

Parents'/carers' Attitudes Towards School Attendance

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TNS Social Research

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Executive Summary

Background

Increasing pupil attendance and reducing unauthorised absence are key factors in the Government's strategy to raise educational standards. Local Education Authorities (LEAs) are required to set targets for overall absence. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) publishes annual attendance statistics to monitor progress and the new Public Service Agreement target for school absence is to reduce the 2003 level of school absence by 8% by 2008.

This report presents the findings of a study of parents'/carers' attitudes towards pupil attendance at school. The study was carried out by TNS Social Research between September 2003 and June 2004.

The main aim of this study was to examine the attitudes of parents/carers towards pupil attendance, with particular emphasis on determining how the attitudes of parents/carers whose children are persistent poor attenders differ from those of parents/carers whose children have rarely or never missed school. The study also examined the views of parents/carers towards the support they received to improve their child's attendance. An additional aim was to examine how the parents/carers of children who are poor attenders can most effectively be persuaded to meet their responsibilities in ensuring their child's regular attendance at school.

Key findings

The key findings from the research are presented below. The first set of findings relate to parents/carers of children drawn from the general population that took part in a telephone interview, and whose children generally had good levels of attendance. The second set of findings relate to parents/carers of children with poor attendance who were currently receiving help from the Education Welfare Service that took part in a qualitative interview.

Parents/carers of children who are good attenders

It is clear from the findings from the telephone survey that parents'/carers' attitudes towards education were generally very positive, with the majority (97%) agreeing that a good education would help their child to get ahead in life. Similarly, almost all respondents (96%) agreed that parents/carers should encourage their children to get the best grades in exams

that they can. Parents/carers agreed that gaining qualifications would help their child get a better job (93%) and 90% also agreed that children learn important life skills at school.

Overall parents/carers were broadly confident about their role as parents/carers. Almost nine in ten parents/carers (89%) agreed that they were confident in their abilities to bring up their child, while 86% agreed that they enjoy the challenges of raising their child. Parents/carers were also aware of the support they received from schools in this process: two thirds of parents/carers (66%) agreed that they receive a lot of support from their child's school

Most parents/carers recognised that school attendance was an important issue and one which they should be concerned about. The majority of parents/carers (96%) agreed that regular attendance at school is equally important for primary and secondary school age pupils. Parents/carers do, on the whole, see the onus of responsibility for their child's attendance being on themselves (98%). Around a quarter (24%) see that some of this responsibility is shared with the school.

The majority of parents/carers (85%) said that their child had never missed a day of school in the last 12 months, unless s/he had been ill. Almost all parents/carers felt that it is unacceptable to take a child out of school to wait in for a plumber (98%), earn money (97%) or go shopping (96%). Missing a lesson because they did not like a particular subject and keeping their child off school to care for a sick relative or friend was also considered unacceptable by 94% and 80% of parents/carers respectively. More than two-thirds (65%) did not consider it acceptable for a child to take a day off school 'now and again'.

However, taking their child to the doctor or dentist during school hours, which would be authorised by schools, was seen as acceptable by nearly half (47%) of parents/carers and a further third (35%) said that it would depend on circumstances. Opinion was almost equally divided over whether it was acceptable or not to take a child on holiday during term-time. While three in ten (29%) said that it would be acceptable, almost the same proportion (31%) felt that it would not be acceptable, and just over a third of parents/carers (36%) said it would depend on the circumstances.

A quarter of parents/carers believed that it would be acceptable to keep a child off school if s/he was being bullied, and a further 42% said that it would depend on the circumstances. Just over a quarter (28%) deemed it unacceptable to keep a child off school because of bullying.

The majority (98%) of parents/carers understood that they have a legal obligation to ensure that their child attends school regularly and on time. Nearly the same percentage (96%) knew that they needed to ask permission to take their child out of school for any reason other than illness. However slightly fewer parents/carers were aware that headteachers can refuse permission for parents/carers to take their children on holiday during term-time (84%), that they could be fined if their child did not go to school (85%) and just under three quarters (73%) were aware that they could receive a prison sentence if their child did not attend school.

Analysis of the results from the telephone survey indicated that there were no significant differences in the attitudes examined between parents/carers of a child with good attendance compared to those parents/carers of a child with poor attendance.

Parents/carers of children who are poor attenders

Analysis of the qualitative interviews with parents of poor attenders indicated that the reasons given by parents/carers for their child's poor attendance were very varied. In most cases the parents/carers provided multiple reasons which they considered had contributed to their child's poor attendance. Many parents/carers also described how they were tackling multiple problems (such as housing, debt and health issues). A number of the parents/carers had experienced difficulties related to school attendance with their child over a period of months and some over a period of years, and as a result the issues and problems that contributed to poor attendance sometimes changed over time. Parents/carers often described their situation as complex and difficult to tackle effectively.

The qualitative research confirmed that parents/carers share many of the attitudes of parents from the wider population. Specifically they share positive attitudes about the value of education, and the importance they place on ensuring that their child receives a good education. The interviews with parents/carers also confirmed that they have similar views about what would be an acceptable reason and an unacceptable reason for a child not to attend school. Both groups considered it was unacceptable for a child to miss school to wait in for a plumber, to look after a sick family member or because they disliked lessons. Both groups also expressed similar mixed views about the acceptability of missing school as a result of bullying. Parents/carers from both groups also both accepted that they were responsible for ensuring that their children attend school. In virtually all respects the attitudes expressed by the parents/carers of children with poor attendance in the qualitative interviews was more or less identical to those views expressed by the wider population in

the telephone survey. Knowledge of the law concerning attendance was relatively good in the general population of parents/carers, and perhaps unsurprisingly very good amongst parents/carers who took part in the qualitative interviews.

Almost all the parents/carers described how they wanted to see help and support for poor attendance available at an early stage. Many felt unsure where to turn in the beginning and did not know who to contact to get advice. Some mentioned that they would like to have a variety of sources of information both at the school and independently. A number of parents/carers wanted to have more readily available basic information about attendance problems. In particular they wanted to have written information that provides the “facts” about poor attendance at school and information about what parents/carers can do, as well as contact details of professionals that can help

Some parents/carers mentioned that although they had tried to ensure their child attended school and had been proactive in contacting their child’s school about the issue, they had not received the necessary support from either the school or other agencies when it was needed. A few parents/carers suggested that schools should play a bigger part in ensuring children attend. A number of parents/carers suggested that an attendance book, and a dedicated liaison officer in each school, who is solely responsible for attendance, would also be valuable.

Some parents/carers felt that it was important not to take their child’s reasons for non-attendance at face value. They felt that it was important for parents/carers, schools and other agencies to get beneath the surface and approach the problem in a sensitive and appropriate manner, according to individual circumstances.

Parents/carers appeared to respond in different ways to tackling their child’s poor attendance. We identified four different approaches that parents/carers adopted. We recognise that any ‘typology’ can only reflect some of the commonalities between types and minimises the differences within types. We also recognise that the small number of interviews conducted means that the groupings are fairly broad-brush and that further research would be required to validate or elaborate on this ‘typology’. The four types are as follows:

- Parents/carers who try hard to tackle poor attendance
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- Parents/carers who describe themselves as feeling powerless to tackle poor attendance
- Parents/carers who appear to be over-protective or dependent on their child
- Parents/carers who are either apathetic about tackling poor attendance or who appear not to engage with the school or other support professionals

Although these four groupings of parents/carers appear to be quite distinct, we recognise that individual parents/carers may not fit neatly into a single group, or that they may have characteristics which set them apart from these groupings. For this reason we would be cautious about using a typology for diagnostic purposes or to determine appropriate interventions. The main value of these groupings may be to reflect some of the diversity of attitudes to improving attendance.

