-MY-LIFE-REPORT.pdf>
- Disabled Children’s Partnership and Speech, Language and Communication Alliance. <https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/about-us/news-and-blogs/uk-economy-would-benefit-by-8-billion-from-earlier-investment-in-childrens-speech-and-language-support/>
- Fight for Ordinary (Disabled Children’s Partnership).
<https://disabledchildrenspartnership.org.uk/fight-for-ordinary/>

APPENDIX ONE - DEMOGRAPHICS

Age of young disabled people

- 11-15 years 50%
- 16-19 years 24%
- 20-25 years 24%
- Prefer not to say 3%

Type of disability or condition *more than one applies

- Autism 71%
- Learning disability 58%
- Social, emotional and mental health needs 51%
- Speech, language and communication needs 47%
- Physical disability 38%
- Genetic conditions 26%
- ADHD 25%
- Hearing impairment 19%
- Multi-sensory impairment 19%
- Rare condition 17%
- Other 17%
- Visual impairment 15%
- Acquired brain injury 11%

Type of Support *more than one may apply

- EHCP 62%
- EHCP but provision is not provided 14%
- No support in place but should have 12%
- SEN support 5%
- Used to have an EHCP but not now 3%
- Other 4%

Education or Training Setting

- Post-16 college or training setting 29%
 - Special needs school 18%
 - Mainstream 14%
 - Home school or education at other than school 8%
 - Has a place but cannot attend due to lack of support 8%
 - Independent school 6%
 - University 4%
 - Other 4%
 - Alternative provision 3%
- *6% preferred not to say

Ethnicity

- White 81%
 - Mixed ethnic minority groups 8%
 - Black 5%
 - Asian 0.6%
 - Other 0.6%
- *5% preferred not to say

FIGHT FOR ORDINARY



Disabled
Children's
Partnership

Kids

Disabled children
say we can

Kids is a national charity for disabled children, young people and their families with a mission to create a world where all kinds of children have all kinds of opportunities. Registered charity number: 275936

The Disabled Children's Partnership (DCP) is a growing coalition of more than 130 charities and parent groups, to campaign for improved education, health and social care for disabled children, young people and their families. We are administered by Royal Mencap Society (registered company in England and Wales no. 00550457; registered charity numbers are 222377 in England and Wales, and SC041079 in Scotland). The work of the Disabled Children's Partnership is possible due to the generous support of Pears Foundation.