

Section 2

Information for Parents



Six steps to take if your child refuses to go to school

Tanith Carey Published 4th April 2023

1 Try to understand why:
Talk to your child to see if you can find out why they are refusing to go to school. There may be underlying issues, such as anxiety, bullying or problems with friends, that are causing their reluctance to attend.

2 Tell the school:
Do not try to cover up your child's refusal by claiming they are ill.
If your child is developing a pattern of school refusal, research shows that working with school authorities from the start will help address the issue more quickly.
You will also need rapid intervention to prevent this becoming regular, as well as support from the school so they are more sympathetic to the difficulties your family are having.

3 Give positive reinforcement
When your child does go to school, talk about their day and reflect back their feelings without trying to talk them out of them.
Emphasise how they managed to cope, despite all the worries.
Use examples from your own life to explain that fears can seem greater when we try to avoid them and they will deal with them better by facing them.

4 Look for other symptoms:
Some young people may develop school phobia in which they may have physical symptoms of fear, such as panic attacks or complain they have headaches or stomach aches when they think about or attend school.
If the problem cannot be resolved with support from the school, ask for help from an Educational Psychologist via the school.

5 Parents need to get on the same page:
School Refusal can take longer to address if parents have different views – for example, one of you is more sympathetic while the other advocates a tougher line.
Take some time to talk through your feelings and agree on a joint approach.

6 Help with social skills:
A common reason for school refusal is that teens develop low feelings of self-worth because they have difficulties with friends.
Rather than hope they will grow out of these, give specific targeted help to help them practice social cues and exchanges.

Working together to improve school attendance

Being in school and having the best attendance possible underpins all the many benefits of school for your child, such as their learning, wellbeing and wider development.

For some children, attending school every day will be harder than for others. This is why schools, and local authorities are committed to working together with families to solve problems and support your child's school attendance. This guide covers two areas:

- parents' responsibilities for school attendance and what you need to do when your child needs to be absent.
- How schools and local authorities will work with you to support your child's attendance.

Parents' responsibilities

What are my responsibilities for my child's attendance

As a parent, you are legally responsible for making sure your child gets a suitable full-time education, usually from the [age of 5 to 16](#).

For most parents, this will mean making sure your child is in school every day except when:

- Your child is too ill to go to school.
- You have permission for a leave of absence from your child's school for them not to attend. You should only ask for this in exceptional circumstances.
- Your religious body has a day especially for religious observance.

There are also some other circumstances for example where:

- Your [local council](#) is responsible for arranging your child's transport to school and it is not available on that day or has not been provided yet.
- Your child attends an independent school that is beyond walking distance from home and your local council has not arranged for your child to board at or near the school or attend another school closer to home.
- Your child does not have a permanent address and you are required to travel for work. (This exception only applies if your child attends their usual school or another school where you are staying as often as possible. This must be 200 half days or more a year if they are aged 6 or older.)

Whilst some absence is unavoidable, it is important that your child is in school every day they can be for their learning, wellbeing and development.

If my child needs to be absent from school, what do I need to do?

You should contact their school as early as possible on the first day of absence to explain why. If you do not, your child's school will contact you on the first morning of their absence to find out why your child is not in school.

All parents can request a 'leave of absence' for their child which gives them permission to be absent from school. Your child's school has the final say over whether to approve the request and for how long your child can be absent.

My child has a short term illness. Do they have to go to school, and will I be penalised if they don't?

If your child is ill, read the [NHS advice](#) to help you decide whether they can go to school. We have also produced a leaflet 'Parents' Handbook of Childhood Illness'. You will be able to get a copy from your child's school.

If they are too ill to attend, you are not breaking the law and will not be penalised. You should let the school know as soon as possible on the first day of absence and schools must record such absences as authorised. If the absence due to illness is ongoing or frequent you should speak to child's school to see what support can be put in place.

Do I need to provide medical evidence to support my child's illness related absence?

If your child is too ill to attend school, schools must record these absences as authorised. In the majority of cases medical evidence is not needed, but schools may ask you for evidence where:

- Your child is regularly absent because of illness, to assess how they can help your child by putting the right reasonable adjustments in place.
- In a small number of cases where they have reason to believe your child was not too ill to attend and a conversation cannot resolve the issue.

If you are asked to provide evidence this does not need to be a letter from your doctor or consultant, and doctors will not usually provide such letters. It can, instead, be appointment cards, prescriptions, or notes of previous consultations (including from the [NHS App](#)).

A lack of written evidence must not prevent the right support being put in place or the absence being authorised if you can demonstrate your child was, or is, unable to attend, or is awaiting treatment. If you are asked for evidence you cannot provide, a conversation between the school, child and parent can help to resolve the issue.

What should I do if my child needs a dental or medical appointment in school time?

To avoid disruption to your child's attendance, medical and dental appointments should not be booked during the school day whenever reasonably possible. When they are, you should ask the school in advance for a leave of absence and collect them as close to the time of the appointment as possible and return them to school for the rest of the school day afterwards.

My child has a long term illness, special educational needs or a disability that is impacting their attendance. What help is available?

If your child is regularly absent from school because of illness (regardless of whether it is mental or physical) or special educational needs or a disability, they have the same right to a suitable full-time education as any other child. You should work with your child's school to discuss the reasons and make sure the right support is in place.