Methodology

This report presents the findings of a study of parents'/carers' attitudes towards pupil attendance at school, and comprised the following phases:

- A review of the existing literature on parents'/carers' attitudes towards pupil attendance and truancy
- A telephone survey of 2,000 parents/carers, exploring their views on the value of education and attitudes towards attendance
- Interviews with 22 parents/carers whose children are or have been poor attenders and/or have truanted, across seven Local Education Authorities (LEAs).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The research had two aims. Firstly to identify whether there were any differences in parents'/carers' attitudes towards attendance between the general population and a group of parents/carers whose children were currently not attending school. This research has not identified any differences in the attitudes of parents in the general population and those in the interview group regarding: views about education, views about acceptability of non-attendance, and understanding of the law regarding poor attendance.

The second aim was to examine the views of parents/carers towards the support they received to improve their child's attendance. As has already been described, a number of suggestions have been made by parents/carers about the support they have received, and the support they would like to receive.

Based on the information the research team have collected from this research, we propose the following:

1. Better communications. Parents/carers often appeared to lack information about poor attendance and possible approaches to helping improve their child's attendance. We would recommend that the DfES considers the means by which parents/carers could have access to this type of information from a range of sources (EWOs, School Liaison Officers, Publications, Telephone Helplines and the Internet, for example). It was clear from the research that in some cases, parents/carers were initially unaware of what support services exist or how they could find out about them.

Bullying was given as a reason for poor attendance by some parents/carers, and in other cases, parents/carers suspected that their child was being bullied but hiding this behind other reasons for non-attendance. Tied into the need for better communications, we would suggest that the DfES continues to place emphasis on the need for schools to make their bullying policy and procedures clear to all parents and pupils.

2. Multi-agency working. Parents/carers often described how they were tackling multiple problems (such as housing, debt and health issues). While the Education Welfare Service (EWS) provides a very useful service, which the parents/carers in this study valued, it is possible that in some cases, earlier involvement of multiple-agencies may have been beneficial. This is particularly relevant in cases where the real causes of non-attendance are hidden behind a reason deemed 'acceptable', either by the parent/carer or the child. We are aware that work is already underway in this area. In some schools they have successfully brought together staff from a variety of different agencies to work together with families. Similarly, the DfES is already involved in a number of initiatives to extend this approach, such as through work on Behaviour and Education Support teams (BESTs) , Behaviour Improvement Programme (BIP) and Extended Schools¹.

¹ Department for Education and Skills (2003) Towards the Development of Extended Schools, Anne Wilkin, Kay Kinder, Richard White, Mary Atkinson and Paul Doherty

3. Joined-up working. It was clear from the interviews with parents/carers that they valued a “joined-up” approach that involved themselves, EWOs and schools working together. In many cases, it was only when all three parties became involved in a joint plan that progress on attendance started to be made. Recent moves to encourage the use of parental contracts with parents of poor attenders and which identify an agreed set of actions that each of the stakeholders will follow, seem to be a very positive step forward, and one that the vast majority of parents/carers would support.

4. School-based support and initiatives. Parents/carers accepted that it is their responsibility to ensure their child attends school, but felt it would be helpful if their child’s school was able to monitor attendance more closely. Suggestions included an ‘attendance register’ which would be taken at the start of every lesson, and a dedicated liaison officer who would telephone the parent if their child was absent. Both of these suggestions are already in operation in many schools in England. Clearly, there are financial costs associated with extending the implementation of these, but we would recommend that schools aim to provide speedy contact with parents/carers when a child is absent, in order to prevent the absence becoming long-term. Many parents/carers in this study expressed satisfaction with the opportunities for their children to pursue more vocational courses at school. There were a number of examples whereby the school and the EWO had been able to arrange changes to individual children’s timetables to encourage attendance. Often parents/carers said they were unaware that this was a possibility and therefore did not discuss possible changes with the schools. We would recommend that schools routinely review the curriculum requirements of poor attenders. It may also be useful for the DfES to consider how this strategy can best be promoted to parents/carers. Parenting classes may also be useful in cases where parents/carers have low self-esteem and self-worth and feel powerless to do anything about their child’s poor attendance. We would suggest that activities are provided through schools to engage parents/carers in developing their parenting skills, self esteem and confidence.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Increasing pupil attendance and reducing unauthorised absence are currently high on the Government's education agenda. Indeed, improving the level of school attendance is one of the key factors in the Government's strategy to raise educational standards.

Local Education Authorities (LEAs) are required to set targets for overall absence. The DfES publishes annual attendance statistics to monitor progress and the new Public Service Agreement target for school absence is to reduce the 2003 level of school absence by 8% by 2008.

Under the 1996 Education Act², parents/carers have prime responsibility for ensuring that their children receive an efficient full-time education, suitable to their age, ability and aptitude, and to any special educational needs that they may have either through regular attendance at school or otherwise. The Act also states that: 'if a child of compulsory school age who is a registered pupil at a school fails to attend regularly at the school, his parent is guilty of an offence'.

Parents/carers can be fined up to £2,500 or even imprisoned for failing to ensure that their child attends school regularly. Magistrates can also impose a Parenting Order if they see fit, which means that the parent/carer may have to attend a class on parenting skills.

1.1.1 *Authorised and Unauthorised Absence*

Schools are required to take attendance registers twice a day: once at the beginning of the morning session and once during the afternoon session. They are required to identify whether an absence is authorised or unauthorised. It is important in this context to distinguish the differences between authorised and unauthorised absence, as the focus of this research is on exploring parents/carers' views towards *unauthorised* absence:

- **Authorised absence is absence with permission from an authorised representative of the school. This includes instances of absences for which a satisfactory explanation has been provided (for example, illness).**

² Department for Education & Employment. 'Education Act 1996'.

- **Unauthorised absence is absence without the permission of the school, and includes all unexplained or unjustified absences.**

While by law parents/carers can request term-time leave of up to 10 days, this is intended to be for special circumstances, and the headteacher has the right to refuse to authorise the absence.

'Truancy' means different things to different people: while many might associate truancy with pupils taking time off school without their parents'/carers' knowledge, this is not always the case. The Audit Commission (1999)³ estimated that at least 40,000 of the 400,000 pupils absent from school each day are 'truancy or being kept off school by their parents/carers without permission'; while an OfSTED report (2001)⁴ suggested that 'truancy is not synonymous with unauthorised absence.' In other words, unauthorised absence may sometimes result from holidays taken during term time not being authorised.

In this report, the term 'poor attenders' is used throughout to describe pupils who have not been or are not currently attending school on a regular basis. The term 'truancy' has not been used (except where quoted from previous research) because there is no agreed definition of truancy.

1.1.2 *Levels of unauthorised absence*

In 2003/4 across all schools in England, 5.85% of half days were missed due to authorised absence and 0.72% of half days missed due to unauthorised absence.⁵

The figures for unauthorised absence are higher in secondary schools than in primary schools (1.14%, compared with 0.41% respectively). In 2002-03, the average number of half days missed through unauthorised absence per pupil in secondary school was 15 and in primary school it was 8. In secondary schools, statistics show that an average of 20% of pupils take at least one unauthorised half day session off school per year.

