



LET'S TALK...

We Miss You – Family Edition

Best practice and guidance for maximising school attendance, including emotionally based school avoidance

“Build strong relationships and work jointly with families, listening to and understanding barriers to attendance and working in partnership with families to remove them.”

Department for Education, Working together to improve school attendance, August 2024

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Please note that the terms ‘school’, ‘pupil’ and ‘CYP (child or young person)’ are used throughout this guidance for consistency. However, the content is relevant to all children, young people and staff within any educational setting, including early years, enhanced provision and further education.

Foreword

The Essex best practice guidance for schools and settings known as Let's talk... 'We Miss You' has been available since 2022. It was co-produced by professionals and educators to understand and support school attendance difficulties with the intention of maximising school attendance. It makes it very clear that a joined-up approach is needed and that this can only be done through working together as recommended by the Department for Education.

“Some pupils find it harder than others to attend school and therefore at all stages of improving attendance, schools and partners should work with pupils and parents to remove any barriers to attendance by building strong and trusting relationships and working together to put the right support in place. Securing good attendance cannot therefore be seen in isolation, and effective practices for improvement will involve close interaction with schools' efforts on curriculum, behaviour, bullying, special educational needs support, pastoral and mental health and wellbeing, and effective use of resources, including pupil premium.”

Department for Education guidance (May 2022)

This new document Let's talk... 'We Miss You' Family Edition is guidance for relating directly to the [original document](#) for schools and settings.



Introduction

School attendance is important, and at Essex County Council we understand that it can present challenges for some children and young people. This has been recognised at a national level and the latest statutory guidance for schools is enabling us to take a more balanced and compassionate approach where attendance is affected by young peoples' thoughts and feelings.

This best practice document highlights the importance of Essex schools/settings and families working closely together to support children and young people in accessing their education.

In the statutory guidance, the Department for Education states:

“Good attendance starts with close and productive relationships with parents and pupils. Schools should treat all pupils and parents with dignity and staff should model respectful relationships to build a positive relationship between home and school that can be the foundation of good attendance.

In working in partnership with parents, schools should discuss the link between attendance and attainment and wider wellbeing, and challenge parents' views where they have misconceptions about what 'good' attendance looks like.

Where a pupil or family needs support with attendance, it is important that the best placed person in the school works alongside and supports the family and wherever possible the person should be kept consistent.

Where a pattern of absence is at risk of becoming, or becomes, problematic schools should draw on these relationships and listen to and understand the barriers to attendance the pupil or family is experiencing. In doing so, schools should take into consideration the sensitivity of some of the reasons for absence and understand the importance of school as a place of safety and support rather than reaching immediately for punitive approaches.”

Department for Education: Working together to improve school attendance (August 2024).

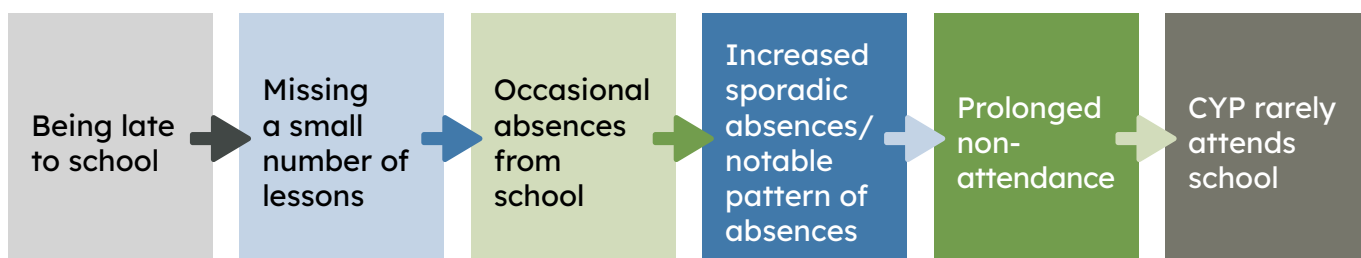
School attendance difficulties

Children can be absent from school for a variety of reasons, the main reason being usual childhood illnesses. However, there is a group of children and young people whose reluctance to attend school is due to emotional factors leading to lengthy absences from school. This is known as Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) – however, it is important to note that EBSA isn't a medical condition in itself.

