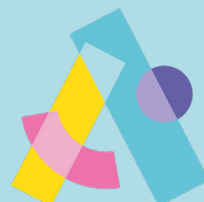


# School attendance and mental wellbeing

For school leaders, senior  
mental health leads and  
classroom teachers



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building the mental  
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# School attendance and mental wellbeing

Reduced or non-attendance at school by a child or young person is often rooted in emotional, mental health or wellbeing issues.

Non-attendance can include not attending entirely for prolonged periods or regularly missing whole days at school. It can also include:

- not going to their classroom
- not staying in class
- not attending some lessons
- avoiding some physical spaces or people.

Children and young people may face several barriers to attending school. When discussing non-attendance in this guidance, we are referring to non-attendance that is rooted in mental wellbeing difficulties. Other terms sometimes used include 'emotionally based school avoidance' (EBSA) or 'emotionally based school non-attendance'.

[Research from the Children's Commissioner](#) found that in the 2022/23 academic year, 22.3% of all pupils were persistently absent from school. In 2018/19, that figure was 10.9%, meaning that rates of persistent absence have more than doubled in this period.

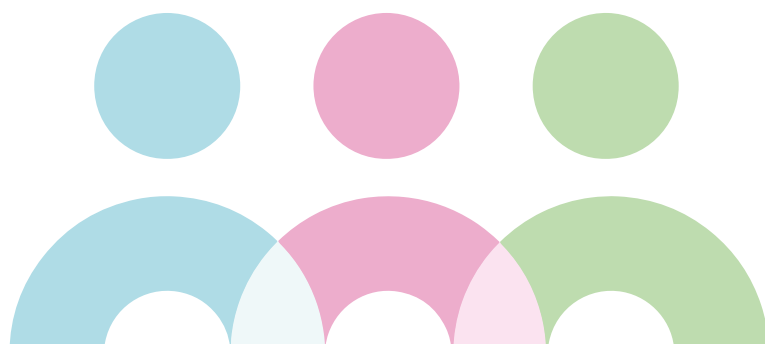
## What causes non-attendance?

There is no one reason why children and young people might have difficulties attending school. It varies by individual, and is usually caused by a combination of various factors and their interaction, rather than a single cause. Potential risk factors for non-attendance can be split into three main categories: aspects specific to the child or young person, factors to do with the family and home, and issues to do with school.



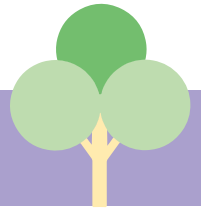
## Some examples of non-attendance risk factors could include:

| Child/young person   | Family/home  | School   |
|--|--|--|
| Anxiety, depression or other mental health concerns                      | High levels of family stress (including financial stress, conflict or domestic violence) | Bullying and microaggressions                                  |
| Difficulties with managing and regulating emotions                       | Changes to the home environment (including divorce, separation or parent/carer illness)  | Difficult relationships with staff members                     |
| Trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)                          | Being a young carer  | Lack of provision to meet specific learning or wellbeing needs |
| Difficulties making and maintaining friendships, being socially isolated | Loss and bereavement   | Difficulties in particular subjects or physical spaces         |
| Separation anxiety or attachment issues with a parent/carer              | Family history of difficulties at school   | Demanding, pressurised academic environment                    |
| Having a special educational need or disability, or being neurodivergent | Poor parental mental health  | Transitions: from primary to secondary, or through key stages  |



# What can school staff do?

Although non-attendance is a complex issue, positive outcomes are very achievable. There are some strategies outlined here, split into universal approaches and more targeted strategies.



## Universal

### Take a whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing

Taking a whole-school approach to mental health has benefits for pupils, staff and families. It means involving all aspects of the school community in promoting and supporting wellbeing. By developing a culture which prioritises wellbeing and is supportive and safe, school staff can reduce the impact of non-attendance risk factors.

### Resource suggestion

Use the [5 Steps to Mental Health and Wellbeing framework](#) to develop your own whole-school approach to mental health.



### Keep an eye out for early indicators and start conversations

As part of regular reviews of attendance data, school staff should try to spot early patterns of absence arising, keeping an eye out for irregular attendance and lateness.

