



Department  
for Education

# **Summary of responsibilities where a mental health issue is affecting attendance**

**February 2023**

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## Introduction

This document builds on the [Working together to improve school attendance](#) guidance, and should be read alongside the statutory guidance documents on parental responsibility measures, children missing education, supporting children with medical conditions, suspensions and exclusions, alternative provision, and safeguarding. A list of relevant links to further guidance is available at the end of this document.

The guidance below makes clear the expectations placed on school staff as well as academy trustees/governing bodies, parents/carers and Local Authorities (LAs) where there is a pupil experiencing social, emotional or mental health issues that are affecting attendance.

This guidance applies to **any** pupils displaying any social, emotional or mental health issue that is affecting their attendance. It is **not** only for pupils who have a diagnosed mental disorder, or a disability or special educational need.

In this guidance, any actions taken to support attendance are referred to as “reasonable adjustments”. This term is used throughout this guidance as a way of describing those actions in **general terms, as opposed to** a school’s duty to make reasonable adjustments for pupils with a disability under section 20 of the 2010 Equality Act.

Where a child has a disability, Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan and/or an assigned social worker, it is important that school staff take account of this when considering actions outlined in this document. A section on [additional considerations for children with Special educational needs and disabilities \(SEND\) and/or an assigned social worker](#) is included.

The guidance includes sector-led effective practice examples of how schools do this well. Find out more from [Support for pupils where a mental health issue is affecting attendance: effective practice examples](#). These examples are intended to exemplify how the principles in the [Working together to improve school attendance guidance](#) and this guidance apply in these circumstances.

## What should school staff be doing to support pupil mental health?

School staff are **not** expected to diagnose mental health conditions or perform mental health interventions, but they **are** expected to work to ensure regular attendance for every child, as per the [Working together to improve school attendance](#).

Broadly speaking, the role of school staff is to ensure that the school is a calm, safe, and supportive environment where all pupils want to be and are keen and ready to learn, which is the foundation of securing good attendance.

Generally, schools will achieve this by [promoting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing](#) through a whole-school approach to pupil mental health, and by developing a trusted relationship with parents/carers and families that involves them in the conversation about the school's ethos, and emphasises the importance of supporting mental health and regular attendance.

Resources are available to support this at the end of this document. The Department encourages schools to identify a senior mental health lead who will have strategic oversight of their setting's whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing. More information on [senior mental health lead training](#) is available.

Schools also play an important role in teaching pupils about respectful relationships, emotional wellbeing, mental health and supporting social and emotional development, such as through a high quality, evidence-based and age-appropriate RHSE curriculum.

## When is it appropriate for a pupil to be absent because of a mental health issue?

Schools should set and maintain high expectations for the attendance, engagement and punctuality of pupils who are anxious about attending school. It is important to recognise that, in many instances, attendance at school may serve to help with the underlying issue as much as being away from school might exacerbate it, and a prolonged period of absence may heighten their anxiety about attending in future.

School staff will recognise that there can be attendance challenges where a child has a social, emotional or mental health issue, particularly a severe issue for which the child is receiving clinical treatment.

As per paragraph 219 of the [Working together to improve school attendance](#) guidance, school staff should advise parents/carers to notify them on the first day the child is unable to attend due to illness. School staff must record absences as authorised where it is not possible for a pupil to attend due to illness (both physical and mental health related).

Many children will experience normal but difficult emotions that make them nervous about attending school, such as worries about friendships, schoolwork, exams or variable moods. It is important to note that these pupils are still expected to attend school regularly.

School staff should work quickly to communicate this expectation to parents/carers, and work together with them to ensure that such circumstances do not act as a barrier to regular attendance. Any associated anxiety about attending should be mitigated as much as possible by creating a plan to implement reasonable adjustments to alleviate specific barriers to attendance (see [effective practice examples](#)). These adjustments should be agreed by and regularly reviewed with all parties, including parents/carers. As mentioned above, in this guidance any actions taken to support attendance are referred to as “reasonable adjustments”. This term is used throughout this guidance as a way of describing those actions in general terms, as opposed to relating to a school’s duty to make reasonable adjustments pupils with a disability under section 20 of the 2010 Equality Act.

In developing a plan to support attendance through reasonable adjustments, school staff will need to take into account the individual circumstances of the child, being mindful of safeguarding responsibilities as set out in the [Keeping children safe in education 2022](#) guidance.

## Involving parents/carers in conversations at an early stage

Parents/carers know their children best and are well-placed to support them to recognise and manage their normal emotions, and parents/carers of children experiencing social, emotional or mental health issues play a vital role in the attendance or non-attendance of that child.

In developing a plan to implement reasonable adjustments to support attendance, school staff should aim to involve parents/carers to support a child who is anxious about attending from an early stage, making it clear that part of the aim of the plan is to maximise face-to-face attendance as much as possible. The plan should have regular review points built into it, and have been agreed in advance of implementation.