These figures do not take account of absences taking place after pupils have registered, and as a result, total absences may actually be greater. An anonymous survey of 35,000 Year 10 and 11 pupils (O'Keefe, 1993)⁶ found that 30% of respondents reported having

³ 'Audit Commission, (October 1999). 'Missing Out: LEA Management of School Attendance and Exclusion'.

⁴ OfSTED (2001). 'Improving Attendance and Behaviour in Secondary Schools'. OfSTED. London

⁵ DfES (2004). 'Pupil Absence in School in England 2003/04 (Revised)' DfES. SFR 49/2004.

⁶ O'Keefe, D (1993). 'Truancy in English Secondary Schools'. HMSO

truanted at least once in the previous half term. Nearly one in ten 15 year olds reported having truanted at least once a week, and of these, 90% had registered at school and then truanted. (In 1993-1994, 6.5% of half days were missed due to authorised absence, while 0.7% of half days were missed due to unauthorised absence. In the same academic year, the average number of half days missed through unauthorised absence per pupil in secondary school was 22 and in primary school it was 11).⁷

1.1.3 *Factors linked to unauthorised absence*

A great deal of research has been undertaken into the causes of unauthorised absence (for sources, see Chapter 3). The evidence indicates that there are a number of factors that are related to poor attendance. These factors include:

- **Socio-economic factors:** such as poverty and deprivation; domestic factors such as family breakdown and conflict, and other types of disadvantage.
- **Educational factors:** such as poor educational achievement and disaffection with school.
- **Socio-cultural influences:** such as the impact that peers have on school attendance and behaviour; juvenile delinquency and crime; and bullying.

However, it must be borne in mind that multiple factors are often implicated, and these are difficult if not impossible to separate. Also, parents'/carers' attitudes are likely to have an influence on pupils' attendance, alongside the factors mentioned above.

1.2 **Aims and objectives**

The main aim of this project was to examine the attitudes of parents/carers towards pupil attendance, with particular emphasis on determining how the attitudes of parents/carers whose children are persistent poor attenders differ from those of parents/carers whose children are good attenders at school.

An additional aim was to examine how the parents/carers of children who are poor attenders can most effectively be persuaded to meet their responsibilities in ensuring their child's regular attendance at school.

⁷ Statistics of Education – Pupil Absence and Truancy from Schools in England: 1993/4 - 1997/8. [DfES Statistical Bulletin](#)

This report presents the findings of a study of parents'/carers' attitudes towards pupil attendance at school. The research was carried out by TNS Social Research between September 2003 and June 2004 and comprised the following phases:

- A review of the existing literature on parents'/carers' attitudes towards pupil attendance
 - A telephone survey of 2,000 parents/carers, exploring their views on the value of education and attitudes towards attendance
 - Interviews with 22 parents/carers whose children are or have been poor attenders and/or have truanted, across seven Local Education Authorities (LEAs).
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2 Methodology

The study comprised three parts:

1. Developmental work (literature review and interviews with key stakeholders)
2. Telephone survey with 2,000 parents/carers
3. Depth interviews with 22 parents/carers across seven LEAs.

2.1 Developmental research

2.1.1 Literature review

The purpose of the literature review was to provide information about research that had been conducted into any possible link between parents'/carers' attitudes and their children's non-attendance at school. The information collected from the few studies in this area was used to help design the research instruments. The literature review appears in Chapter 3.

Following the literature review, a series of interviews were undertaken with key stakeholders; namely, parents/carers, Education Welfare Officers (EWOs), Educational Psychologists and DfES policy officers, with the aim of validating and prioritising the important areas for the research to investigate. The interview guides can be found in Appendix 2.

2.1.2 Interviews with parents/carers

The research team wrote to the Heads of EWS, of which two agreed to participate, and subsequently discussed with them the possibility of setting up either group discussions or interviews with families of children who were currently receiving support regarding school attendance. Originally it was hoped that group discussions could be organised with parents/carers. However, it soon became apparent that this was very difficult for EWOs to arrange. Therefore it was decided that these should be replaced by a series of individual face-to-face qualitative interviews.

Interviews were conducted with three parents/carers in the same Inner London Local Education Authority (LEA) and with three parents/carers from the LEA from the South of England. The parents/carers were selected by the Education Welfare Service to reflect a wide range of parents/carers with different types of attendance problems. The rationale for this was to collect a wide range of views about attendance issues as possible. However, it was recognised that it would not be possible to include parents/carers who did not make

use of the Education Welfare Service. The parents/carers interviewed had children of primary and secondary school age, and the families had been receiving support for different lengths of time. Four of the parents/carers had received Parenting Orders. Parents/carers were keen to participate in the study. They received a small payment of £25 for out-of-pocket expenses. The interviews were conducted in the homes of the parents/carers and were arranged by EWOs, who were present at some, but not all, of the interviews.

The interviews were held on 26th November 2003 and 22nd January 2004.

In the interviews parents/carers were asked:

- what factors they consider to be important in determining school attendance patterns
- what influence they believe parents/carers have to encourage children to attend school
- what types of support they receive to help encourage their child's attendance
- what additional help and support they require.

2.1.3 Discussions with other key stakeholders

The two EWS who had agreed to participate in the parents'/carers' interviews were also asked if they would help to organise group discussions with EWOs.

One of the group discussions was conducted with 5 Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs) from an Inner London Local Education Authority and a second group discussion was conducted with four EWOs from an LEA from the South of England. A third group discussion was planned but had to be replaced by a series of telephone depth interviews⁸ with three Educational Psychologists and a further three EWOs drawn from six different LEAs in England.

The final group discussion was conducted with four staff from the DfES policy team who have responsibility for policy development on school attendance.

The group discussions and the telephone depth interviews were held between 25th November 2003 and 26th January 2004.

⁸ 'Depth' interviews are open-ended interviews based around themes which the interview explores and probes, as opposed to being a series of structured questions with multiple choice answers. They allow for more detailed information to be collected.

During the sessions with EWOs and Educational Psychologists the following issues were discussed:

- the objectives of the research
- the reasons for poor attendance
- the impact of parents'/carers' attitudes on school attendance
- the key findings from the literature review and listings of the attitude sets (statements about attitudes to school attendance)

Respondents were also asked for their views on the following questions:

- Do parents/carers of poor attenders have a different set of attitudes to parents/carers of children without attendance problems?
- Which sets of attitudes of parents/carers do they consider to be most important (regarding attendance)?
- Are there any attitude sets that have not been included in the draft questionnaire that should be?
- Is there anything else that they think needs to be included in the survey?

The final session was held with DfES policy staff. At this session the research team presented the findings from the education welfare officers and educational psychologists and sought any additional input from the DfES on the content of the telephone survey and depth interviews with parents/carers.

2.2 Telephone survey of parents/carers

2.2.1 Sampling strategy

The sample comprised 2,000 parents/carers of school-aged children. This sample size was chosen because it was sufficiently large to allow for reliable sub-analysis to be conducted. Sub-analysis enables responses to be broken down to observe whether there were differences in responses according to factors such as parents'/carers' age and gender, their own attendance record at school and their own educational qualifications.

The survey methodology used Random Digit Dialling (RDD). Whilst 96% of households⁹ has access to the telephone, there is, however, a relatively high level of ex-directory numbers. It is estimated that nationally, this figure is around 35%, while in London and other metropolitan areas it could be as high as 50%. (Mobile phones are excluded from these estimates to avoid potential double counting). RDD has been developed to overcome this problem. We used what is known as the 'seed number plus n' approach. It started with a listing of working exchanges, which are sourced from general public surveys and other means. A series of numbers (+/-n) were generated around these seed numbers to create full listing of contact numbers. These were then stratified by area and individual numbers were selected with probability proportionate to population to allow for a representative spread.

