

Lack of education for children with intellectual disabilities made worse in the Coronavirus emergency

Briefing by Inclusion Europe
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The consequences of the Covid-19 shutdown of schools and other social distancing measures constitute a **major problem for students with intellectual disabilities, their families and teachers**. Across Europe people are responding and finding new ways to enable students to continue their learning and development. We appreciate everyone who is doing their best in these circumstances.

However, the **current situation amplifies the ongoing segregation and discrimination** that people with intellectual disabilities face. Most young people with intellectual disabilities are not able to continue their learning and development during the coronavirus lockdown.

Now more than ever, **schools and responsible authorities must work to make sure that discrimination and exclusion of students with intellectual disabilities does not** reach a point of complete despair or non-return. They need **to raise their game** to address these challenges and ensure that young people with intellectual disabilities are not further disadvantaged.


This **brief is to remind authorities of their responsibility to provide education to learners with disabilities during the Coronavirus emergency covers:**

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1. Situation analysis: how children and students with intellectual disabilities are being further excluded from education by the Coronavirus measures;
2. Potential solutions and suggestions that could improve the lives of learners with intellectual disabilities and their families;
3. Issue and error awareness: the things to watch out for and mistakes to avoid when schools start again;
4. Resources on education from other organisations on inclusive education in times of coronavirus and a survey for completion by parents, teachers and children with intellectual disabilities.

1. Problems learners with intellectual disabilities face

Home-schooling can be particularly difficult. This applies to all students, with or without disabilities.

But because of the prevailing discrimination, some of the following aspects are more problematic for students with intellectual disabilities:

- **No education offered to children with severe intellectual disabilities and complex support needs.** Children with complex support needs were already segregated or not accepted in any school prior to the Corona crisis. They may have been authorised to go to day-care centres, but these are now also closed. We find that this category of children is completely left out of all the innovative online educational offerings.
- **Inaccessible technology:** no access to internet, no laptops available, bad connection, rigid communication methods that are difficult to use for learners with intellectual disabilities so leading to misunderstandings.

Information technology¹ is a double-edged sword as many will not be able to use it; many students with intellectual disabilities have not been exposed to this technology, as schools haven't previously considered it relevant.

Plus, online teaching may be tiring for children and students with disabilities, especially those who have attention deficit.

- **Environment:** for some children and learners with disabilities, it is hard to understand that now, when they are at home, they are actually "at school". Difficulties achieving this change of attitude and mindset for children with intellectual disabilities might constitute a blockage... With consequences on their ability to understand that they have to work as seriously as in school, that online schooling is not just end of day homework and that the assignments they hand in will have an impact on their grades, and ultimately their chance to go to the next level.

Plus, in many countries, **autonomy is a skill rarely developed at school**, especially for younger children... It is therefore difficult to conceive of children with disabilities being able to educate themselves on their own.

This **drastic change in their routine** is stressful, as previously they found comfort in the routine of planned activities on which they can no longer rely on.

- **No support dedicated to learners:** learners with intellectual disabilities who normally have someone to support them in classes are now left alone as support persons are not deemed to be "essential" workers.

Therefore, **parents or relatives are left without any help** to support their children with disabilities during this period. They

¹ The United Nation's Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD) however requires that States ensure not only that it is available but also accessible for all users with disabilities, Article 9(2)(g) CRPD.

have to manage this transition of routines, fill the gaps in education and simultaneously manage their child's anxiety.

Plus, parents are not teachers. Many parents may lack the taught knowledge themselves, have other school aged children to support and additionally have to work for their own job at home or at their workplace.

- The **positive learning stimulus of socialising with classmates is absent**. Students with learning disabilities profit by being in a group of fellow students, following routines, socialising and chatting. No online lesson can replace this positive effect of being in a classroom in school.
- School closures could have **dramatic consequences on the development** of children with intellectual disabilities. Professionals warn against potential regressions for children who stop learning², the **setbacks** for children with intellectual disabilities are inevitable with all these upheavals

2. Some solutions being used

Teachers have had to adapt their teaching methods at short notice and children with disabilities were often an afterthought.

The result is that children with intellectual disabilities are mostly left out of distance teaching, when available.