Support is available at [Children's mental health - Every Mind Matters](#). This is important for children of all ages, but in particular if the child is transitioning from one school to another, or to another class, which may make them more anxious about school.

## How to facilitate support for children where a mental health issue is affecting attendance

As part of any plan to support the child to attend well, schools should facilitate relevant pastoral support. This should be done with the clear aim of improving attendance as much as possible while supporting the underlying mental health issue.

This will involve having sensitive conversations with pupils and with parents/carers as swiftly as possible after having been made aware of the issue, and making reasonable adjustments in order to overcome specific barriers to attendance.

For example, a trusted adult periodically checking how the pupil is feeling or enabling the pupil to access a quiet space at break times can be effective ways of helping a child to feel less anxious about attending school. Or, if a pupil is anxious about returning to school because they are worried about being behind academically, they might be supported by providing access to additional educational support and tutoring. Full guidance on the programmes and activities that the Department is funding to support education recovery and children and young people's wellbeing, including the Recovery Premium and National Tutoring Programme, is available at [Education recovery support](#).

More examples of common, effective reasonable adjustments can be found in the [effective practice examples](#).

Any plan to help the child to attend well may also involve making referrals to in-school or external professional support, and schools should be supportive where parents/carers feel the child needs to visit a health professional in relation to a mental health concern. Schools should consider additional pastoral care inputs for pupils, including any support that can be offered by the pupil's most trusted adults in school, and where appropriate making referrals to other services.

This might include community groups, counselling services, psychological practitioners or, where available, Mental Health Support Teams. Any professional workers supporting a pupil with a mental health or emotional issue should maintain the same ambition for the attendance of the child as the school, maximising in-person learning where possible.

Where available, school nursing services can also play an important role in helping to alleviate barriers to attendance, by providing health advice or information to pupils, including an assessment of individual needs and strengths. The school nurse can work with young people, parents/carers and the school to offer support based on these assessments, including helping families to navigate health and care services.

School nurses can work with families, schools and others for early identification of vulnerability that may impact on education or attendance, so early support or referral to other services can be offered.

Where pupils have complex and long-term health conditions that are impacting attendance, school nurses can offer support to young people to manage their health condition and medication within school.

Professionals should join up and provide cross-agency support through a team around the school or family where they feel other services may help to alleviate a pupil's concerns about barriers to attending school, and ensure that the pupil knows which school staff they can talk to if required.

Under general public law principles, LAs have an obligation to take into account the [Working together to improve school attendance](#) guidance in exercising their functions and, as such, should give due consideration to that guidance when making decisions about their attendance service and on school attendance matters.



## How to handle situations where parents/carers do not engage or agree with support offered

Parents/carers have a duty, under section 7 of the Education Act 1996, to ensure that their child of compulsory school age (5 to 16) receives an efficient full-time education either by attendance at school or otherwise, and so share in the responsibility of ensuring good and regular attendance.

As such, we would encourage parents/carers and schools to be open and work together to create a plan for attendance that fits with the needs of the child. Working with parents/carers and pupils to understand the barriers to their attendance and, where appropriate, making reasonable adjustments to overcome those specific barriers is an effective way of building confidence and reducing anxiety about attending.

Parents/carers should engage with support offered by the school, and be reminded of the importance of regular attendance and the emotional and mental wellbeing benefits of attending school for children and young people. They should feel reassured that the school has a plan for their child, and parents/carers should feel supported in their responsibility of ensuring the child's regular attendance at school.

Any reasonable adjustments or support put in place by schools should ensure that the time the child spends in school is prioritised as much as is possible.

In some instances, parents/carers themselves might be living with mental health problems or experiencing wider vulnerabilities or challenging life circumstances. This may affect their ability to provide support and care, and so it is important to recognise the need for practical, whole-family support and/or early help support where necessary, in order to try to address the causes of poor attendance. For example, where applicable, the family's support worker might act as a convenor of any additional support offered and is a key party to join any conversations about a child's attendance.

Where support offered is not engaged with, or where all other options have been exhausted or deemed inappropriate, schools should work with LAs to consider whether to formalise support or to enforce attendance through legal intervention in the normal way under their existing powers. See section below [\[link\]](#) for more details.

## Should school staff ask for medical evidence of a mental health-related absence?

It is important that children and parents/carers do not feel as though their concerns about mental health have gone unheard which is why, as explained in the [Working together to improve school attendance guidance](#), schools must record absences as authorised where pupils of compulsory school age cannot attend due to illness (both physical and mental health related).

There is no need to **routinely** ask for medical evidence to support recording an absence as authorised for mental health reasons. This is because, in general, primary care health professionals such as General Practitioners are unlikely to be able to offer such evidence to support one-off absences related to mental health.