The numbers generated were then screened against the Business Database, Fax Database, Telephone Preference Service (TPS) and Fax Preference Service (FPS). This process removes business numbers and therefore maximises the chances of a number being a residential household.

The sample was then screened for parents/carers of children aged 5 years to 16 years who were at a maintained school in England; in other words, when a respondent answered their telephone, s/he was asked whether s/he cared for any children (within this age bracket). If so, the respondent was interviewed. If not, the respondent was thanked for their time and the interview was terminated.

2.2.2 *Fieldwork*

Fieldwork was conducted from the research team's telephone unit between 1st May and 22nd May 2004. In order to maximise the response rate to the survey, telephone interviewers stressed the importance of the survey in their introduction, and stated that it was being conducted on behalf of the DfES. Table 1 shows that 3.5% of the sample issued resulted in a completed interview.

⁹ Market Pocketbook 2002

Table 1: Call response report

Total sample issued	55,433	100%
No reply, engaged or unobtainable	30,564	55%
Calls made that resulted in speaking to respondent	22,869	45%
Ineligible respondent	16,964	30%
Eligible respondent refused to participate	5,663	10%
Eligible respondent but broke appointment	147	Less than 1%
Termination during interview	95	Less than 1%
Completed interviews	2,000	3.5%

2.2.3 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed from the earlier work carried out; that is, the literature review and interviews with key stakeholders. It is presented in Appendix 3. The questionnaire was 20 minutes long and covered the following areas:

- Attitudes towards education
- Attitudes towards parenting and caring
- Attitudes towards attendance
- Knowledge of legal requirements
- Parents/carers' and child's attendance at school
- Demographic information about the family.

Where the respondent cared for more than one child, a single child was selected for the focus of discussion in the interview. It was felt that by concentrating on one child, parents/carers would be able to give more focused responses than would have been possible if they had had to think about the situations of all of their children. Respondents were asked to select a child randomly by choosing the one whose name would be the first in alphabetical order.

2.2.4 Analysis

The data for the telephone survey was analysed and tables produced using a number of demographic breakdowns including parents'/carers' age, sex, educational qualifications and attendance records. Further analysis was also undertaken to look at the ways in which

attitudes grouped together. We examined whether these clusters were related to any specific reported behaviour such as parents'/carers' own as well as their children's pattern of attendance. Separate analyses were undertaken using children's attendance as the dependent variable, and exploring the relationship between children's attendance and other variables examined in the telephone survey.

A fuller explanation of the statistical analyses undertaken can be found in Appendix 2.

2.3 Interviews with parents/carers whose children were poor attenders

The main objective was to explore the issues surrounding attendance among parents/carers of children whose children are/have been poor attenders, with a view to understanding how their attitudes may differ from parents or carers of children who are not poor attenders.

2.3.1 Fieldwork

The qualitative research took the form of 22 in-home interviews of approximately 60 minutes duration. The research team contacted the senior manager at 14 Education Welfare Services (EWS) in Local Education Authorities. Each was provided with a written description of the project and an invitation to participate. 7 EWS agreed to take part. They came from a wide range of LEAs including urban and rural areas from the North, Midlands and the South of England. EWOs were asked to provide contact details for a wide range of parents/carers who were currently receiving services from the EWS. Those taking part in the depth interviews were given £25 as a reimbursement for their time.

There were various inputs into the design of the discussion guide. A draft topic guide was developed which was discussed in detail with the members of the Steering Group. Following this the guide was finalised with the DfES. The discussion guide reflected the question areas included in the main telephone survey but explored parents'/carers' reasons for their responses in depth. The discussion guide is included at Appendix 4.

2.3.2 Analysis

With the consent of the participants, the depth interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed with the subsequent transcripts used confidentially for analysis. The research study team carried out the interviews themselves and undertook full content analysis of the qualitative data.

Data was input and stored anonymously. No data has been provided to the DfES that would enable the linking of responses to participants, or identification of participants.

3 Parents/carers attitudes to school attendance – a literature review

A considerable amount of research has been conducted into the reasons for unauthorised absence. The research has tended to focus on identifying possible factors that are linked with poor attendance. The types of associations that have been widely reported include socio-economic, socio-cultural and educational factors. However, little research has been undertaken into parents'/carers' attitudes towards school attendance. It has been suggested that parental factors, such as their own experiences of and attitudes towards education, authority, schools and school attendance is likely to have a significant impact on their children's attitudes towards school and consequent behaviour. The purpose of the literature review was to provide information about research that had been conducted into the link between parents'/carers' attitudes and their children's non-attendance at school.

3.1 Parents'/carers' views on school attendance

A study of attitudes to attendance in seven LEAs in England¹⁰, found that most parents/carers believed that children who did not attend school regularly would underperform in school work, and that it was necessary for young people to get qualifications. However, the findings also indicated that parents/carers of children who truant tended to hold different attitudes from parents/carers of children who do not have problems with attendance.

Fewer parents/carers of children with school attendance problems believed that pupils who did not attend regularly would do badly in their schoolwork, and similarly, a smaller proportion of these parents/carers believed that young people needed qualifications. This group were also less likely to think that their children's safety was at risk if they were not at school, and were less likely to believe that regular school attendance was important.

There were also statistically significant differences between the views of both sets of parents/carers with regard to when children should miss school, with a significantly higher proportion of parents/carers of children with attendance problems agreeing that children should miss school to see the doctor, the dentist, or to help out at home.

¹⁰ Malcolm, H *et al* (Sept 2003). 'Absence from School: a study of its causes and effects in seven LEAs'. Research Report No.424 [DfES](#)

Primary school pupils were also surveyed as part of the study. Over a tenth (77 pupils) thought that their parents/carers would condone an absence, with the most common reason, reported by 20% of these pupils, being given as 'having something more important to do'. Of the pupils who thought their parents/carers would condone an absence, just under half (34) also said that they had truanted in the past.

3.2 Parental supervision

Family attitudes may also play a part in keeping children from school, either directly or indirectly. A study by O'Keefe (1993),¹¹ for example, found that 44% of truants believed their parents/carers knew they were truanting, while 48% of non-truants said they were held back from truanting by fear of their parents/carers finding out.

A study undertaken by Kinder *et al* (1995) of senior managers, year heads, and form tutors in schools drawn from 14 Local Education Authorities¹², which found that family circumstances and values were one of three major causes of non-attendance, along with individual child and school-related factors. Family circumstances and values linked to poor attendance included parentally condoned absence, parents/carers not valuing education, family problems, poor parenting, poverty and a lack of social confidence in the local community.

3.3 Parental interest in their child's school

Research indicates that most parents/carers show considerable interest in their child's school, and this is equally the case for parents/carers of children who have attendance problems.

In an Ofsted report¹³ into attendance and behaviour in secondary schools, they found that most schools usually enjoyed good working relationships with parents/carers. In fact, most of the parents/carers said they wanted more contact with schools.

The majority of parents/carers were appreciative of the concern and time given by headteachers and staff, even when approached about issues concerning their children's attendance or behaviour. However, OfSTED found that a small proportion of parents/carers

¹¹ O'Keefe, D (1993). 'Truancy in English Secondary Schools'. [HMSO](#)

¹² Kinder, K, Harland, J, Wilkin, A & Wakefield, A (1995), 'Three to remember: strategies for disaffected pupils', [NFER](#)

¹³ Woodward, R & McVie, S. (2001). 'Improving Attendance and Behaviour in Secondary Schools' [OfSTED](#)

were very unco-operative with the schools, and their attitudes, whether confrontational or passive, served to reinforce their children's negative attitude towards school.

