



Back to School Survey 2026

- Difficulties & Concerns Returning & Starting

September 2026


Barnardos
Because childhood lasts a lifetime



Introduction

Every year, hundreds of thousands of children across the country either begin or return to school. For most it will be an exciting period getting ready to start something new or after months of summer holidays, looking forward to meeting friends again and getting back into a routine focused on learning and development.

However, starting and returning back to school can also be a source of anxiety and uncertainty for many children and their families. Below we outline some of the main issues that children and young people face, including struggling with big transitions, difficulties attending and school avoidance, and struggles to engage due to additional needs and insufficient supports.

Addressing these issues, through additional supports and rolling out existing best practice would make a considerable difference to the lives of thousands of individual children across the country and help combat educational disadvantage more widely.

Methodology

Each year, Barnardos undertakes an online survey of parents on their children returning to education in September. This year there was a specific focus on worries, concerns and difficulties parents and children face returning to and fully reengaging in school. A link to the survey is shared with the public and our supporters through various channels, primarily email and social media. This year the survey was live from the 7th to the 31st July inclusive. 704 responses were received, 455 primary school pupils and 249 secondary school students.

Barnardos work in and with schools

Barnardos provides a range of services within primary and secondary schools across the country, such as our Online Safety Programme, Wizards of Words reading programme, Roots of Empathy group programme. We also provide 1:1 and family supports to children, young people and their parents, where there are struggles with school anxiety and school avoidance.

We also take a significant proportion of our referrals directly from school, through teachers and principals. Additionally, we work with children who have been referred for issues not related to school, but discover over time that many struggle with either attending or engaging with school due to household adversities.



Through our early years services, we work closely with primary schools to support children and their parents during the transition to school, recognising that this is a significant and sometimes a challenging milestone for the whole family.

Concerns about going back

Parents completing the survey were asked if their child had any worries or concerns about going back to school. Almost two thirds (59%) of primary school parents said they did, 30% said they did in relation to friendships, 26% around struggles with class work, 12% worries about bullying and 18% difficulties with routines. For secondary school parents seven in ten (70%) said they did, while 31% identified friendships, 33% struggles with class work, 18% bullying and 25% difficulties with routines.

Our survey asked parents how much their children got out of school. Findings indicate that most parents believe their children get as much as they would like themselves from school educationally, socially and developmentally, all or most of the time. Parents report children being happy going back to school and continuing their development.

Do you get as much out of school as you would like (Primary)	All the time	Most of the time	Some of the time	Very rarely/never
Educationally	32%	48%	18%	2%
Socially	34%	38%	22%	5%
Developmentally	31%	47%	20%	3%

Do you get as much out of school as you would like (Secondary)	All the time	Most of the time	Some of the time	Very rarely/never
Educationally	16%	46%	34%	4%
Socially	26%	37%	27%	10%
Developmentally	18%	42%	35%	6%



However, the findings also highlight areas of concern. While the majority of primary school parents reported positive experiences across these areas, a notable minority said their child rarely or only some of the time get as much as they would like out of school socially and educationally. Concerns were more pronounced among parents of secondary school pupils. Over a third of secondary school parents felt their child got as much from school educationally (38%), socially (37%) and developmentally (41%) some of the time, rarely or never, highlighting the challenges some young people continue to face in fully engaging with school life.

Reducing the number of children who worry about the return to school requires schools to work closely with children and their parents, taking proactive steps to reduce barriers to participation wherever possible. Alongside support from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPs), Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), and other statutory organisations, it also involves engaging with community organisations that can provide additional support when needed.

Lost school days

School avoidance

"In an ideal world, a trusted person to meet her at the school gates and help her start her day every day would be truly wonderful so that she builds a feeling of safety in her body. An authentic acknowledgement of the fact that the child wants to be in school, and that not attending isn't a failing on anyone's part."

Over the past few years across our services, we have seen a significant increase in the number of children we support having problems around school anxiety and school avoidance. Staff have reported an increase in anxiety and mental health issues generally for children and young people.