Unhelpful and helpful language

Unhelpful	Helpful
<p>Previously, professionals have typically referred to prolonged absence from schools as 'school refusal'. Pupils with school attendance difficulties are often described using labels such as 'school phobic' or 'truant', terms which are now considered outdated. These terms also mean different things to different people.</p>	<p>In Essex, our preferred terminology is School Attendance Difficulties, which is used for any pupil who struggles to attend or stay in school/education setting for any reason. This term is consistent with other terminology used in education to describe the needs of pupils e.g. literacy difficulties, social communication difficulties. The attendance difficulties could occur occasionally, sporadically, regularly or persistently.</p> <p>Any terminology that is more specific should only be used to describe a pupil's absence where a thorough assessment has taken place to determine what is causing and maintaining their absence from school.</p>

School attendance difficulties may start gradually. This can make it hard to spot when things are beginning to go wrong. It is easier to make changes if you intervene early, at the first sign of difficulties. The chart below shows the different stages that a young person can move through. It is important to note that not all CYPs will start from the far left.



Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families

Good practice for families working with schools/settings

These seven principles are important for families to bear in mind when supporting their child with attendance difficulties:

1. Intervene early

2. Work with the school/setting throughout

3. Actively involve your child in discussions about their needs and what support they require

4. Develop an action plan based on a personalised and holistic approach

5. Review the plan with the school/setting regularly

6. Accept that the journey will not be smooth

7. Involve external professionals if initial attempts to get your child back into school have not been successful

What about the school attendance policy?

All schools/settings should have an attendance policy by law. It should contain detailed information relating to pupil and parental/carer expectations for all attendance and punctuality requirements. It should also link to their safeguarding policies and practice.

Attendance policies should be available via the school's website and in paper form on request. A 'pupil friendly' version should be available because it is important for pupils to understand the school's expectations in relation to attendance - this should be shared regularly (e.g. termly) in an age-appropriate way.

What can schools/settings do to support children with medical needs?

Pupils who have a known medical need that requires treatment and/or periods of time absent from school specifically related to their condition, should also be acknowledged and their absence correctly recorded.

How can families work more closely with the school?

Some schools have staff dedicated to pastoral support, attendance and home-school liaison who support the family, school and CYP. They will work with you to reduce the barriers to school attendance.

Early intervention

A proactive school/setting can identify pupil needs and address them early in order to prevent persistent attendance difficulties. When pupils improve their school attendance, they improve their chances of academic success and life outcomes.

If you know your child is having difficulties in attending school, speak to the right people as soon as possible in order to avoid a small issue turning into a bigger one. Don't be afraid to raise and repeat concerns, or even escalate it further via the school's complaints procedure.

A child's school absence could be anywhere on a continuum of varying degrees of severity, ranging from full, but reluctant, attendance to no attendance at all:

Full attendance (school staff may be unaware of pupil reluctance or emotional difficulties)

Occasional absence e.g. odd days off or lessons missed

Sporadic absences for a few weeks, including post-registration (there may be patterns)

Persistent non-attendance (long periods off school or long-lasting difficulties)



Four categories of school attendance difficulties

There are four key reasons why children may experience school attendance difficulties. These are listed below and should be considered prior to any assessment:

Are there any medical problems? YES > Authorised Absence

Physical illness is the most common cause of pupils staying away from school. In most cases this is genuine, and the absence is straightforward. There are instances where your child has frequent days off school for minor illnesses which may raise concerns about the underlying reason for the absences (further investigation is warranted).

Are you concerned? NO > Parentally Permissive Absence

Some parents may feel it is ok for their child to stay at home e.g. for company or to act as a young carer. Some parents may have had their own negative experiences of education Others may have been in dispute with the school. Some parents may have withdrawn their child deliberately.

If parents elect to home educate, they are legally obliged to inform the school in writing and must show that they are providing 'out of school education'. More advice can be found here: schools.essex.gov.uk/pupils/Education_Access/Pages/default.aspx

Please note this is different from parents who might permit the non-attendance of their anxious child, or keep their child off school in good faith without realising the nature of their attendance difficulties.

Do you know your child's whereabouts during school hours? NO > Self-determined Absence

In this case, there are no identified common indicators of emotional distress at the prospect of attending school and parents/carers are usually unaware of their child's location.

Children are seeking a pleasant/rewarding experience which keeps them out of school. In some cases they may be at home taking part in a rewarding activity e.g. sleeping or playing computer games. They typically lack interest in schoolwork and are resistant to academic/behavioural expectations in school; in some cases they may display anti-social behaviour.

However, even in this case, it could still be Emotionally Based School Avoidance which is preventing the initial non-attendance, but in the void left by school, the CYP is finding alternative activities. Assessment of the function of absence will support in ascertaining this.