3.4 Parents'/carers' interest in their child's education

The ongoing Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime (ESYTC)¹⁴ reported in Summer 2001 that nine out of ten young people (89%) said that their parents/carers had a positive attitude to school, while only one in ten (11%) thought their parent's attitude was negative. There were no significant gender differences in the children's perceptions of their parents'/carers' interest in school. More recent figures have yet to be reported on.

In the same report, while most parents/carers were considered to be actively involved in their children's school careers, there was some evidence to suggest that the level of parental interest was associated with the social background of the parent. Parents/carers from the higher social class groups tended to be more involved with their child's education than parents/carers from the lower social class groups. The survey also indicates links between negative parental attitudes to school with delinquency and poor attendance. Pupils that reported delinquent behaviour were also more likely to believe that their parents/carers held negative attitudes to school.

3.5 Parents'/carers' education

A study based on 60 families in three of Leeds' most deprived wards¹⁵, concluded that parents/carers in inner-city areas need more support from authorities to get involved with their children's education. It found that poor language and basic skills often hindered parents/carers from getting more involved, and many parents/carers lacked a basic understanding of how the school system works. It also found that, despite having underachieved at school themselves, the majority of parents/carers wanted their children to do better at school than they themselves had. Most respondents believed that their own attitudes towards learning were a major influence on their children's school performance.

3.6 Parenting style

The ESYTC study also identified differential parenting styles¹⁶. The most successful style of parenting, which was associated with a low level of delinquency in the child, combined

¹⁴ Woodward, R & McVie, S. (2001) 'Summary of Findings 2: Summer 2001'. Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime <http://www.law.ed.ac.uk/cls/esytc/sumoffindings2.htm>

¹⁵ Learning Partnerships (Sept 2003). 'Parental Involvement in Children's Education'. **DfES**

¹⁶ Smith, D.J. (2001) '*Youth, Parenting and Crime*'. Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime

strong supervision with low conflict and a high level of trust or autonomy. This indicates that parents/carers manage to control their child's behaviour successfully; without getting into serious conflict with them, and at the same time persuade the child that he/she is trusted to make certain decisions. The parents/carers who are often in conflict with their children are those who do not supervise them closely, yet their children feel that they are not allowed to make their own decisions.

Findings of the ESYTS study¹⁷ also suggest that parent-child relationships vary depending on the characteristics of the neighbourhood in which families live. In areas of high social deprivation, parental monitoring was shown to have a less positive effect on delinquency than in affluent areas, while punishment and parent/child conflict had a less *negative* effect. This suggests that parenting strategies (of whatever kind) are more likely to be effective when they are based on family expectations learned from local practice, culture and social setting.

3.7 Attitudes towards taking holidays in term time

In a 2002 MORI survey¹⁸ of 713 parents, 19% said that they would take their children on holiday in term-time, or that they had already done so. Of these parents, 40% believed that taking holiday in term time would not affect their child's education. Of the parents who said that they had taken their children out of school for a holiday, half said they had done so in order to save money. Costs aside, 29% of respondents indicated that their work commitments meant that holidays could only be taken in term-time.

3.8 Summary of findings

While there has been considerable research into the factors that are linked to poor attendance, the literature on the link between parental attitudes and poor attendance has not been fully explored. The literature available suggests that parental attitudes to education, school and their child's attendance, as well as other factors such as their parenting style, could be associated with their children's attendance at school.

¹⁷ 'Report to the ESRC for Sweeps 3 and 4' (April 2003). Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime

¹⁸ MORI (October 2002). 'The British Abroad – the changing world and its impact on Britain and the travel industry.' On behalf of the Association of British Travel Agents.

4 Survey of parents and carers

This chapter comprises a detailed analysis of findings from the telephone survey of 2,000 parents/carers. It includes information about the profile of parents/carers that participated in the survey and how they responded to questions on the following topics:

- Reported levels of attendance
- Attitudes towards education
- Attitudes towards parenting and caring
- Attitudes towards attendance
- Implications and solutions.

Data was analysed by subgroups such as the characteristics of the parent or child. Differences have only been reported where they are statistically significant. The questionnaire appears in Appendix 3.

4.1 Respondent profile

Table 2 below compares selected characteristics of parents/carers who participated in the survey with those drawn from households with adults that have dependent children, and is based on Census (2001) data. The respondent profile is broadly representative of parents/carers across England, although there is a caveat to be noted. The sample included parents/carers who do not usually live with their children, whereas Census data is available only for parents/carers whose children live in their household. The survey sample was therefore not weighted because comparative data from the Census is not available.

Table 2: Respondent profile compared to household data on the percentages of adults living with children taken from the Census (2001)

Demographic		Telephone survey	Household data from Census (2001)
Gender	Men	26%	Not available
	Women	74%	Not available
Status	Mother or father in two-parent family	80%	73%
	Lone mother	18%	23%
	Lone father	3%	4%
Age	< 20 -30 years	6%	< 24 years 3%
	31-40 years	46%	25-34 years 19%
	41-50 years	41%	35-49 years 49%
	51+ years	7%	50+ years 29%
Ethnicity	White	91%	90%
	Asian	3%	5%
	Black	3%	3%
	Mixed race	1%	1%
	Chinese or other ethnicity	1%	1%
Educational attainment	No qualifications	11%	Not available
	Level 1 or 2	40%	“
	Level 3 or 4	37%	“
	Level 5	7%	“
Age parent left full-time education	Under 16 years	12%	“
	16 years	36%	“
	17 years	10%	“
	18 years	16%	“
	19 years	5%	“
	20 years or above	22%	“
Employment status	Full-time work	46%	“
	Part-time work	30%	“
	Not working or unemployed	19%	“
	Other	5%	“
Household income	Less than £10K to £15K	20%	“
	£15K to £30K	29%	“
	£30K to more than £40K	36%	“
	Not specified	15%	“
First language	English	95%	“
	Not English	5%	“

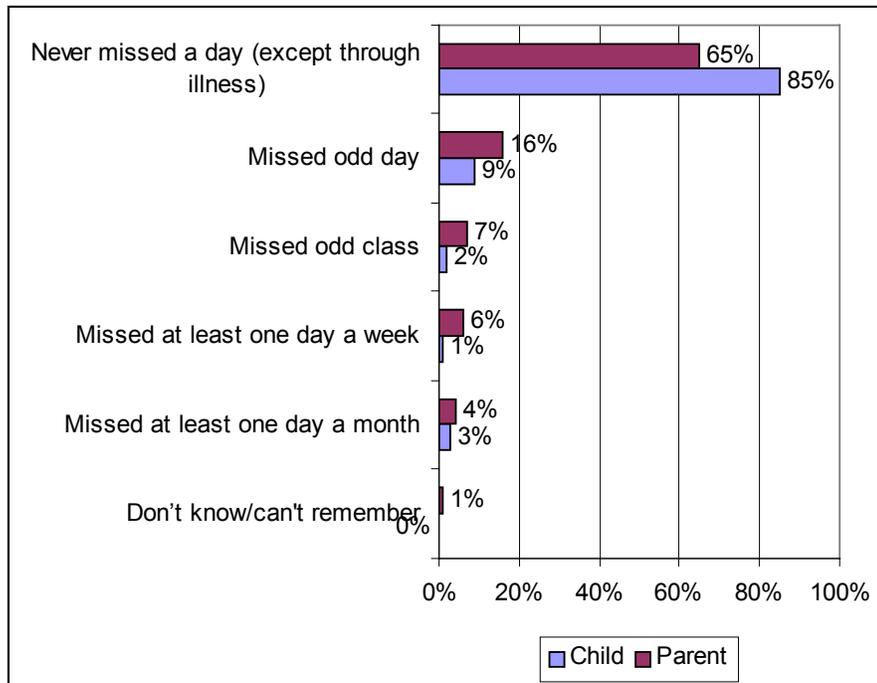
4.2 Reported levels of attendance

4.2.1 Parents/carers compared with children

Figure 1 compares children's attendance over the last 12 months at school with parents/carers' attendance records overall.

