



Covid learning loss: How to help children who've fallen behind

Studies show some students are months behind the level they should be at due to missed school days, but there's plenty you can do to help them catch up, writes **Tanya Sweeney**

January is proving to be a difficult month in Irish schools. As classrooms reopened after Christmas, principals reported record low student attendances, as well as significant staff shortages on the first day back after the break.

Reports from Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI) members indicated that up to 30pc of staff were absent due to Covid, while the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) estimated that schools were down 20 to 25pc of staff.

Yet even before the Omicron variant arrived, the past two years have been very difficult for pupils and parents alike. With schools closed for lengthy lockdown periods, many parents are now starting to wonder about the cumulative effect of all those missing school days. How much learning have their children missed out on? And will they ever catch up?

There is little data available on Covid-related learning loss in Irish schools, but international studies paint a bleak picture. According to a study conducted by US non-profit Empower K12, students in the Washington DC area were four months behind where children their age are during a typical academic year in maths, and a month behind in reading skills. Some 55pc of at-risk students in the area were more than two years behind in math skills.

A study by Oxford's Leverhulme Centre for Demographic Science researched schools in the Netherlands, where schools were closed for eight weeks in lockdown. The study shows that, despite high-quality remote provision, primary age students lost a fifth of the progress they would usually make in a year. Even with learning from home in place, the study notes that students made 'little or no' progress.

It is no wonder, then, that parents are alarmed. Dublin-based ECCE teacher Monica Walsh says that her son Dylan (12), who is in 6th class, has missed 33 days of school in this academic year. She worries that Dylan will fall behind academically. "They do lots of revisions and [there's] only six months to get him ready for the new adventure of secondary school," Monica admits. "I see that it takes time for him to feel comfortable in school again — it's not an easy adjustment for a child. Of course I worry — every parent wants the best start for their child," she adds.

Sligo-based mum of two Fiona Casey says her son Christopher (7) hasn't had a full year since he started school. He has missed five weeks of this academic year, occasionally as the close contact of a positive Covid case. "He's a bright child, but I can't help but feel that certain parts of his development are lacking. He hasn't had that much interaction with his friends, and I find he is very clingy with me," she notes. "A change in teachers has also caused upset for Christopher. I always wonder how this will all affect him, but the way I see it their future isn't very promising."

How worried should parents be about their children falling 'behind'?

According to Dr Anne Looney, Executive Dean of Education at Institute of Education, DCU, learning loss has been around since before Covid. "Originally, 'learning loss' was used to describe what happens in summer holidays, when children come back in September," she explains. "Even if a child is getting their tonsils out and they've been out of school, they're nervous and worried about getting back with friends and reconnecting those relationships."

Falling behind academically is a legitimate concern, she adds, but you can often add to children's anxieties by focusing on it.

Yet in a two-year stretch where children have endured more than simply absences from school, Aileen Hickie, CEO of Parentline, offers a note of caution: "Don't think that [school] is going to be the same as it was two or three years ago," she says. "Any stress isn't helpful. It's almost back to the toilet training — they won't be walking down the aisle with a nappy on them. They will catch up. Instead, focus on offering praise for whatever efforts they are making."

Can tutoring help to fill in any academic gaps?

Sharon Bolger is director of School Is Easy Dublin/North Wicklow, a service originally founded in Canada, which provides additional online tuition to primary school children. She recommends tutoring to "boost confidence and fill in knowledge gaps".

"If any parent feels this is impacting their child's school-going experience and crucial early learning years, then I would absolutely say to help them catch up outside of school,"

she says. "When it comes to primary learning the Department of Education recommends that parents seek advice from their schools and class teachers first and foremost as they are best placed to advise on resources based on the particular learning needs of the children," Bolger adds.

Yet Paul Downes, professor of psychology education at the DCU Institute of Education, offers a caveat to parents of primary school children. "There may be an issue with a child and a particular subject, but you'd be talking about a light touch, as opposed to hothousing them," he says. "The primary school day is already quite long and given the limited amount of concentration a child has, [tutoring] can be counterproductive."

What online resources or at-home apps can parents use if they want to enhance their child's learning experience during spells of being absent from school?

For children aged 9+, Creative Bursts (*moli.ie*) offers creative challenges and writing games. Cúla4 offers a slice of Irish-language programme especially for children on TG4, and their free app is designed to help deepen learning of the Irish language. Epic! is suitable for kids from pre-school up, and caters for all reading abilities and allows children to access a digital library, and by extension any book that they like. Parents worried about reading age can also download Reading Eggs, which offers pre-school and primary school children structured reading activities. Kahoot! has many features used in many an Irish

classroom already, and offers a fun interactive quiz for kids aged five and over. The SeeSaw app is also being used across Irish classrooms.

What other offline free facilities or resources are available?

Libraries Ireland offers a service to primary school pupils that includes reading and curriculum support materials and online learning resources (see *LibrariesIreland.ie*). Schools themselves can also offer additional supports if they feel they are appropriate for a particular child. "Teachers know where a certain child is at and what needs to be done and can offer small achievable targets and to prioritise areas where they think they've fallen behind," says Hickie.

How else can parents focus on the overall learning development of their children right now?

"From a concentration perspective, getting kids to read books they enjoy is great for language and literacy, but also for their concentration," Downes observes. "I'd focus on building on their interests and getting their confidence flowing with the certain things they enjoy."

"The big thing is that you don't want them to lose a child's love of learning."

As an ECCE teacher, Monica notes the importance of keeping children active: "Bring them for walks or to the playground," she says. "There are YouTube channels with exercises and yoga. Puzzles, board games and reading stories will benefit them in the future."

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Stress: Focussing too much on how far kids may have fallen behind can add to their anxiety. PICTURE POSED