In some schools, regions or countries several solutions have been put in place. This is an overview of the lessons learned from these examples:

- **Teachers and learning support staff should have close contact** with children/ students with intellectual disabilities and

² No more pencils, no more books - Closing schools for covid-19 does lifelong harm and widens inequality, The Economist, 30/04/2020, <https://www.economist.com/international/2020/04/30/closing-schools-for-covid-19-does-lifelong-harm-and-widens-inequality>

their families to ensure that they continue to receive the same quality education as before and prevent school dropout;

- Organise **support from other classmates** to encourage social connections and to help alleviate the time demands on potentially overloaded parents;
- **Schools temporarily opened only for children with disabilities and “pooling” support services** in order to have at least one support person per school where children with disabilities are going, to provide education during the emergency;
- Finding **safe ways and environments to meet** with learning support persons;
- Remote services and information technology **accessible** to people with intellectual disabilities – Easy to understand explanation of the programs and easy to use software;
- Free Internet connection and/or software licenses;
- **Collaboration with organisations of persons with disabilities** to organise the online education platforms;

3. Issue and mistakes to avoid when schools re-start

It is **not acceptable that classes and schools for children with disabilities remain closed while “mainstream” schools are re-opening** - some countries are not opening them at all until next school year. This leaves children without the education they have every right to receive, and families straining to cope.

When the lock-down is lifted and schools can have pupils back, which may happen by phases and by tranches in many countries, **it should be a priority to get children with intellectual disabilities back first.**

It is safe to assume online learning will continue to play a more significant part in how education is delivered after the crisis.

Schools and responsible authorities need to ensure online teaching is provided in an **accessible way, inclusive of persons with intellectual disabilities.**

The return to school **might be different for children or students with intellectual disabilities and other underlying health conditions.** Educational institutions must ensure that education remains possible and durable for those learners, so that they won't miss any information out or end up being excluded from the class.

An **adequate transition for each student with intellectual disabilities** should be put in place by the schools. This should be planned **prior** to their return to school with the involvement of the parents, class teacher, support persons and educational psychologists. It might even be considered that education psychologist could start working with children and students with intellectual disabilities during this covid-19 home schooling period, as this would facilitate transition.

It may also be important that children with intellectual disabilities **retain the same learning support person** as before the lock-down to avoid one more change in their routine.

Where will the children with intellectual disabilities be in their education when schools gradually re-open?

Some might have received distant education, while most others were excluded. This affects their education and inclusion and necessitates instant and effective remedies.

As it has been shown that long period out of school can cause permanent damage, especially to younger children, **schools should re-open as soon as possible** and any **prolonged options for online learning will not suit** children with intellectual disabilities.

As for the **long-term process of getting back to school**, those responsible must be innovative and make sure that things do not simply go back to the way they were, when many learners with intellectual disabilities were segregated or not provided with any education at all.

Whatever forms education will now take, all children must be educated together.

4. Resources

IMPORTANT – for parents, teachers and children with disabilities to complete!

Please feel free to complete this [survey](#) developed to understand if learners with disabilities and their families have access to the support they need to continue learning while schools are closed due to COVID-19 by the World Bank's [Disability Inclusive Development](#) team, and more specifically the [Inclusive Education Initiative's](#) Disability-Inclusive Education Community of Practice. ([LinkedIn page](#))

- **For teachers, schools and competent authorities**
 - Webinar recording and Presentation of the Inter-agency Network for Education (INEE) "[Ensuring Inclusive Education during Covid-19.](#)"
 - [Delivering distance learning in Emergencies](#), produced by USAID's Data and Evidence in Education Programs (DEEP)
 - The **International Institute of Online Education** (IIOE) is providing online professional [capacity building guidance](#) concerning information technology in higher

- education, originally destined to support developing countries. The training materials are accessible on the [IIOE Library](#).
- The **English government** has provided material, apps and games for children with specific educational needs and disabilities [here](#). Some of the apps are free during this period of lockdown.
 - **British Council's [response](#)** to Coronavirus.
- **Research and Training Centre for Rural Education (INRULED)** in Beijing, the **Smart Learning Institute of Beijing Normal University**, and UNESCO's Institute for Information Technology in Education (**IITE**) have released a [Handbook](#) on facilitating flexible learning during educational disruption – the Chinese experience in maintaining uninterrupted learning in covid-19 outbreak and [Guidance](#) on active learning at home during the COVID-19 outbreak.
- **Policy on inclusive education from disability organisations and children organisations**
- The **International Disability and Development Consortium** (IDDC)'s Inclusive Education Task Group [response](#) to Covid 19.
 - Inclusion Europe's [Exploratory study on the inclusion of pupils with complex support needs in mainstream schools](#) and its report on the [Empowerment of people with complex support needs](#). **Inclusion International** is collecting the [work](#) of its members on Coronavirus. For example, in Argentina, Pilar Cobeñas published a [video](#) in Spanish on inclusive education.
 - On the [Right to education during Covid 19](#) by Plena Inclusion, in Spanish.
 - **Learning Must Go On: [Recommendations](#) for keeping children safe and learning, during and after the COVID-19 crisis**, Inter-agency recommendation (Save the Children, INEE, UNICEF, Humanity & Inclusion, Finn Church Aid, Plan International).

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- [Education sector guiding note on COVID-19](#), Humanity & Inclusion