Does your child show significant emotional distress? YES > Emotionally-Based School Avoidance

The presence of severe emotional distress at the time of attending (or even at the prospect of attending) school - usually anxiety. This is in contrast to self-determined absenteeism, as your child will usually be at home during school hours, parents will be aware (and concerned) and there is unlikely to be any significant anti-social behaviour. Persistent emotional distress may include physical symptoms and dysregulation.

NB: there is often no emotional distress at weekends or during school holidays and your child may even function well at various times when they manage to attend school.

One of the barriers in these cases is the uncertainty about the presence of physical illness; there can be physical symptoms of anxiety and parents/carers/GPs can unwittingly provide medical explanations for Emotionally-Based School Avoidance.

Assessment and analysis

For children and young people with school attendance difficulties, a thorough and systematic assessment of the situation led by the school with your support and cooperation is essential in order to plan effective support and intervention.

Unhelpful assumptions

It is quite common for school absence to be treated as a 'blip' by:

- oversimplifying it ("They're trying it on")
- minimising it ("It's just a passing phase")
- attempting to get immediate results ("Get them back in on Monday morning")

Helpful questions

These responses are often driven by a lack of understanding, time constraints and lack of clarity of roles. Furthermore, they do not convey the values of compassion and kindness, hope, connection and belonging. Instead, our mindset should enable us to be curious, asking:

- What has happened/is happening?
- Why/why now?
- What can we do to help?

Why would a school do an assessment?

- to work out the nature and severity of the attendance difficulties and any other emotional or wellbeing issues
- to consider the factors that may be contributing to the school attendance difficulties
- to establish the main function of the absence and plan intervention
- to identify any potential opportunities or challenges

Who should lead the assessment?

It is usually the school staff. Dependent on how your school/setting operates, it could be the class teacher, home-school liaison worker, SENCO, attendance officer or pastoral lead. All views should be collected in order to make a rounded assessment. It is important the the impact of diagnosed or undiagnosed SEND is considered throughout the assessment.

When should assessment happen?

Early intervention is crucial, especially where children and young people have anxiety about attending school; the longer they stay away, the higher their levels of anxiety will be when attempting to return.

Don't be afraid to request an assessment if you have noticed the early signs of attendance difficulties in your child or young person.

Sharing your views

It is important that the school involves you in the decisions being made and in gathering information about the current situation. Information can be gathered by asking questions to explore areas of the child's life. You may be asked questions about:

- their developmental and educational history
- their strengths, aspirations and interests
- if there have been any changes or significant losses within their life
- their relationships and reported friendship groups
- their academic progress
- their behaviour (including any presenting symptoms of anxiety)
- what their typical day might be like, including comparing days when they go to school to those when they do not
- what their typical morning and evening routines are
- what the impact of their non-attendance is on various family members
- what your views are on the reasons for their school attendance difficulties
- if there are any exceptions (times when school avoidance occurs less frequently)
- if there have been any previous attempts to address the issue. It could also be helpful to find out how they best communicate



Assessment tools

Schools have been given guidance regarding the use of appropriate assessment tools. It may be that you and your child are asked to be part of the completion of these assessments.

The intention of the assessment is to understand which of the four functions (or a combination of them) are playing a part in the EBSA. It will also assist in identifying the strengths and risks involved. From this, an informed and purposeful action plan can be created.



Understanding EBSA

Emotionally-Based School Avoidance

The term Emotionally-Based School Avoidance (EBSA) is widely used now to describe occasions where it has been established through assessment that a pupil's absence is because of an emotional distress e.g. anxiety. EBSA doesn't just mean not attending school entirely, it could be:

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

Everyone experiences anxiety and often anxiety is a healthy and helpful response. People feel anxious when they believe they are under threat. When someone thinks something bad is going to happen, their bodies release adrenaline which helps them prepare to physically deal with the threat by running away or fighting. This is the stress response. These chemicals cause physical sensations in their body, such as sweating, a dry mouth, a fluttering tummy and a fast heartbeat.

Peaks in non-attendance are particularly associated with key transitions, so it is important to be aware at these points in particular. For example:

- moving from primary to secondary school
- at the start or end of a new school year
- prior to or following school holidays



Support and targeted intervention

Action planning

Once a thorough assessment has been carried out and your child or young person's absence from school is better understood, it is crucial that the school works with you to make a plan of action. This should be devised with involvement of all the key people, including a member of school staff with whom your child has a positive relationship and the pupil (at an age-appropriate level). It should be specific and written down.

