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## Early Years Education Facing Crisis as Attainment Gap Widens, Report Finds

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The education gap among the U.K.'s youngest learners has reached a worrying new high, with children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special needs falling even further behind their peers, according to a new national report.

The latest annual study by the Education Policy Institute (EPI) reveals that early years education is now at a critical point, with growing concern over the long-term effects of the pandemic on children's development and learning. The attainment gap for pupils with

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) has widened to a record 19.9 months by the end of the Reception year, marking the largest disparity ever recorded by the think tank.

Particularly hard-hit are children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), who are significantly trailing behind their classmates. The report also shows that five-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds are now up to one month further behind more affluent children compared to 2019 levels, highlighting the lasting impact of pandemic-era disruptions.

Among the most troubling findings is a drop in education and training engagement among teenagers. More than 20 per cent of 16-year-olds are currently not in education or training, a stark contrast to pre-pandemic levels. The data paints a concerning picture for the future prospects of young people facing barriers.

## Service Cuts

Kali Jauncey-Childs, early years lead for Oasis Community Learning and assistant principal at Oasis Academy Warndon in Worcester, says the decline in joined-up services has made early intervention far more difficult. “We used to have Sure Start centres which brought together speech therapists, health visitors, and early education professionals. Now those services are gone, and the result is we’re missing the opportunity to support children when they need it most,” she told *Sky News*.

Zoe Jackson, assistant headteacher at Woodside Primary School in south London, shared her concerns over the changing needs of pupils entering the classroom. “More children are arriving in our nursery and Reception classes with speech and language delays, difficulties in emotional regulation, and complex emerging needs. We’re doing all we can to support them, but it’s becoming a huge challenge without proper funding and staff training.”

The report also flags a marked decline in attainment among White British pupils since 2019, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. These students are now among the lowest-performing groups, highlighting that the attainment gap is widening across the board.

Natalie Perera, chief executive of the EPI, has called for urgent action. “Our youngest and most vulnerable learners are still paying the price. Without swift intervention, we risk embedding lifelong disadvantage into the system,” she shared with *Sky News*.

The EPI is urging the government to act. Recommendations include scrapping the two-child benefit cap, extending free school meals to include pre-schoolers, and ensuring all teachers are trained in child development and early SEND identification. The report also pushes for increased funding for persistently disadvantaged pupils throughout the education system.

As pressures mount on schools and families alike, the need for targeted, practical support has never been clearer. The warning is plain: without bold steps, the education gap will continue to grow, putting thousands of children at risk of being left behind.