In instances of long-term or repeated absences for the same reason, however, seeking medical evidence may be appropriate to assist in assessing whether the child requires additional support to help them to attend more regularly, and whether the illness is likely to prevent the child from attending for extended periods.

If a parent proactively seeks out a note from a GP, it does not imply a need for absence unless this is explicit in their letter.

## Can part-time timetables be used for children who are anxious about attending school?

The [Working together to improve school attendance](#) guidance sets out the principles of part-time timetables.

A part-time timetable might refer to an agreed period of time where the child is allowed to be away from school for part of the school week.

All children of compulsory school age are entitled by law to an efficient, full-time education suitable to their age, aptitude and any special educational need they may have. It is the legal responsibility of all parents/carers to ensure their child receives that education by full-time attendance at school or otherwise.

In very exceptional circumstances, however, where it is in a pupil's best interests, a plan to help a child to attend well may involve the use of a temporary part-time timetable to meet their individual needs. For example, where a medical condition (including a mental health condition) prevents a pupil from attending school full-time and a part-time timetable is considered as part of a re-integration package.

A medical condition might include a mental health condition, however schools should keep in mind the nature of the challenge, and whether it can instead be managed by implementing reasonable adjustments to support attendance, as outlined above.

Any part-time timetable should seek to maximise face-to-face school time as much as possible. Schools should consider providing remote education to help pupils stay on track with the education they would normally receive. Any remote education should only be considered if the pupil is well enough and able to learn and should be given in line with the guidance [providing remote education: guidance for schools](#).

Any part-time timetable arrangements should be designed with the specific barrier to attendance in mind, have a time limit by which point the pupil is expected to attend full-time, (either at school or at an alternative provision setting), and have formal arrangements in place for regularly reviewing the timetable with the pupil and their parents/carers.

The [effective practice examples](#) demonstrate how utilisation of a temporary part-time timetable can help to improve a pupil's attendance over time.

In agreeing to a part-time timetable, the school, parents/carers and pupil have agreed to the pupil being absent from school for part of the week or day, and therefore must treat absence as "absence with leave" (a type of authorised absence).

A part-time timetable **must not** be used to manage a pupil's behaviour. Guidance and further support with [managing mental health and pupil behaviour](#) is also available.

A part-time timetable may also refer to full attendance at school, but with different arrangements for the attendance of lessons. This is also a valid option and example of a reasonable adjustment (see the [effective practice examples](#) for more detail). We would encourage school staff to consider the same principles outlined in this section for this type of arrangement (i.e. for it to be regularly reviewed, agreed by all parties, building back up to full time spent in classes, etc.).

## When to inform the Local Authority (LA) about an attendance concern

Schools should inform the LA where pupils are likely to miss more than 15 days, and work with the family to provide educational provision whilst determining with the LA whether alternative provision should be provided under section 19 of the Education Act 1996, as outlined in [statutory guidance](#).

LAs must not follow an inflexible policy of requiring medical evidence before making their decision about alternative education. LAs must look at the evidence for each individual case, even when there is no medical evidence, and make their own decision about alternative education.

Safeguarding partners should work together with appropriate relevant agencies to safeguard and promote the welfare of local children, including identifying and responding to their needs. This should mean that no pupil is left without educational provision.

Parents/carers may [submit a complaint](#) to the Department for Education where they do not feel the LA has acted in accordance with the [School attendance parental responsibility measures](#) guidance.

## When to consider legal intervention in order to enforce attendance

The [Working together to improve school attendance](#) guidance and this guidance document set out a support-first approach, which is also demonstrated in the attached case studies.

Taking forward attendance prosecution should only be considered where all other options have been exhausted or deemed inappropriate. Where in-school pastoral and/or external specialist support is facilitated but **not** engaged with voluntarily, schools should work with LAs to consider whether to formalise support or to enforce attendance through legal intervention in the normal way under their existing powers. This includes instances where a mental health issue is affecting attendance.

This may include a parenting contract, education supervision order or punitive action, for example fixed penalty notices, in instances where a child is **not** kept off for legitimate medical reasons. Where the pupil has a disability, there should be careful consideration given as to whether sufficient attendance support has been offered before resorting to legal intervention.

## Additional considerations for children with SEND, an EHC plan and/or an assigned social worker

As mentioned above, this guidance applies to all pupils, but school staff should consider whether a child with a SEND need may be more anxious about attending school. Where a child is disabled within the meaning of the Equality Act 2010, schools will need to consider their duty to make reasonable adjustments under section 20 of that Act. The principles of maintaining consistent high ambitions for the attendance of this cohort of children, remain the same, and schools should strive to maximise their time spent in school.

Most pupils with SEND attend well, but where attendance does emerge as a concern, any additional needs should be considered as part of attendance conversations, ensuring that any plans put in place are agreed with the child's parents/carers.