Figure 1: Percentage of respondents reporting attendance patterns: parents/carers' attendance record at school compared to their children's attendance in the last 12 months

Base: All parents/carers (2,000)



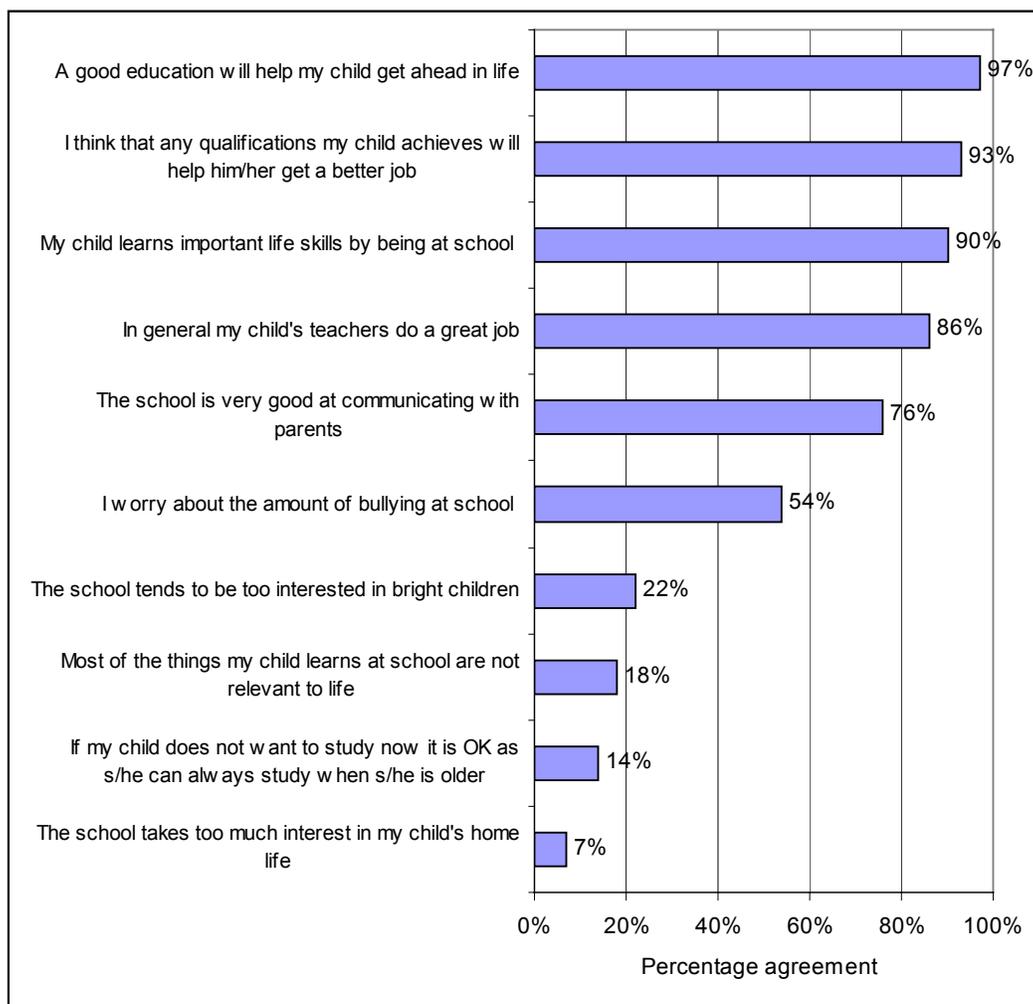
- The majority of parents/carers (85%) said that their child had never missed a day of school in the last 12 months, unless s/he had been ill, while this had also been the attendance pattern of over two-thirds of parents/carers (65%).
- While only 2% of parents/carers said their child occasionally missed the odd class, almost one in ten parents/carers (9%) said that their child occasionally missed the odd day at school. By comparison 7% of parents/carers say that they had missed the odd class when they were at school, and 16% had missed the odd day of school.
- Infrequent attendance was much less common, with only 3% of parents/carers saying that their child misses at least one day of school per month, and just 1% saying that their child misses at least one day per week of school. Similarly, 4% of parents/carers said that they had missed at least one day of school per month, and 6% had missed at least one day per week.

After further analysis, which is reported in detail in Appendix 2, a relationship between the reported child's attendance and the parent/carers reporting of their own attendance was found. Parents/carers who report their own attendance at school was poor are more likely to report higher proportions of their children missing some school.

4.3 Attitudes towards education

Parents/carers were asked for their level of agreement or disagreement with a series of statements about education generally. A summary of the overall findings appears in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Percentage level of respondents agreeing with statements about education (listed below)
Base: All parents/carers (2,000)



Parents'/carers' attitudes towards education were generally very positive. The majority (97%) agreed that a good education would help their child to get ahead in life. While 93% thought that qualifications were important to their child's future, 90% also agreed that children learn important life skills at school.

Three quarters of parents/carers (76%) agreed that their child's school is good at communicating with them and the majority (86%) agreed that their child's teachers do a great job.

However, over half of parents/carers (54%) worried about the amount of bullying at school. Just over a fifth (22%) felt that their child's school tended to be too interested in bright children at the expense of the others, although only 7% thought that the school takes too much interest in their child's home life.