Possible interventions to try at home

(please note that these suggestions relate to the function identified, and they may not be suitable for your child)

Support plans and interventions should be based on the outcomes of robust assessments, and agreed as part of action planning. It is important to consider the impact of unmet needs throughout.

Function 1: Avoiding things in school that lead to negative emotions (e.g. anxiety)

Possible interventions at home

Consider general wellbeing in relation to eating, sleeping, use of technology, routines etc.

Supporting your CYP to recognise their own signals of anxiety, discuss anxious feelings in story books and help them keep a feelings diary.

Learn about the impact of adrenalin and the stress response, and discuss it at home.

Encourage your CYP to discuss any anxiety or worry with you, no matter how small or silly it may seem to them.

Help your CYP practice techniques such as deep breathing, singing, focussing on small details. [ECC's Self-Care resources](#)

Encourage lots of positive self-talk and reframe negative thoughts into more positive ones. www.youngminds.org.uk/young-person/my-feelings

Help your CYP learn to relax with calming activities such as walking, reading, fishing, yoga, mindfulness, swimming, breathing exercises, a warm bath etc. Think about what you do to calm yourself and invite them to try.

Speak to your school/setting's Designated Mental Health Lead for support.

Function 2: Avoiding difficult social situations, evaluations or judgements in school

Possible interventions at home

Model resilient behaviour by talking through scenarios where you have felt anxious. Discuss how you felt, what techniques you used to overcome the anxiety and how you felt afterwards.

Try to avoid inadvertently pressurising your CYP or making comparisons between siblings and or friends/relatives.

Speak to your school SENCO if you think any of your CYP's difficulties are related to SEND.

Function 3: Gaining attention from significant others at home

Possible interventions at home

Establish morning routines that prepare your child for school, such as getting up in time, having breakfast, having bag packed the night before etc.

Establish bedtime routines, which may include the restriction of technology after a certain time.

Work out what your CYP is doing all day when not in school. What actions can be taken to make home less appealing? Turn wi-fi off?

However, if your CYP uses online interaction for self-regulation, this would not be appropriate. It may also not be possible if there are adults working from home that require internet access.

Encourage homework and home learning where possible in order to ensure your CYP isn't 'left behind' their peers.

Use problem-solving techniques (schools/settings can support with this).

Establish positive and individual time to spend with your CYP outside school hours.

Carefully consider the attention your CYP receives when they do not attend school during school hours.

Establish reward systems for when your CYP attends school.

Function 4: Gaining rewarding things or activities outside of school

Possible interventions at home

If possible, remove access to the more stimulating activity (e.g. computer games) during school hours.

However this may not be appropriate for your CYP if they use these kinds of activities to self-regulate.

Support your CYP in travelling to and from school.

Encourage your CYP to focus their attention on positive aspects of school (e.g. their friends, their favourite lesson/teacher, activities they enjoy doing) instead of the negatives (i.e. why they are finding it difficult to attend).

When they start to attend school, consider a simple gratitude journal or encourage them to identify one thing that has gone well at school each day, recording this visually in a book or chart to be referred to later.

Find out what reasons for going to school motivate your CYP, and encourage them to consider how attending school will help them achieve their own personal goals and ambitions (what would they like life to look like in the future?), for example, having friends, getting qualifications, pursuing interests, moving towards a career they want.

It may be helpful to remind your CYP that it is important to attend school, although this should be carefully considered as it could add pressure.

Your CYP should be encouraged to maintain or develop relationships with their school peers outside of school hours.

Your CYP should be encouraged to keep in touch with school (key adults/favourite teacher) to maintain a connection.

Encourage your CYP to keep up with schoolwork so they don't feel behind on their return.

Keeping in touch

Schools and settings have a duty of care and responsibility to safeguard all children on roll at their school. Regardless of the reason(s) for non-attendance, schools and settings will keep in contact with children and young people who are not attending school. It is important to try to keep your child feeling connected to the school even if they are not currently attending. This can be done through: audio or video calls; sending emails, postcards and letters; sending photographs of classwork; sending work home; staff visiting your CYP at home. Parents should encourage this where possible so it is a two-way process of communication.

How to be pro-active at times of school transition

For some children starting in Reception, this may be the first time that they have been away from you for extended periods of time and they may struggle to follow the routine of the school day. These children may find the transition into school difficult and you may see behaviours related to separation anxiety (e.g. crying, clinging to parents). Similarly, the transition from primary to secondary school can feel daunting when CYP move from a small school with a single class teacher into a larger school where they are having to navigate corridors, find their classrooms and build new relationships with a number of different adults.