#### Other early indicators can include:

- a parent or carer reporting that the child or young person does not want to come to school
- physical signs believed to be linked to stress (e.g. stomach ache, sickness, headache)
- behavioural change e.g., reduced engagement with others and their learning.



If staff notice these patterns emerging, beginning a dialogue with the child or young person about how they are feeling can help them open up and ask for help.

These conversations can feel difficult or uncomfortable, but will also let a pupil know that they are being listened to and supported.

## Resource suggestion

Get tips and advice on starting conversations about mental wellbeing with a child or young person with this [Mentally Healthy Schools guidance](#).



## Nurture protective factors

A protective factor is an attribute or condition that can help protect a child or young person against some of the risk factors outlined above. This can prevent non-attendance or reduce its impact.

Schools play a very important role in developing protective factors in their pupils.

### Ways to do this include:

- ensuring that all pupils have at least one adult at school who knows their strengths and concerns well - this is especially important at times of transition, e.g., the start of Year 7
- building a school culture that recognises all emotional reactions as normal and helps pupils feel safe to express their emotions
- supporting the child or young person in developing effective emotional regulation strategies
- providing quiet or safe spaces for pupils to access if they are experiencing intense emotions
- providing opportunities for pupils to contribute to decision-making in the school, helping them feel that their voices are valued and heard
- working to reduce everyday stressors in the classroom for pupils who easily become overwhelmed
- checking in regularly with pupils to see whether any agreed adaptations or strategies are working and useful, and adjusting if not.



## Resource suggestion

Open up conversations about mental health in the classroom with the [Talking Mental Health animation and teacher toolkit](#).



## Working in partnership with families

Ensuring that parents and carers feel connected and involved with the school is key to supporting children and young people's mental health.

Some parents and carers may have few opportunities to engage with schools. They may also have had difficult times at school themselves when they were younger, and their confidence in the ability of the school to support their child may be low.

By finding ways to involve them in school life and communicating and working in partnership with them, you will build parents' and carers' trust in the school.

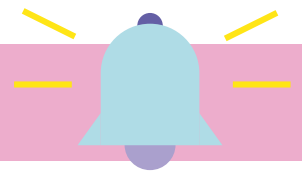
If parents and carers trust that school staff will listen to them and their child, they will be more able to support the child to attend school, as they know that they will be cared for and their needs will be met.

### Resource suggestion

Explore a range of ways that schools can engage with parents and carers with our [5 Steps framework](#).



## Targeted



As well as working on universal approaches to mental health and wellbeing, it's also important for school staff to develop a planned process around non-attendance for children and young people who require more targeted support.

It's important to note that some groups and individuals, such as autistic children and young people, LGBTQ+ pupils and young carers may be disproportionately affected by difficulties with non-attendance. They are also likely to need tailored, individual support.

Collaboration, understanding and an individual approach based on the young person's needs is vital. School staff should work together with young people to find out what works for them. In all instances, curiosity and avoiding assumptions is crucial.



You may be familiar with the assess/plan/do/review model, which is laid out in the [SEND code of practice](#). If not, the SENCo in your school will know it. It is a very useful framework for working with a pupil experiencing difficulties with attending school.

Below is an example with suggested actions under each step. The cycle can be repeated as many times as needed to help the child or young person progress.



## Assess



- Keep an eye out for early indicators of non-attendance in pupils and act quickly.
- Work with pupils to identify the risk factors they are experiencing which may be causing non-attendance. The [Child Outcomes Research Consortium \(CORC\)'s website](#) has several different tools to help you do this.

## Plan



- Co-produce a return to school action plan in collaboration with the pupil, their family and relevant school staff. Agree a date of review, and share the plan with everyone involved. If the pupil is finding the idea of returning to school particularly difficult, the plan could focus on smaller steps – like meeting a friend from school or completing a piece of work – to begin the process of returning to school.
- Work with the child or young person on a return to school pupil support plan, detailing the support they can expect when they come back to school. Again, share this with everyone involved.

