

Some children starting school ‘unable to climb staircase’, finds England and Wales teacher survey, Sally Weale, *The Guardian*, January 30th, 2025

Some children are starting reception school “unable to climb a staircase”, while others use Americanisms in their speech because of too much screen time, according to a survey of teachers.

The pandemic has been blamed for a decline in school readiness among reception-aged children, but some teachers who took part in the annual poll said the “Covid baby” explanation was starting to feel like an excuse.

The survey of 1,000 primary teachers in England and Wales, carried out by the market research group Savanta on behalf of the early years charity Kindred2, found 49% of teachers thought the problem had got worse over the past year.

The government has made school readiness one of its core missions, with an ambition for 75% of children to reach a good level of development by the time they join reception – up from the current level of 68%.

The Kindred2 director, Felicity Gillespie, said the report’s findings suggested “too many parents are failing to support the development of their children, in spite of – we know – having their best interests at heart”.

As well as children arriving at school in nappies – one in four who began reception last September were not toilet trained – teachers reported children with poor basic motor skills and underdeveloped muscles, which they linked with excessive screen use.

“I’ve got two children [in my class] who physically cannot sit on the carpet. They don’t have core strength,” a reception teacher in the north-west told researchers.

A deputy head in the north-west reported an increase in “delayed walkers” with “clumsy movements, dropping things, unable to climb a staircase”, while a reception teacher said pupils were using Americanisms such as “trash” and “vacation” that they had picked up online.

Nearly two in five (39%) staff said “less time spent in early childhood education due to lockdown restrictions” was a key factor of school readiness, but one senior leader in the East Midlands said: “There’s only so long you can blame Covid for that. I’m sorry, but a lot of it comes down to parenting as well.”

Fewer than half (44%) of the 1,000 parents of reception-aged children who took part in a parallel survey said they thought children starting school should know how to use books correctly, turning the pages rather than swiping or tapping as if using an electronic device. Three in four (76%) identified toilet training as something a child should be able to do before reception.

While nine out of 10 parents considered their child ready for school, teachers said one in three children were not.

Parents and teachers agreed that lack of access to health visitors was having an impact. According to government guidelines, health visitors should visit five times during pregnancy and the early years, but 63% of parents said they had received up to two visits and a fifth (21%) reported no contact at all.

Meanwhile, more than four out of five (83%) teachers said they believe the cost of living crisis will continue to have a significant impact on school readiness this year.

“Parents are busy working and I don’t think they’re actually spending a lot of quality time with the children, having those basic play skills and conversations,” a reception teacher in the north-west said.

Tiffnie Harris, a primary specialist at the Association of School and College Leaders, said: “This study finds an alarming disconnect between some parents and schools about what school readiness actually means. What we suspect lies behind this finding is that many families are themselves struggling with a range of economic and social pressures and there is a dearth of support for them.”

The early education minister, Stephen Morgan, said: “Children arriving at school not ready for the classroom takes teachers’ focus away from doing what they do best, which is why we have already started work to extend early language support, deliver thousands of school-based nurseries, and strengthen and join up family services through continued investment in the family hubs and start for life programmes.”