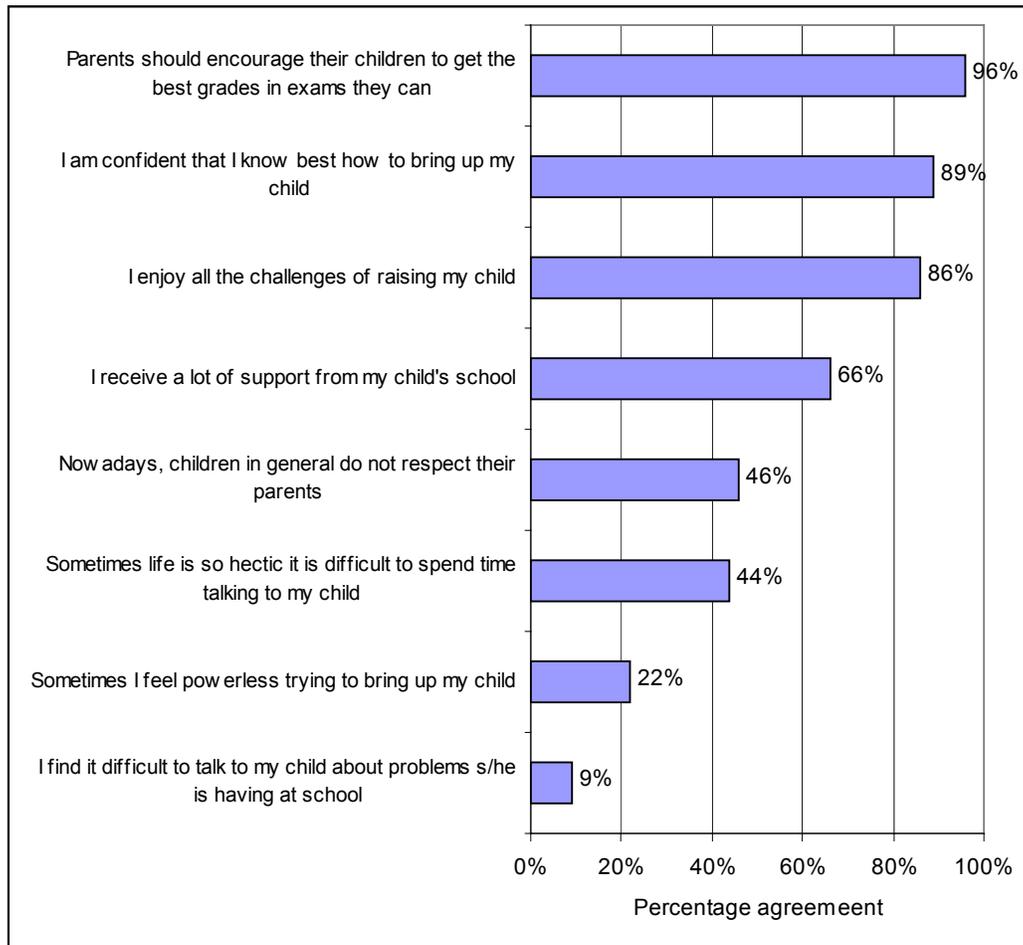
Just under a fifth of parents/carers (18%) thought that most of the things their child learns at school are not relevant to real life. A small proportion (14%) of parents/carers saw it as acceptable that if their child did not want to study now, s/he could study when s/he was older.

4.4 Attitudes towards parenting and caring

Parents/carers were asked for their level of agreement or disagreement towards a series of statements about parenting and caring. In general, responses were positive, as Figure 3 reveals.

Figure 3: Percentage of respondents agreeing with statements about parenting and caring (listed below)

Base: All parents/carers (2,000)



Almost all respondents (96%) agreed that parents/carers should encourage their children to get the best grades in exams that they can. Nearly nine in ten parents/carers (89%) agreed that they were confident in their abilities to bring up their child, while 86% agreed that they enjoy the challenges of raising their child. Two thirds of parents/carers (66%) agreed that they receive a lot of support from their child's school.

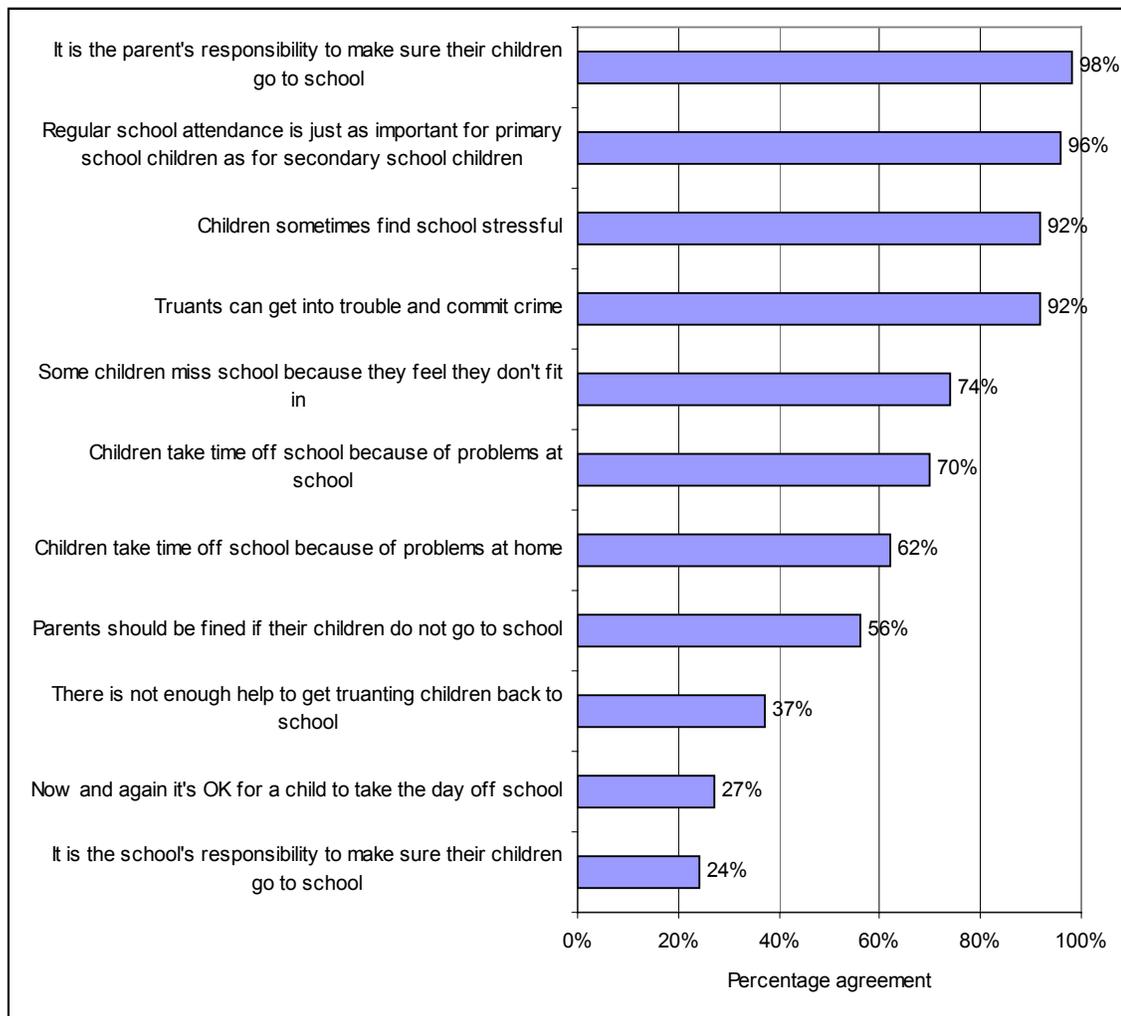
While the majority of parents/carers did not find it difficult to talk to their child about problems s/he is having at school, a fifth of parents/carers (22%) admitted that they sometimes felt powerless trying to bring up their child. Nearly half of all parents/carers (46%) thought that children in general do not respect their parents/carers nowadays, and 44% admitted that sometimes life was so hectic it was difficult to spend time talking to their child.

4.5 Attitudes towards attendance

4.5.1 Views about school attendance

Parents/carers do, on the whole, see the onus of responsibility for their child's attendance being on themselves, rather than on their child's school. While 98% of parents/carers agreed that it is their responsibility to ensure their child goes to school, only 24% of parents/carers agreed that it was the responsibility of the school. Figure 4 illustrates the findings.

Figure 4: Percentage of respondents agreeing with statements about attendance (listed below)
Base: All parents/carers (2,000)



The majority of parents/carers (96%) agreed that regular attendance at school is equally important for primary and secondary school age pupils, and more than two-thirds (65%) did not consider it acceptable for a child to take a day off school now and again.

Almost all (92%) agreed that children can sometimes find school stressful, and nearly three quarters of parents/carers (74%) agreed that some children miss school because they feel they don't fit in.

Seven in ten parents/carers agreed that children take time off because of problems at school, while just over six in ten (62%) agreed that children take time off because of problems at home.

