Guidance on school avoidance

For parents/carers of children and young people with SEND

Reading Information Advice and Support Service for SEND

This guidance sheet will explain:

- What you can do if your child is not attending school
- How schools should help
- Your child's legal rights to education
- How a request for an education, health and care needs assessment (EHCNA) may help

Parents' responsibilities

As a parent, you must ensure your child accesses education. Schools will always want to confirm that you are aware of that responsibility and are taking it seriously. Schools may offer support for your child in school and may ask an attendance support service to assist. We would always encourage you to engage with this support.

However, we know that there are cases where neurodiversity, SEND, trauma, anxiety or other underlying difficulty presents a barrier to attending school. Attendance contracts, or the support on offer, may not be enough to bring about positive change. If you believe there is underlying SEND, this factsheet will help you to understand the options open to you to seek further support.

Mental health support

If mental health may be at the heart of the situation, do look at local support that is immediately and readily available:

For young people: Reading Directory | Young People & Mental Health
For adults: (you, as parents, may also be suffering the impact of the situation):
Reading Directory | Mental health and emotional wellbeing

Do also look at: Not Fine in School - School Refusal, School Attendance

Identify triggers

There may be several reasons why a child is struggling to attend school. For example:

- Academic pressures
- Home-related worries
- Emotional developmental delay
- Sensory difficulties
- Neurodivergence (autism/ADHD) – diagnosed or undiagnosed
- Bullying or abuse

- Behaviour of other children in the classroom
- Separation anxiety
- Not feeling difficulties are understood or believed
- Physical difficulties
- Friendship issues
- Social anxiety
- Learning difficulties
- Adolescent hormone and brain development
- Unstructured break times
- Navigating around school
- Travel to and from school
- Changes to routines and staff

Can you find out whether there is any pattern to your child's non-attendance, or anything in particular that causes or triggers their refusal?

If your child has symptoms (eg sickness), or if non-attendance tends to be on the same day each week, you could keep a diary. It may be that simple changes or support can be put in place that will make things easier.

However, it may not be possible to identify specific triggers. Do not expect your child to understand the reasons themselves, or to have the answers. In some cases, it may be helpful to think of the non-attendance as the symptom of an underlying need.

Seek health support

Even if there is no apparent health need, it may be worth going to the GP to discuss the situation. It is always worth ruling out any underlying health need (eg vitamin or mineral deficiency leading to tiredness). The GP may not have any specific solution but may be able to provide a record of the consultation to confirm that they have met your child and that they appear to be struggling. The GP can discuss with you whether it is appropriate to refer your child to CAMHS for mental health support.

The GP may agree to write a letter to confirm what they have observed. Sometimes there is a charge for this. Be aware that many surgeries enable you to access consultation records for no cost and this may be helpful too.

Neurodiversity referrals (for both autism and ADHD) are made through the school. A six-month support plan needs to be implemented by school before a referral can be made: https://cypf.berkshirehealthcare.nhs.uk/adhd-and-autism-neurodiversity/parents-and-carers-how-to-request-help-for-possible-autism-andor-adhd/

Focus on positive engagement

If your child has started to disengage from school life, then extra-curricular activities and family life will be even more important for them. It may be best not to place conditions on other activities (ie “you can’t go and play football/see your friend if you don’t go to school”). If you are concerned that your child is starting to get anxious and withdraw from wider life experiences, then it will be important to encourage anything that supports the child out of their bedroom or home.

Screens/phones/social media

These can place a burden on young people as they do not offer any respite from social relationships. We advise you to consider limiting your child’s phone use. Some contact time may be important if the child is using the phone in a positive way to engage with friends. However, prolonged and unmonitored phone use is likely to fuel a young person’s anxiety as well as contribute to disrupted sleep and difficulties concentrating.

Attendance reporting

It is important to keep informing the school about your child’s absence, according to the school’s procedures. The school is likely to put safeguarding checks in place to make sure that the child is still safe and cared for. This may involve home visits, and these may be scheduled or unscheduled. We would encourage you to help with this.

