



Disruption to learning from COVID-19 could take a year to reverse for autistic children

- Over three in four (77%) autistic children have missed out on learning opportunities due to the pandemic
- 70% of all parents have seen increased anxiety levels from their autistic child when learning, as the lack of routine takes its toll
- During World Autism Awareness Week, MORE THAN and Dogs for Good have come together to help more families with autistic children by highlighting the positive impact a dog can have on mental wellbeing and learning development

Monday 29th March 2021: The lack of routine and school closures over continued periods of lockdown is having a sizeable impact on families across the UK, with 60% of all parents surveyed concerned that their child is suffering from a setback in their learning. The impact is more pronounced amongst parents of autistic children, with 70% of respondents saying they also noticed a setback. One in four (24%) parents with autistic children who have expressed concerns of a setback say they think it will take over a year for their child to make up for lost time.

The new survey from UK charity Dogs for Good, and pet insurer, MORE THAN, found that the past year has been particularly disruptive for autistic children's learning development and mental wellbeing. Almost three quarters (71%) of parents with an autistic child feel their child has lost confidence due to lockdown, while 70% say their child has been affected by the lack of routine. By comparison, 58% of all parents surveyed are experiencing similar feelings amongst their children.

In addition to a decline in mental wellbeing and confidence levels, nearly two in three (64%) parents with an autistic child have noticed their child's reading skills stagnate over lockdown, compared to 41% of all parents. Over six in ten (62%) parents with an autistic child have also noticed their child being increasingly stressed and anxious while reading, compared to just 40% of all parents.

This World Autism Awareness Week, MORE THAN and Dogs for Good have come together to help more families with autistic children overcome challenges posed by the pandemic and highlight the positive impact having a pet dog can have on mental health and learning development.

For over thirty years, Dogs for Good has been using its knowledge and experience to bring disabled people and dogs together, enabling life-changing differences. The charity provides three services to autistic children and adults – two specifically aimed at families of autistic children.

Peter Gorbing, CEO of Dogs for Good, said: *“Covid-19 has presented difficulties for everyone, and the closure of schools has undoubtedly hindered the learning and development of many children. Children on the autistic spectrum face challenges every day and the pandemic has amplified this. The work that we do to support these families is now more relevant than ever before.”*

“Our expertly trained assistance dogs help autistic children be more independent and establish positive daily living routines. Our partnership with MORE THAN enables us to expand the ways in which we can support people who may be struggling, particularly those on the autism spectrum. It's our goal to help more families through the specific autism services we provide.”

Developing a strong relationship with a dog can improve people's mental wellbeing in a variety of ways. The survey highlights how parents of autistic children notice how their child is more relaxed (73%), happier (74%) and more physically active (78%) when spending time with a dog. As we continue to navigate our way through the pandemic, parents who have an autistic child are looking for ways to build up their confidence and ease them into the next phase.



Kay Martin, Managing Director at MORE THAN, said: *“Lockdown has been a struggle for everyone, but it’s particularly concerning to see the impact it has had on the mental wellbeing and development of autistic children. Working with Dogs for Good, we have seen that dogs can really benefit children – providing companionship and reducing stress. Better harnessing our relationship with dogs could help to relieve some of the impacts lockdown has had, so we wanted to partner with Dogs for Good to support the great work they do in helping families with autistic children, while highlighting the benefits dogs can bring to our lives.”*

Dogs for Good’s Family Dog service helps families build a bond with a pet dog to establish good routines around bedtime, encourage regular exercise, and help reduce anxiety and encourage confidence around social interactions, all of which aid positive mental wellbeing and concentration. This innovative service has already benefitted over 1,400 families across the country.

Additionally, with the charity’s Assistance Dog service, dogs are expertly trained to help autistic children in many life-changing ways. Autism assistance dogs have public access rights and are able to support a child to enable them to feel more confident in busy and of overwhelming environments, enabling the whole family to enjoy much greater freedom.

As part of the partnership, MORE THAN has committed to sponsoring five new assistance dogs who will be trained to help more families.

ENDS

NOTES TO EDITORS

March 2021 research: All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from Opinium. Total sample size was 2,000 parents, of which 148 are parents with autistic children. Fieldwork was undertaken between 11th - 15th March 2021. The figures are weighted to nationally representative criteria.

For more information or interview requests, please contact the team on MoreThanPR@grayling.com

About MORE THAN

MORE THAN is the direct financial services brand of RSA. Established in 2001, the company offers car, home, pet, business, and travel insurance.

About Dogs for Good

Dogs for Good is a UK-based charity training dogs to help adults and children with physical disabilities and learning disabilities, children with autism and adults with dementia.