Although almost half (48%) of primary school parents who completed the survey said their child never refused to go to school, more than one in five (22%) said their children engaged in school avoidance more than once a month. 39% of secondary school parents said their child never refused to go to school, with one third (33%) replying at least once a month. A substantial proportion of primary and secondary school students are frequently engaging in school refusal. Research



demonstrates the negative impact that this can have on a young person's education and development¹.

Frequency of school avoidance	Primary school	Secondary school
Never	48%	39%
Very rarely	30%	28%
Occasionally (once a month)	9%	18%
Frequently (once a week)	10%	11%
All the time	3%	4%

Over half of primary (52%) and 42% of secondary school parents said the main reason for refusal was anxiety (52%). 28% of primary and 37% of secondary school parents said that school refusal got worse over the past year.

Main reason for refusal	Primary school	Secondary school
Anxiety	52%	42%
Struggles to engage	12%	7%
Difficulties with peers	11%	9%
Struggles with routines	17%	9%
Difficulties with bullying	9%	5%

Parents responding to the survey suggested additional supports and guidance for parents around the issue of school avoidance alongside child centred and individualised approaches within schools to help tackle the issue. Some parents reflected that their child faced too much pressure while others suggested more space for children to regulate themselves before going into classrooms.

"Just the fact of school refusal yet again and the lack of help around same, I would gladly welcome TUSLA to help me regarding same and get my little man back on track"

"I need more at home guidance on what to do with our child if he refuses to school."

¹ [School absence leads to lower educational qualifications and poorer wellbeing in early adulthood | ESRI](#)



"Maybe a transitional space where I could wait with my child while they regulate enough in order to go to class." (Primary School Parent)

Parents suggested that there should be good communication between schools and parents around school refusal, keeping each other informed, and working together to try and address the issue.

"Having a chat with the principal on what is happening and for the school to keep me informed."

"Easier channels and more frequent communication by class tutor and year head with student and parents. I didn't feel like anyone was looking out for her or that I had an easy route to communicate with her teachers/tutor/year head/coaches."

It's important to note that quite a few parents felt that children can just get overwhelmed at times and need a day off to recharge.

"Sometimes it all just became overwhelming for my little person. That is ok. He is autistic and manages so well most of the time. Sometimes we just needed to be kind to him and us and recharge."

"Just happened once or twice, feeling overwhelmed and tired. It's so much to take in and the complexity of managing relationships and worried if they'll be told off by teacher for something and just the difficulty of learning all the rules and social structure of school life."

Parents discussed best practice they have witnessed in some schools around school refusal, for example the introduction of wellbeing supports and the significant difference it has made.

"She wakes up most days saying she doesn't want to go but does in the end so hasn't missed much school, the school is great and offered wellbeing classes which she greatly benefited from but I feel this should be standard across all schools."

"We have a principal that is at the door every morning to support any parents with children who are struggling to go in."

"The school are amazing and child would receive one to one care on entry to soothe."



Absenteeism

There has been a significant increase in the amount of overall school absenteeism in Ireland over the last number of years². Almost half (46%) of primary and secondary school parents who completed the survey said their children missed school for non-health/medical reasons last year once or twice. One quarter of parents (24% of primary and 26% of secondary) said never with 10% of primary and 13% of secondary school parents saying more than five times.

Level of absence	Primary school	Secondary school
Never	24%	26%
Once or twice	46%	46%
Three to five times	12%	16%
More than five times	10%	13%

59% of primary school and 46% of secondary school parent said the reason for doing so was holidays. 45% of primary and 34% of secondary school parents said they plan to take their children out of school for a day or more this year for non-medical/health reasons.

Reason for non-health/medical absence	Primary school	Secondary school
Holiday	59%	46%
Family occasion	33%	38%
Sporting/cultural event	6%	11%
Adversities within the home	10%	9%

While just 10% of parents attributed absences to challenges within the home, these children were disproportionately likely to have more than five absences per year. These adversities can include poor parental mental health, substance misuse

² [School absence has grown since the pandemic and shows little sign of improvement | ESRI](#)



difficulties, or living in emergency accommodation, which can make it very difficult for children to attend on days when parents are struggling themselves. They can also lead to greater anxiety for children, difficulties with routines, and emotional dysregulation, all of which make school attendance more difficult.