Attendance panels

The school is likely to call meetings to discuss attendance. They may set goals for small steps back into school. It is important for you to explain, as much as you can, your child’s difficulties, and any support that you think might help. You should explain any concerns you have about underlying SEND or social, emotional and mental health issues.

What can I ask the school to do to help?

Schools have a responsibility to identify any special educational needs a child may have. This duty is set out in the Children and Families Act 2014. An educational psychology assessment can be an excellent way of doing this. Advice from the speech and language service, or from the RISE team https://brighterfuturesforchildren.org/for-parents-carers/rise-for-parents/, may also be helpful.

Educational psychology assessment

An educational psychologist can assess your child and help understand what might be behind your child's difficulties. They can make recommendations for support that might help. This could be support with learning, or with emotional regulation, for example. However, schools have limited access to educational psychology support and may not always be able to provide it quickly.

If you have the financial resource, you could consider a private educational psychology assessment. But do talk to the school before going ahead. The school may not be able to carry out the recommendations of a private report, especially if they have not commissioned it themselves. It may be more appropriate to consider an education, health and care needs assessment request (see p6 below).

School work

Often, schools are reluctant to send work home as they are concerned that this can encourage non-attendance. Every situation is different and if you think it would help your child to have work to do at home, ask to discuss that. Schools may propose the use of online platforms such as Sparx maths or Seneca, which children can access themselves. However, children sometimes struggle to use these apps effectively at home alone, even if parents try to support.

Do ask for what you think your child needs – any work they can do at home may help gaps caused by missed learning to remain bridgeable. However, online apps are not a substitute for classroom learning in the long term, nor do they offer pastoral or social support, which is likely to be needed for any child struggling with school avoidance.

Reduced timetables

Any attendance is always better than none. Reduced timetables can be a way to manage the child's level of overwhelm and help them to feel they can cope. It should be tailored to the child, considering their preferred subjects and times and avoidance of trigger subjects and times. Some schools/parents prefer to try to get the child in whenever they can, without any clear structure, but this can fuel anxiety as many children respond better to routine and clear expectations.

Most schools will view reduced timetables as a temporary measure designed to support a gradual reintegration to full-time education over time.

Reduced timetables should never be the only strategy over the long-term. They should be used alongside other support, and ideally educational psychology or other professional assessments, to better understand what may be underlying the anxiety.

Medical referral for tuition

If there is clinical evidence (eg from CAMHS or a consultant) that non-attendance is arising from mental health, then the school may consider a medical referral for tuition. It is not common for a medical practitioner to explicitly state that a child is not fit to attend school. However, statutory guidance does not require doctors to put it in these terms. The guidance states (p8):

"Where specific medical evidence, such as that provided by a medical practitioner, is not readily available, the child's home school or the local authority should consider liaising with other medical practitioners and consider other evidence to ensure appropriate provision can be arranged as soon as possible. The local authority should review any additional evidence to help them identify the most suitable provision."
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-for-children-with-health-needs-who-cannot-attend-school)

So, it may not be necessary for a medical professional to state that a child is 'unfit' for school. All relevant evidence, including that provided by parents and other non-medical practitioners, such as family support workers, could be considered.

The local authority will expect the school to take the lead role in making a referral for medical tuition and identifying suitable provision (e.g. tutoring). However, it is important to note that the legal responsibility for ensuring that suitable alternative education is in place ultimately lies with the local authority, and so the school or parent may wish to raise a concern with them.

Alternative provision

Alternative provision can be very helpful if a child is unable to engage with mainstream learning. Tutoring, or an enrichment activity, or in some cases both, can help the child keep up with academic learning while also helping them to rebuild a connection with the world.

A therapeutic, or enrichment activity may be especially important for those children who have started to retreat from life in general.

The question will always be how this is funded. Medical funding can be used in some cases (see above), but this is not the only funding pathway. Schools can also access a certain amount of funding for SEND learners (known as Element 2 funding) which they could use to commission some alternative provision. This funding is not allocated. It is a notional amount of money, usually up to about £6,000/year, which schools are expected to use, as necessary, to support any pupil with special educational needs in accordance with guidance from the Department for Education. (Spending above the £6,000 threshold would indicate the need for an EHCP).