If the child has an EHC plan, school staff should consider communicating with the LA at an early stage once they become aware of barriers to attendance that relate to the child's needs. In many cases the school may be able to agree with parents/carers adjustments to its policies and practices that are consistent with the special educational provision set out in the EHC plan. In other cases, the additional or different attendance support identified may require the LA to review and amend the EHC plan.

If school staff identify that anxiety about attending is being driven by another medical need, then they should work with the relevant health professionals and parents/carers to review that support and consider putting in place or updating an Individual Healthcare plan.

In keeping with the [Working together to improve school attendance](#) (paragraphs 82 and 83), and the [Keeping children safe in education](#) guidance, it is important that school staff maintain high expectations for the attendance of children with a social worker by consistently monitoring and improving their attendance through the Virtual School Head programme.

The effective-practice guidance sets out two instances where the child has special educational needs and disabilities, but good attendance is managed through sensitive conversations, creating a plan to support attendance, working with parents/carers and making referrals where required.

## Summary of responsibilities

The table pulls out from the [Working together to improve school attendance](#) expectations relating to social, emotional and mental health issues and attendance.

Parents/carers are expected to:	School staff are expected to:	Academy trustees and governing bodies are expected to:	Local authorities are expected to:
<p>Make sure their child attends school.</p> <p>Work with the school and other partner organisations such as the LA to establish a shared understanding of perceived barriers to attendance, with a view to supporting their child to maintain full-time attendance at school.</p> <p>Proactively engage with any support offered.</p> <p>Keep in touch with the school and be open in communicating information that will help improve the quality and nature of support being provided.</p> <p>Take action as best they can to support their child(ren) to</p>	<p>Set and maintain high expectations for attendance for children with mental health concerns and work with pupils and parents/carers to maximise their attendance.</p> <p>Facilitate support for pupils experiencing mental health problems as well as for those experiencing normal but difficult emotions through sensitive conversations with pupils and parents/carers.</p> <p>Consider additional pastoral care inputs, where appropriate making referrals.</p> <p>Engage with parents at an early stage in conversations to support their child experiencing anxiety</p>	<p>Regularly monitor and consider the approach to <a href="#">promoting and supporting mental health and wellbeing within the school</a> to understand how it is working.</p> <p>Satisfy themselves that the building of emotional resilience is sufficiently delivered through school curriculum and pastoral support, promoting a strong ethos and culture.</p> <p>Support the school to take a holistic approach to <a href="#">promoting and supporting mental health and wellbeing</a>.</p>	<p>Work in conjunction with relevant services and partners such as local mental health services, and provide access to voluntary sector support and council services where necessary.</p> <p>Promote and protect the health and wellbeing of the school-age population.</p> <p>Work with partner organisations to signpost schools to support available in the local community and prioritise targeting support for children and young people most in need.</p> <p>Where support is provided but not engaged with voluntarily, consider whether to formalise support or to enforce attendance through legal intervention in</p>



<p>recognise and manage their social, emotional and mental health and wellbeing.</p> <p>Support is available at <a href="#">Children's mental health - Every Mind Matters.</a></p>	<p>to ensure robust support for the child.</p> <p>Support parents if they feel the child needs to visit a specialist in relation to a mental health concern. There is no need to routinely ask for medical evidence to support recording an absence as authorised. Schools should encourage parents to make appointments out of school hours where possible.</p> <p>Only request medical evidence of a mental health-related absence where there is a genuine and reasonable doubt about the authenticity of the illness, whether the illness should constitute an absence or to inform any agreed actions to support attendance.</p>		<p>the normal way under their existing powers.</p> <p>Determine whether alternative provision should be provided under section 19 of the Education Act 1996 as outlined in <a href="#">statutory guidance</a> where pupils are likely to miss more than 15 days.</p> <p>Review EHC plans where required.</p>
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## Examples of effective practice

Find out more from the [Support for pupils where mental health is affecting attendance: effective practice examples](#) document.

## **Links to relevant further guidance**

[Working together to improve school attendance guidance](#)

[Promoting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing](#)

[Senior mental health lead training](#)

[Keeping children safe in education 2022](#)

[Children's mental health - Every Mind Matters](#)

[Education recovery support](#)

[Providing remote education guidance for schools](#)

[Mental health and behaviour in schools](#)

[Education for children with health needs who cannot attend school](#)

[Promoting and supporting mental health and wellbeing in schools and colleges](#)

[School attendance parental responsibility measures](#)

[Children Missing Education: Statutory guidance for local authorities](#)

[Supporting pupils with medical conditions at school](#)

[Suspension and Permanent Exclusion from maintained schools, academies and pupil referral units in England, including pupil movement](#)

[Complain about a school: state schools](#)

[Complain about a school: Special educational needs \(SEN\)](#)



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