- *Conclusion*

School is a hugely protective factor for many children, especially for those experiencing disadvantage and adversity. Increased non-attendance presents immediate risks in terms of wellbeing and educational attainment as well as reducing future opportunities. It is concerning that school avoidance and absenteeism is higher among children experiencing disadvantage, leading to further disadvantage and inequality.

Targeted supports at disadvantaged children and parents have been proven to increase school attendance and reduces school avoidance.

Programmes such as those provided through Tusla Education Support Services and introduced under DEIS Plus are very welcome. Programmes such as Anseo and others have done a lot of work to set out best practice around school avoidance and absences, providing suggestions and measures that schools and parents can work together on to try and address the problem.

However, these need to be combined with increased investment in community-based services, that can work in collaboration with schools to further address the underlying issues that lead to school anxiety and school refusal, such as Barnardos. Our staff work with families to reduce the harm and trauma children experience due to these adversities, helping parents with routines and to cope with children's anxieties, reducing school absences.

Additional needs

Parents are often concerned about the ability of their children to begin or return to school due to their educational needs and a lack of adequate supports to help them fully engage. 40% of all parents completing the survey said their child had some form of special educational need.

One fifth (20%) of primary and 14% of secondary said their child was waiting for an assessment for an issue that affects their ability to engage in school. For those waiting for an assessment 44% of primary and 59% of secondary said they had been waiting for more than one year.

	Primary school	Secondary school
Educational Need	39%	40%



Child waiting for an assessment for an issue that affects their ability to engage in school	20%	14%
Already assessed	24%	29%
Waiting less than six months for assessment	29%	29%
Waiting six months to one year for assessment	27%	12%
Waiting more than one year for an assessment	44%	59%
Unable to afford a private assessment and support.	71%	74%

Nearly half (48%) of primary and 53% of secondary school parents with children who had been assessed said they had been waiting for more than a year for actual support. 71% of primary and 74% of secondary school parents with a child with an educational need said they were not in a position to pay for a private assessment and support.

We work with a substantial proportion of children with additional needs who are struggling to access assessments and then indeed support itself for issues that prevent their engagement in school. We witness the impact this has directly on children and their immediate and future development as well as on their wider family, including both parents and siblings. The longer they wait the greater the likelihood that they will struggle to reach their educational potential.

Children living in households who can't afford private assessments and support will generally have to wait longer and are at greater risk of struggling to engage in and attend school. The process of accessing assessments and support publicly can be difficult and require substantial navigational and advocacy skills. This is difficult for children with parents dealing with certain adversities, that can make advocating for their children more difficult at times, such as those with substance misuse issues or struggling with mental health difficulties.

More than half of primary (56%) and almost two thirds of secondary (63%) school parents with children who have special educational needs, said their child only had some or none of the supports they need to engage fully in school. It is a concern that children in disadvantaged household are disproportionately likely to fall into this group.



Level of support they need	Primary school	Secondary school
All	22%	21%
Most	21%	17%
Some	47%	55%
None	9%	8%

Transitioning to school

Transitioning to School

From experience, we know that life transitions for children and young people can be difficult and lead to some concerns and apprehension. This is particularly true for children beginning primary school or moving to secondary school.

- **Primary school**

From our own experience across our early years services, struggles transitioning into primary school can be normal. However, it is important parents prepare children as much as possible for the transition and schools have in place measures to support them, in order to minimise the impact those struggles can have on school engagement and attendance in the longer term.

Staff have reported increasing levels of dysregulation among many young children they support who have just started school, an inability to sit still at desks for more than a few minutes and keep focused on class work. These children are more likely to be dealing with trauma and adversities within their homes. It can take longer for these children to adapt to school and keep engaged with learning and classwork and therefore become at heightened risk of educational disadvantage.

More than four in five (82%) primary school parents said they thought their child was sufficiently prepared when transitioning into primary school, 18% said they weren't. Parents believe there is a need for a longer easing in period, more induction days and meet-ups before primary school started. Some parents also felt that more information and guidance could be provided directly to parents.

