



Difficulties Attending School

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND CARERS

This leaflet has been designed to provide you with information and strategies to support you and your child or young person and includes some frequently asked questions.

What could be stopping my child/young person going to school?

There are many reasons why a child or young person, from time to time, may have difficulties in attending school, some of which are included in this booklet:

WORRY - are they worried about doing badly in school, crowds, using public transport, being bullied, getting sick?

HEALTH & WELLBEING - migraines, irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), additional needs such as autism, difficulties reading or writing, dyslexia, dyspraxia, speech, language and communication difficulties, period pains, an eating disorder, or panic attacks.

SENSORY OVERLOAD - fabric of the school uniform, smells, noises, moving between different classrooms, school environment such as what happens at unstructured times, or busy corridors.

FITTING IN - social media, struggles at unstructured times such as lunch and break times, fallen out with a friend or friendship difficulties, hasn't got a friend, feels lonely, feel like they don't fit in.

SCHOOL WORK & TEACHERS - finds the work either too hard or too easy, having trouble with a particular teacher/staff member, worried about exams and assessments, doesn't like getting changed for PE.

ANY RECENT CHANGES - moved house which has resulted in a change in school, transition from primary to secondary, or secondary to college.

THINGS AT HOME - stressful things such as arguing with siblings, significant changes such as a divorce or separation, health of a family member, bereavement.

OTHER THINGS - other family members at home, worried that child/young person may be being influenced by others, gaming, feels they learn from others, doesn't know how to explain their absence, worried about returning to school, feels safe at home, worried they won't be able to catch up with work, relationship breakdown.

ACCESSIBILITY & ENVIRONMENT - there could be other different aspects of the school environment, not listed above.

What might you see?	4 main reasons - adapted from Kearney and Silberman 1990
<p>Trouble in the morning, teary, complaints of illness, oppositional behaviour, running away.</p> <p>Frequent lateness to school.</p> <p>Consistent non-attendance after weekends/holidays.</p> <p>Physiological symptoms that may include nausea, vomiting, shaking, and sweating.</p> <p>Trouble the night before school/poor sleeping.</p> <p>Difficulty staying in lessons.</p> <p>Avoiding extracurricular activities.</p> <p>Behaviours intended to avoid distress - aggression/threat/self-harm.</p>	<p>To avoid uncomfortable feelings brought on by attending school, such as feelings of anxiety or low mood, academic demands and/or aspects of the school environment.</p> <p>To avoid situations that might be stressful such as social pressures/friendships, or a sense of fitting in.</p> <p>To reduce separation anxiety or to gain attention from significant others, such as parents or other family members.</p> <p>A feeling of security at home and access to comforting, low demand activities such as going shopping or playing computer games during school time.</p>

Strategies to Consider

Look for any patterns that may help you in identifying any factors. Have there been any significant events, for example and not limited to:

A school move or transition/house move/birth/death/separation of close family members.

Focus and reinforce positives:

- What is your child and young person good at?
- What activities do they really enjoy doing?
- When did they have good attendance at school?
- What helps your child and young person, and what motivates them?
- Who are their friends?
- Is there a teacher at school that they trust, if so who is it?
- Their qualities and what you admire about them.

Let your child/young person know they can talk to you.	Identify a safe space child/young person can access.	Acknowledge feelings but don't react.
Familiarise yourself with where you can access support for you.	Support to make new friendships and access social activities.	An up to date one page profile.
Provide a checklist/to do list for each day.	Keep working with school and keep communication open.	Build a toolkit of strategies for managing negative feelings.
Focus on positive behaviours.	Celebrate small successes.	Listen to your child/young person when they wish to talk.

Frequently Asked Questions

- **How do I know the reasons my child is experiencing difficulty attending school?**

By supporting school to gather information about your child. This might include you completing questionnaires or answering questions. School will then work with you and other agencies if needed to develop a shared understanding of the main barriers to your child attending school. This is unlikely to be due to one factor. Sometimes it becomes clear that the barriers are emotional or due to anxiety. This is sometimes called Emotionally Based School Avoidance: This is not a diagnosis or label but is a way of helping us to understand the kinds of strategies which may help.

- **What support can I expect from my child/young person's school when they are unable to attend school?**

Schools have to follow the Code of Practice when supporting children with special educational needs. You can expect that school will gather information to help understand the reasons for your child's difficulties; and work with other agencies where they feel they need help doing this. They will then meet with you to explore this information and plan about how best to support. This may look different for each child as there is no set way of supporting children, it is important that the plan reflects the individual needs of your child. This plan will also need to be reviewed.

- **What support is available outside of school?**

As with any area of need, schools can seek advice from other services such as Mental health services (CAMHs), school nurses their Mental Health Support Team (if they have one), Educational Psychologists and Advisory Teachers. This support will be focused on understanding what the barriers to attendance are and giving school and families advice about what they can do to support.

- **If school are not supporting my child/young person, where can I go for information, advice, and support?**

All schools have a named attendance officer. You can also ask to speak to the school Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo). Working relationships with school are key to success in this area. If you feel that you are struggling to communicate with school speak to POINT, who are an Oldham based charity who operate Oldham SEND Information and Advice Support Service (SENDIASS). All schools have a named LA attendance officer who can offer support and advice.

- **Will I receive a fine if my child/young person is unable to attend school, especially as statutory guidance for attendance changes come into effect on 19th August 2024.**

This will be for the local authority to determine. This new guidance states that schools should be offering support and guidance.

- **What support will my child/young person receive whilst they are absent from school to enable them to keep up with their work?**

This differs from school to school and will also differ depending on your child's particular profile of need. This should be decided as part of regular review of your child's difficulties. Dependent on their needs they may be able to attend the Specialist Learning Centre (SLC) for children with medical needs.

- **Will an alternative provision (AP) be considered?**

As above this will depend on both the individual planning around your child and the particular barriers they are experiencing. Schools may also have their own internal processes around use of APs and so again ongoing communication with school as part of planning and review meetings is important to allow you to discuss this and any other queries.

- **How can I expect communication between home and school to work?**

This will differ from school to school. However, good practice would suggest that you will be involved in the initial information gather to support a good understanding of your child/young person's needs. You should then be included in planning approaches to support your child and in ongoing review of their needs and that plan.

- **What training is available to support parents and carers?**

At present the educational psychology service offers a coffee morning training session in at the request of schools and subject to capacity. This offer is reviewed on an annual basis.

Credits

- Oldham Parent Carer Forum
- Oldham parents and carers with lived experience
- Oldham Council, Educational & Child Psychology Service (ECPS)
- Oldham Council Attendance Team Manager
- Brighton & Hove City Council

Next review date: 19th September 2025.