In practice, as school budgets come under increasing pressure, and with an increasing number of children in need of support, it may be difficult for the school to find this funding. Schools are more likely to offer support in school, and there may be a difference in opinion as to whether a high-cost alternative provision is necessary. The school's view may be that there should be

ongoing work to support the child back to school, rather than commissioning something outside of school.

If it feels as if things are stuck, then consider next steps as set out below.

What else can I do?

If you feel that negotiations with school are delaying, you could consider a parent-led EHC needs assessment request, a complaint to the school, or raising a concern to the LA.

Parent-led EHC needs assessment request

If your child has not had an assessment by an educational psychologist (EP)
Or
If they have had an EP assessment, and this indicates that they may need a high level of support

Then, you may wish to make a parent-led EHC needs assessment request to the local authority EHC assessments team. This is the first step on the pathway to an EHCP. We have a separate factsheet on EHCNA and EHCPs and can guide you on how to make the request. If the LA does not agree to your request, you have a right of appeal.

An EHC needs assessment will involve an EP assessment, which could be very helpful. If that EP assessment indicates that the child's needs are greater than the school can provide for, it may lead to an EHCP. An EHCP may then provide additional funding to support the child.

EHCNA is a lengthy process and should be viewed as a long-term pathway to support. However, it may be helpful, especially if you are finding the pressure of attendance panel meetings to be difficult, or if you are struggling to help others understand your position. A formal EHCNA request sends a clear message to professionals that you believe the underlying cause of your child's non-attendance is SEND.

The legal threshold for EHCNA is very low. If the LA refuse your request, there is a high chance that the tribunal would overturn this decision, if you were to appeal. If there has not been an assessment (such as by an EP) of *why* a child is reluctant to attend school, the tribunal would likely conclude that the child's needs are not fully understood and may order the LA to carry out an EHC needs assessment.

Complaint to the school

A complaint may focus on the following:

- School not investigating a child's SEND
- School failing to use Element 2 funding to source alternative provision
- School not providing work

If you are considering a complaint, we have a separate factsheet that may help you.

Raise concern to the local authority (LA)

If you have discussed with/complained to school but still feel stuck, then you could raise a concern to the LA who ultimately have responsibility (under s19 of the Education Act 1996) to ensure that suitable, full-time alternative education is in place. If your child has an EHCP already, you should raise your concern to your SEND case officer. If your child does not have an EHCP, the Education Access and Support team would be best placed to hear your concern. See https://brighterfuturesforchildren.org/for-parents-carers/schools/school-attendance/

What if there already is an EHCP?

If there is an EHCP, then the LA must deliver the provision in section F. Any failure to deliver this provision could be grounds for a complaint to the local authority. If you are concerned that your child's provision is not being delivered, you should first discuss this with the school AND the local authority case officer.

If the issue is that the EHCP does not accurately describe the young person's needs, then matters should be dealt with through the annual review process. It may be appropriate to request reassessment by an educational psychologist, so that changes to sections B and/ or F of the EHCP can be made. An annual review can also enable the school to make a request for additional funding, perhaps to support more, or different alternative provision.

What is my child entitled to in law?

Your child has a right in law to a suitable, full-time education.

The right to a suitable, full-time education under the Education Act 1996, section 19

The LA has a legal duty to secure suitable, full-time alternative education for those children of compulsory school age who, by reason of illness, exclusion or otherwise, may not for any period receive suitable education unless such arrangements are made for them.
(section 19, Education Act 1996)
https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/56/section/19

Note the use of the word "otherwise". This could therefore apply to situations arising from overwhelm, anxiety, bullying or trauma, for example. This responsibility ultimately lies with the LA, but it is always appropriate to discuss with the school in the first instance, as the LA will expect the school to have been supporting the child.

Statutory guidance also states (page 7) that LAs should provide alternative education as soon as it's clear the child will be away from school for 15 days or more, whether consecutive or cumulative. It also suggests that LAs should implement provision at the latest by the sixth day of the absence.
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-for-children-with-health-needs-who-cannot-attend-school