"More open days, more time in the school or meeting their teacher. Only one visit for half an hour isn't sufficient. Need to familiarise themselves with environment."

"Either prepared them more or us as parents for the amount of intensive learning taking place in Junior Infants. From phonics, numeracy, vocabulary etc; it was overwhelming."



"More information of what they should expect when they start school and what we can expect from the teacher and from the school, how much contact is normal who they should tell when they are feeling a certain way or have certain needs."

There were numerous parents with children with additional needs who felt more should have been done in terms of handover between the early years centre and school. Some parents felt as though the school wanted the child to adapt to it rather than the other way around.

"More communication between playschool and primary school. Handovers for children awaiting assessment or who have a diagnosis should be compulsory."

"The school should have been proactive in understanding my child's needs, should have identified gaps in terms of handing over to new teacher, identified where external supports might be required. However the school is more interested in children being the ones to adapt."

- Secondary school

Just over two thirds (69%) of secondary school parents felt their children were sufficiently prepared when they transitioned to secondary school. Many parents agreed with the views of primary school parents, that there should have been better inductions and more visits to the schools and with teachers in advance. Several parents felt that expectations for children were too high, and there should be greater appreciation that some children would need more time to adapt to the bigger environment and increased workload.

"Whilst in 6th class, students should be allowed or invited to secondary schools in their area. See the facilities, what subjects are on offer."

"I don't think she was prepared for the drastic change in responsibility, size of the premises."

"Big jump in requirements to write essays etc which primary did not prepare for or the extent of reading required."

Parents discussed the social transition being hard for children, making new friends whilst others focused more on the practical differences of now having timetables and lockers, with little done in advance to prepare them for that.

"My daughter felt alone, she had one friend but they got separated into different classes. Every morning she would shake from being nervous just before she had to walk out the front door. There needs to be at least a dedicated team of people



who can help children settle in, to feel relaxed in school and to help anxious kids to blend in and feel welcomed."

"My child suffered from anxiety after a few months of being in a first year. Not only the school being so big, new timetables and so many subjects, using lockets etc. it's just over whelming."

Conclusion and Recommendations

For the majority of children and families, beginning or returning to school is a happy and exciting time. However, for many there are concerns about the ability to engage and attend to their full potential and as a result there is greater apprehension as the summer comes to an end.

Barnardos witnesses the impact that school avoidance, difficulties transitioning, and not having adequate supports in school, has directly on children, their ability to engage in school and in their wider development and wellbeing, as well as on their wider family. It is a concern that vulnerable children, and those living in disadvantage communities, are more likely to experience the issues outlined above.

Targeted supports at disadvantaged children and parents have been proven to increase school attendance. However, these measures need to be accompanied by increased investment in community-based services, such as Barnardos, that can work collaboratively with schools to address the underlying issues contributing to school anxiety and school refusal.

Addressing these issues, through additional supports and rolling out existing best practice, would make a considerable difference to the lives of thousands of individual children across the country and help combat educational disadvantage more widely. Below we set out recommendations for parents, schools and the government to help address concerns and make sure as many children across the country can attend and engage fully in education for the coming school year.

- Increase access to educational needs assessments.
- Increase funding for community-based organisations to support children and their parents with practical and tailored support, to enable children experiencing disadvantage attend and engage in school – supports which can address cost, routines, child anxiety, friendships, preparation for school, and relationships with schools.



- Continue to promote further sharing and implementation of best practice between schools on school avoidance and the national roll out of Anseo, an actionable tool kit for school attendance.
- Encourage promotion of child-led measures in relation to transition difficulties.

About Barnardos

As Ireland's leading children's charity, helping vulnerable children since the 1960's, Barnardos works with vulnerable children and families to provide practical, social and emotional support.

Barnardos supports children and families all across Ireland who have been affected by traumatic life events such as abuse, parental mental health, neglect, separation, bereavement and addiction.

Our core purpose remains the same; 'to help the most vulnerable children in society achieve their full potential – regardless of their family circumstances, their gender, race or disability' – **Because Childhood Lasts a Lifetime.**

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