Some things that could be helpful to do with children include:

- reading story books about going to school
- practising their walk to school and trying on their school uniform
- ask the school/setting for pictures and video tour of the school building (e.g. entrance, toilets, cloakroom, playground, classroom, corridors) and key members of staff
- use of transitional objects to ease your CYP's anxiety such as a favourite cuddly toy
- let the school/setting know that your CYP is anxious and ask if, where possible, they can have a familiar peer in their group
- talk in positive terms about the move
- discuss it in terms of a 'fresh start' for children that have not experienced a positive time in school
- help your child develop independence skills by encouraging them to organise themselves with small aspects of their day during the summer break
- look at and talk about the floor plans/time-tables/key staff
- walk past or drive to the new school to familiarise your child with the building and entrance and local area
- practise catching the bus if this is what your child will be expected to do
- help your child budget for lunch and drinks if they have any shopping or days out with friends during the summer
- ensure that your child has the correct uniform and the various equipment stated on any paperwork sent by school
- take advantage of transition activities between primary and secondary school - there are often taster days, summer camps etc.
- you may find other support from local groups and charities

FAQs

What do I do if the school aren't listening? Firstly, escalate the concern using the school's complaints procedure.

This will usually involve a meeting with the HeadTeacher and/or the school governors. You can draw to their attention the DfE guidance and Essex CC's 'Let's Talk...We Miss You' for schools. If you are facing prosecution for non-attendance, the school must satisfy the Attendance Compliance Team that all steps of LTWMY have been completed. If you feel that your relationship with the school has broken down, you may want to ask another professional working with you to support (ie social care, CAMHS etc). You can also ask to have a trusted friend with you when attending meetings.

What do I do if I can see the early signs of EBSA, but my child hasn't hit the triggers for support?

Have a look at the school's attendance policy. Arrange to meet with whoever is best placed to support your child (in primary this may be the class teacher, in secondary it may be the attendance office or pastoral team). Explain your concerns (preferably with dates, times, triggers and behaviours seen if possible) and seek to find a solution together. You can draw the school's attention to the need for Early Intervention as stated in both the DfE and ECC guidance.

What do I do if my child's dysregulation leads to aggression or violence at home?

It is essential that you speak to the school and let them know what is happening. It may be that other professionals or agencies need to be involved in order to support you and your child in moving forward. The [Essex Child and Family Wellbeing Service](#) offer support and training for families who are experiencing aggression and violence from their child or young person.

If I think the school isn't right for my child, where can I go?

You can contact the Schools Admissions Team to enquire about transfers to schools with places. You can also seek alternative provisions through the [Education Access Team](#). However, it is worth working through any issues with the school in the first instance.

My child is currently not attending school but they won't provide work.

The DfE and ECC guidance clearly states the importance of the CYP keeping up with the work of their peers whilst they are away. You can remind the school of the recommendations in these documents. If you still require help you may need to escalate this through the school's complaints procedures.

My child's non-attendance is due to mental health issues, but we're on a long waiting list for CAMHS support. What can I do?

Keep in contact with the school. Ensure they are aware of what is happening so they can provide support if required. Work together to keep your child up to date with classwork and connections so they don't feel left behind when they return. You can find support in your area [here](#) using the search term 'mental health'.

What if my child has diagnosed or undiagnosed SEND?

Speak to the school's SENCO and voice your concerns. Ask for assessments if appropriate and request support as required. You can access useful information [here](#).

What happens if the school records attendance marks that I don't agree with?

You can ask the school for a copy of your child's attendance record. If you are unhappy with any of the marks, you can query them with the school. Again, you may need to escalate this via the school's complaints procedure if you are unable to resolve this.

How would I go about home educating my child?

If you wish to electively home educate your child, you will need to inform the school and the local authority. It is important to find out as much as you can about your responsibilities around elective home education. More information can be found found [here](#) and on [the government website](#).

Resources and contacts for supporting emotional wellbeing and mental health

- [Child and Adolscence Mental Health Service SET CAMHS](#) or call the SPA on 0800 953 0222
 - [Children and Family Operations Hub](#) or call 0345 603 7627
 - [ECC Local Offer](#)
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Acknowledgements

This guidance is created with the support of the SET Children and Young People's Mental Health Education Board.