## Do



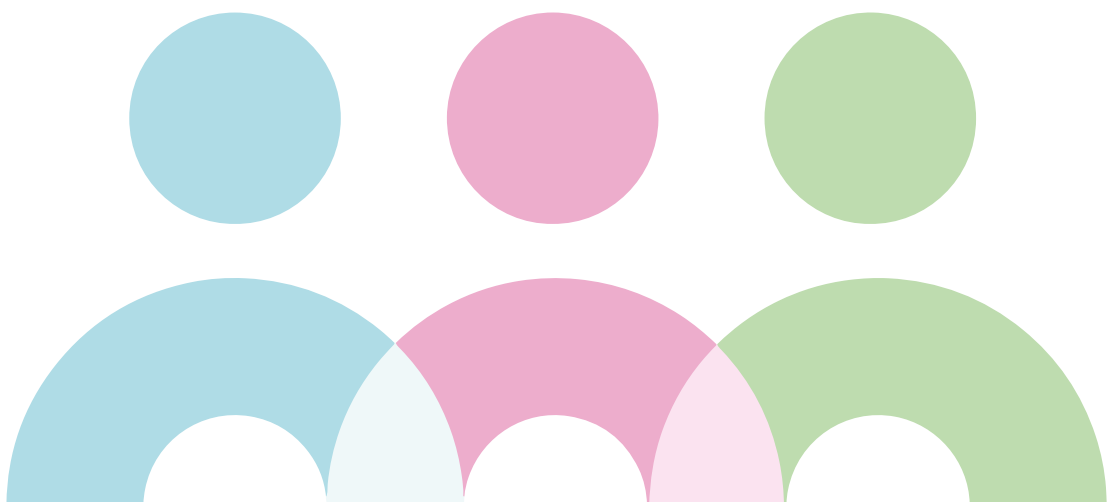
- Maintain good communication with the family and pupil during the return to school – for example, by supporting the completion of school work at home and sharing feedback on the work.
- Consider developing specific family support groups focused on non-attendance, so that parents and carers with children having difficulties can meet and support one another.

## Review



- Monitor the progress made and adjust the plan for the next steps.
- Further consultation with other agencies may be needed.

[Book your place](#) on our Mental health and school attendance training to learn more about how to support children and young people in your setting.





# Case study



**At Anna Freud, our Wellbeing and Emotional Support Team often work with young people experiencing difficulties with school attendance and their mental wellbeing. This case study gives an example of how schools can work with others to support children and young people.**

The young person referred to WEST was experiencing high levels of anxiety around her academic performance, as her GCSEs were approaching and she was not attending school. The referral requested support for anxiety, low mood and difficulties in relationships and communication at school and at home, all of which were contributing to reduced engagement and attendance at school.

The intervention aimed to increase understanding of why the young person was missing school, develop coping strategies and build a stronger support network around the young person.

Individual intervention sessions using cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) helped the young person better understand her anxiety and low mood by identifying triggers, challenging unhelpful thoughts, and understanding the interplay of thoughts, feelings and behaviour.

Additionally, a 'thermometer' was created to help her to apply different anxiety-reduction strategies when she was experiencing difficulties. The young person, her parents and an identified staff member in school also worked together to create a 'stepladder'; a graded hierarchy of exposure to the feared situation – school. While working through this, the young person's confidence to share her worries and accept support in school increased.

A safe space was identified in school where the young person initially transitioned to, from home. This was followed by the young person transitioning from this space to lessons with her peers. Staff working with the young person were supported to better understand her needs and as a result were able to offer sensitive and appropriate support.

Graded exposure, relaxation and grounding strategies helped the young person to gradually transition to full attendance in the classroom. She was able to rediscover her enthusiasm and passion for learning. Her school attendance was 100% prior to taking her GCSE exams.

A session with the young person's parents supported improved communication and addressed the balance of space and support at home. School staff were also essential to helping the young person to feel understood. They also helped to reassure her that a safe space and staff member were available to help her make adjustments to achieve the plan.

A summary of work was completed at the end of the intervention, and relevant content was shared with parents and the professional network. This ensured that the strategies were understood and continued beyond the end of the intervention.

# Further resources

A number of local authority education support teams have produced detailed guidance on non-attendance, which can help schools to identify how they can further support children and young people.

## Solihull Education Psychology Service (2023):

<https://www.solihull.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2021-12/Emotionally-Based-School-Non-Attendance-Guidance-for-Schools.pdf>



## West Sussex Educational Psychology Service (2022):

[What is emotionally-based school avoidance?](#)

## Wakefield Education Psychology Service (2021):

[Emotionally based school avoidance: guidance for schools, settings and support agencies working with children, young people and their families](#)



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