All schools are expected to provide support in these cases. More information can be found in your child's school's policy on [supporting pupils with medical conditions](#). Schools are expected to:

- Work with you to make reasonable adjustments to help your child attend. These could include adjustments to uniform, transport, routines, access to support or lunchtime arrangements.
- Ensure your child receives the right pastoral care and in certain cases consider a time-limited phased return to school where appropriate, for example for those who have anxiety about school attendance.
- Work jointly with other services including your local council and health services.
- For pupils with a long-term medical condition – either physical or mental – schools are also expected to make attendance support a key feature of any individual healthcare plan.
- For pupils with [Education, Health and Care plans](#) - ensure access to any provision outlined within the plan.

To make this work, it is important that you are open and work with your child's school by sharing written information. This will help agree the right support and take an active part in agreeing and putting in place the solution.

In most cases this will be sufficient, but no child should be out of school without appropriate education for more than 15 school days over a school year. Where additional support is needed, your local council is responsible for arranging alternative suitable full-time (or close to) education for your child.

If your child has an Education, Health and Care plan, and is out of school for more than 15 days, we expect the school to inform the local council who is responsible for your child's plan. This is to ensure that they are aware of the situation and to seek their support for your child where necessary.

Where can I get help if my child is too anxious to go to school?

Attending school usually helps to protect your child's mental health, for a range of reasons including giving them a chance to be with friends and to benefit from learning. However, some children can be anxious or worried about going to school, particularly around the start of the new year or joining a new school or class. This is a normal emotion, and not necessarily indicative of an underlying mental health condition.

If their anxiety continues and becomes an attendance issue, you should speak to your child's school together with your child about why they are anxious and what can be done.

You can find some useful advice at [Young Minds](#), to help work through likely reasons together with your child, what to do and how to make sure that you get the right support if there are more serious issues.

You can also discuss local support that is available with your child's school and you can utilise the [Directory of Services](#) found here to help guide these conversations.

Support isn't working because my child's current school place is not suitable for their needs. What can I do?

Your first step is to discuss it with your child's school to see if extra support can be given. If you are still having problems you can apply for a place at a different school or schools. Your local council will be able to provide details on how to apply.

It is important that you don't take your child out of their current school in the meantime – your application for another school may not be successful, for example, if it is full for that particular year group.

If your child has an Education, Health and Care plan then it is helpful to discuss the best way forward with both your school and your local council's SEND team

Formal and legal action where voluntary support hasn't worked or isn't taken up

Will my local council take legal action against me?

If your child is absent from school without permission or a valid reason, you are likely to be breaking the law. Where this happens, your child's school or your local council will speak to you to understand the reasons. If your child hasn't attended because they are struggling to, both your child's school and your local council are expected to put the right support in place to help you.

If you do not take part in that support, or it doesn't work because more structured formal support is needed, then your child's school or your local council may:

- Invite you to agree to a parenting contract. This is not a punishment or a criticism of your parenting. It is a more formal action plan that sets out what you will do to improve your child's attendance and what your child's school and/or your local council will do to support this.
- Apply to the family court for an education supervision order to ensure you and your child receive advice, assistance and direction to make sure they receive a suitable full-time education.

If you do not make any efforts to improve your child's attendance or it is clear you have knowingly allowed your child to be absent without good reason – for example, taking your child on holiday in school time without permission – your local council may prosecute you to protect your child's right to a full-time education. Even during this process, you have the opportunity to accept and engage in voluntary support (such as an early help assessment) or formal support (such as a parenting contract or education supervision order) to prevent the case from going to court. If found guilty you may be given a parenting order, community order, a fine of up to £2,500 or in very exceptional circumstances a sentence of up to 3 months in prison.

Glossary

Attendance action plan

An informal agreement between you, your child if they are old enough to understand, their school and sometimes your local council about what actions supporting your child will take to improve their attendance

Community order

An order that can be made by a Court after you have been found guilty of knowingly failing to secure your child's regular attendance rather than sending you to prison. This may include requirements for you to take part in certain activities or observe certain rules.

Early help assessment

A voluntary assessment of what you and your family need help with to allow your child's school and/or your local council to put the right support in place or help you access the right services.

Education supervision order

An order that can be made by the Family Court to require a local council to advise, assist, and direct you and your child so that they receive suitable full-time education. This is not a criminal conviction, but persistently breaching the council's directions can lead to prosecution.

Leave of absence

Permission given by your child's school for them to be absent from school for a specified period of time. You should write to the head teacher and ask for a leave of absence before the time your child needs to be absent from school. They will only be agreed to in exceptional circumstances.

Parenting contract

A formal signed agreement between you, and your child's school and/or your local council agreeing what actions you will take to improve your child's attendance and what the school/council will do to support you in this.

Parenting order

An order that can be made by a Court after you have been found guilty of failing to secure your child's regular attendance. You will be required to take part in certain activities or observe certain rules.

Reasonable adjustment

A change made by your child's school to remove or change something that is preventing your child from attending school.

Regular attendance

Attending school every day that the school is open in line with the school rules apart from in a small number of allowable circumstances.

Schools Attendance Support Team

The team in your local council who can help you with your child's attendance.

Special educational need (SEN)

Children and young people with SEN all have learning difficulties or disabilities that make it harder for them to learn than most children and young people of the same age. These children and young people may need extra or different help from that given to others.