



SCHOOL ATTENDANCE & SEND

Helping children and young people with
Special Educational Needs and
Disabilities

Attendance⁴Learning®

Children with SEND can have higher rates of absence

Research has highlighted how children with a statement of Special Educational Need (SEN), or Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan have lower attendance rates* than children without.

***30.6% of pupils who received SEND support were persistently absent in Autumn 2021, compared with 21.5% of pupils who are not identified with SEND.**

It is important that children and young people with SEND are not unnecessarily disadvantaged by irregular attendance.

Defining Special Educational Needs

Within the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice, this is defined as:

A child or young person has SEN if they have a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her.

A child of compulsory school age or a young person has a learning difficulty or disability if he or she:

- *has a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age,*
- or*
- *has a disability which prevents or hinders him or her from making use of facilities of a kind generally provided by others of the same age in mainstream schools or mainstream post-16 institutions.*

The code highlights four broad areas that schools plan for including: communication, cognition and learning, social, emotional and mental health difficulties, sensory and/or physical needs.

Communication: This incorporates those children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) who have difficulty understanding and communicating with others (e.g. children and young people with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), including Asperger Syndrome and Autism).

Cognition and learning: This focuses on those children and young people who learn at a slower pace than their peers, as well as those with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD), including dyslexia (difficulty in accurate and fluent work reading and spelling), dyscalculia (difficulty understanding numbers) and dyspraxia (difficulty affecting physical coordination).

Social, emotional and mental health difficulties: This includes those children who may have become withdrawn or isolated, as well as those displaying challenging, disruptive or disturbing behaviour. The code states these behaviours may reflect underlying mental health difficulties such as anxiety or depression, self-harming, substance misuse, eating disorders or physical symptoms that are medically unexplained.

Sensory and/or physical needs: This encompasses children with a disability that prevents or hinders them from making use of the educational facilities generally provided – including those with visual or hearing impairments, multi-sensory impairments, and/or physical disabilities.

What this means for schools

The code states that all children and young people are entitled to an appropriate education, and “every school is required to identify and address the SEN of the pupils that they support”. To achieve this, schools are obligated to:

- ensure that children and young people with SEN engage the activities of the school alongside pupils who do not have SEN
- designate a teacher to be responsible for co-ordinating SEN provision (e.g. SENCo)
- inform parents when they are making special educational provision for a child
- prepare an SEN information report and explain their arrangements for the admission of disabled children, the steps being taken to prevent disabled children from being treated less favourably than others, how their facilities enable access for disabled children, and how their accessibility plan accounts for access improvements over time
- SEN children should also be identified on a SEN Register with provision mapping in place
- training must be delivered to help identify staff and support children with SEND to ensure early identification

Educational, Health and Care (EHC) plan

Local Authorities are required to provide an EHC plan for any SEN child or young person who will be left at a disadvantage without additional support. The plan is to map out any special educational provision to meet the needs of the pupil or student, securing the best possible outcomes for them. Part of this is to ensure children and young people regularly attend the school of which they are registered (on roll) – parents are responsible for making sure this happens.

Parent responsibilities to regular attendance*

By law, all children of compulsory school age (normally 5 to 16) must receive a suitable full-time education. Parents have a legal responsibility to make sure this happens either by registering children at school or by making other arrangements to give them a suitable, full-time education. Once registered at a school, parents are legally responsible for making sure they regularly attend – this includes children and young people with a special educational need and disability (SEND).

*See our full guide: ‘*School attendance and parental responsibility*’.

Absence from school - SEND

Each family's circumstances are unique, for a small number of children and young people, regular attendance is not always possible.

All children are likely to have unforeseen absences due to illness, but some children with a disability or health condition may have lengthy or repeated periods of absence from school.

Short, repeated absences could be due to having frequent hospital appointments or because of a condition involving intermittent illness between periods of being reasonably well. Similarly, children with an impaired immune system may have more absences with coughs and colds than other children.

Mental health conditions can be a reason for lengthy and recurrent absences, and for some children and young people this may manifest in them refusing to attend school (e.g. due to emotionally-based school avoidance). This can be stressful for both children and parents (e.g. perhaps due to feelings of helplessness, feeling judged or blamed).

Anxiety about attending school might manifest in many ways such as the following examples:

- not wanting to get up, get ready or go to school
- anxiety and heightened emotions, especially when getting ready to leave
- physical symptoms like headaches, stomach ache or feeling sick
- a change in behaviour, becoming withdrawn or acting out
- trouble getting off to sleep or maintaining sleep
- not doing schoolwork or not doing so well at school
- not going to school without telling you

Longer absence may be due to children having specific medical conditions that cause them to have intermittent attendance due to an illness, or a chronic condition (e.g. epilepsy or sickle cell anaemia).

In these circumstances, schools may draw up a support plan, and consider whether to refer children for specialist services.

How parents can help their children

School absence can worry parents especially if they do not understand reasons for these. The most important thing parents can do is to listen, be patient and show empathy – their child might have social difficulties or learning challenges, or perhaps certain events may have triggered a reluctance to attend school. Parents can:

- have open conversations with their children
- be non-confrontational, listen, acknowledge, and validate children's feelings
- consider that children might struggle to verbalise their difficulties

Working together to find solutions

Children with SEND and their families need to be acknowledged, understood and supported – the earlier the better. It is important for parents to talk with their school as soon as possible to prevent issues getting worse (e.g. with their Class Teacher, Form Tutor). Schools will share concerns with appropriate staff who will be able to advise on support, for instance their Special Educational Needs and Disability Coordinator (SENDCo).

Support might include:

- behaviour and ability to socialise
- reading and writing, for example because of dyslexia
- ability to understand things
- concentration levels, for example because they have Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- physical ability, for example because of access arrangements

Where attendance is a concern and the child or young person has an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan, the school will work with parents to consider whether the plan needs to be reviewed and amended.

Support for pupils with medical conditions or SEND with poor attendance

New guidance from the Department for Education '*Working together to improve school attendance*' highlights expectations of parents, schools, academy trusts and local authorities regarding poor attendance. Expectations include:

Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Work with the school and local authority to help them understand their child's barriers to attendance.▪ Proactively engage with the support offered.
Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Maintain the same ambition for attendance and work with pupils and parents to maximise attendance.▪ Ensure joined up pastoral support, put in place additional support and make necessary adjustments, such as an individual healthcare plan and if applicable, ensuring the provision is outlined in the pupil's EHC plan is assessed.▪ Consider additional support from wider services and external partners, making timely referrals.▪ Regularly monitor data for such groups, including at board and governing body meetings and with local authorities.
Academy trustees and governing bodies	Regularly review attendance data and help school leaders focus support on the pupils who need it.
Local Authorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Work closely with relevant services and partners, for example, special educational needs, educational psychologists, and mental health services, to ensure joined up support for families.▪ Ensure suitable education, such as alternative provision, is arranged for children of compulsory school age who because of health reasons would not otherwise receive a suitable education.

For further information see:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-guide-for-parents-and-carers>
<https://www.england.nhs.uk/learning-disabilities/care/children-young-people/send/>

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