

Struggling families say a lack of food makes home-learning difficult

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Credit: Annie Spratt on Unsplash

Almost one in five (19%) of parents of primary school pupils from families who are financially struggling reported that a lack of food made learning from home more difficult.

That's one of the findings of a study of 3,409 parents in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland undertaken by psychologists at the University of Sussex during the first lockdown, in 2020.

These new reports focus on the amount of time spent [home](#) learning,

how much of the materials school provided were used, [pupil](#) engagement, pupil motivation, how difficult pupils found home learning and the reasons why, in order to build a national picture of the impact of lockdown on school pupils' education.

Parents of pupils from less advantaged backgrounds—defined as those whose [children](#) were eligible for free school meals, were struggling financially, or who did not have a university-level education—were much more likely to report that aspects of their home environment, such as levels of noise, lack of space, insufficient technology, and, in some cases, even a lack of food, make learning from home more difficult:

- Among primary school pupils, pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) were more likely to struggle with their school work than those not eligible because of household noise and a lack of space, technology, internet, and even food.
- Among secondary pupils, 39% of FSM eligible students reported that a lack of technology such as laptops or PCs made learning from home more difficult, compared to only 19% of non-FSM children.
- Across the ages, parents of FSM-eligible children were much more likely to state lack of food as a factor that made it harder for them to complete their schoolwork. At secondary school, 10% of FSM-eligible children cited lack of food as a factor that made home learning difficult, compared with only 2% of non-FSM children.
- At the primary level, 19% of pupils from households that were struggling financially reported that a lack of food made it harder to complete homework, compared to just 3% of those whose families reported comfortable levels of income.
- FSM-eligible pupils were more likely to find tasks difficult and too numerous than non-eligible pupils. This difference was greatest in secondary schools, where 65% of FSM-eligible pupils

found their tasks difficult compared with 48% of their non-eligible peers.

Children eligible for free school meals also spent less time learning than their peers:

- 34% of primary school pupils who are eligible for free school meals spent one hour or less a day on home learning, compared to 25% of pupils not eligible.
- 23% of secondary school pupils who are eligible for FSM spent one hour or less a day on home learning, compared to just 14% of pupils not eligible.

The study found that boys are particularly likely to struggle with home learning at both primary and secondary level:

- Among primary school pupils, boys were 7% more likely than girls to be doing an hour or less a day of home learning (30% vs 23%), and 5% less likely to be doing three or more hours (23% vs. 28%).
- Among [secondary school](#) pupils, boys were 4% more likely to be doing only one hour or less a day (17% vs 13%), and 10% less likely to be doing three hours or more (42% vs 52%).
- Girls of all ages were more engaged and motivated than boys. This was most apparent in secondary schools where girls were more than twice as likely to be very engaged and very motivated in their home learning than boys.

The findings uncovered a chasm between home-learning provisions offered to privately and state-educated children. In the first lockdown independent schools were:

- more than twice as likely as state schools to offer online pupil-

teacher interactions and

- almost five times more likely to provide opportunities for online peer interaction

Research has shown that both of these things are essential for children's academic and socioemotional development.

Dr. Matthew Easterbrook, Senior Lecturer in the School of Psychology at the University of Sussex and the project's lead researcher, said:

"The results show that parents of pupils from disadvantaged families—those who are eligible for free school meals, who have lower levels of education, or who are financially struggling—are much more likely to report that learning from home is challenging.

"A number of different aspects of their home environment made learning more difficult for these pupils, including levels of noise, lack of space, insufficient technology and internet, and, in some cases, even a lack of food.

"On this last point, amongst parents of primary school pupils from families who were financially struggling, 19% reported that a lack of food made learning from home more difficult. This suggests that for some children, when the most basic of needs are not being met, their education can suffer.

"These results show that school closures disproportionately disrupt the education of those who are most economically disadvantaged, suggesting that educational inequalities are likely to rise because of the pandemic."

Lewis Doyle, doctoral researcher in the School of Psychology at the University of Sussex and co-author of the report, said:

"In line with our previous research, these results suggest that the school closures may adversely affect economically disadvantaged children to a greater extent than their more privileged peers, thus driving further distance between the two groups in terms of educational attainment and future life outcomes.

"School closures, while clearly necessary during this public health crisis, risk entrenching inequality."

The study is [published online](#). The survey ran from 5 May until 31 July 2020. These results are based on analyses of 5,528 responses collected between 5 May and 31 July. Of these, 2,075 responses were from teachers and 3,409 from parents of [school](#)-aged children in the UK. The results in this report are based on the responses of parents.

More information: Education in the time of Corona: Home Learning Study: www.inpsyed.net/

Provided by University of Sussex

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