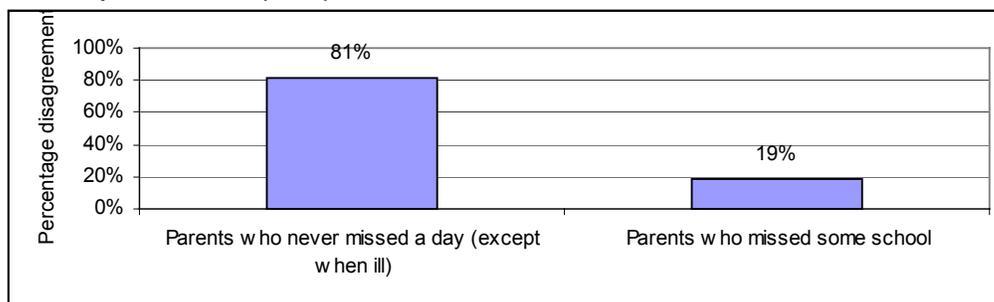
Non-attendance (and specifically, 'truancy') was seen by the majority of parents/carers (92%) as potentially leading children into crime.

There was agreement from over half (56%) that parents/carers *should* be fined if their children do not go to school. However, agreement was less likely among parents/carers whom the school had been in contact about their child's non-attendance (46% compared with 57% of parents/carers who had not been contacted by the school).

Opinion was mixed over whether schools provide enough help in getting truanting children back into school. While 37% of parents/carers agreed that there is not enough help from schools, 29% disagreed, and just under a fifth (19%) did not give an opinion either way.

Just under a third of parents/carers (27%) considered it acceptable for a child to take the day off school 'now and again'. Parents/carers who reported that they had themselves never missed a day at school except through illness were considerably more likely to disagree that it was acceptable to take a day off school 'now and then' compared to parents/carers who reported that they themselves had missed some school (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Percentage disagreement with acceptability of a child taking a day off school 'now and again', by attendance record of parent
Base: All parents/carers (2,000)

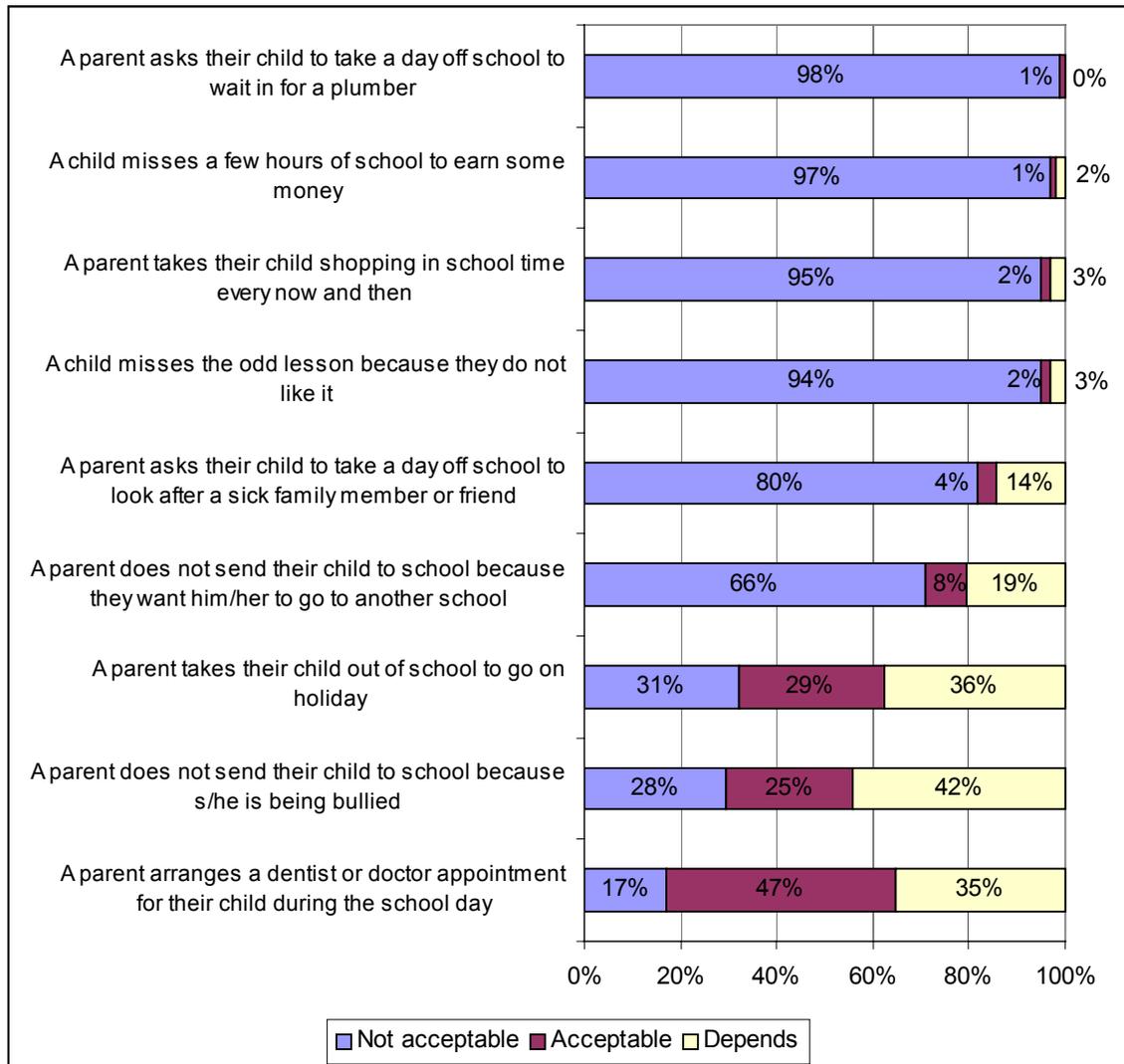


Subsequent analysis, which is reported at the end of this chapter, found there was also evidence that those parents/carers who had reported that they themselves had poorer attendance at school, and who agreed with the statement that ‘now and again’ it was acceptable for a child to take a day off school” reported a higher percentage of non-attendance of their child at school than those who had disagreed with this statement.

4.5.2 Acceptability of different forms of non-attendance

Several scenarios involving non-attendance at school were described to parents/carers. They were asked whether they thought the reasons for non-attendance in each case were acceptable. Figure 6 illustrates how parents’/carers’ responded, and the findings are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Figure 6: Percentage of respondents' who indicated that it was 'not acceptable', 'acceptable', or 'depends' to the following statements concerning reasons for non-attendance
Base: All parents/carers (2,000)



4.5.3 Forms of non-attendance generally considered 'unacceptable'

There were certain situations in which there was near universal agreement from parents/carers that it would be unacceptable for a child to miss school. Almost all said that it is unacceptable to take a child out of school to wait in for a plumber (98%), earn money (97%) or go shopping (96%).

Not liking a particular subject was not considered a valid excuse by the majority of parents/carers (94%) for a child to miss a lesson. Keeping their child off school to care for a

sick relative or friend was also considered unacceptable by eight in ten parents/carers; although 14% said that it would depend on the circumstances.

4.5.4 Forms of non-attendance generally considered 'acceptable'

Taking their child to the doctor or dentist during school hours was seen as acceptable by nearly half (47%) of parents/carers and a further third (35%) said that it would depend on circumstances. Whilst non-attendance of this kind would be authorised by schools, 17% of respondents thought that arranging a doctor's or dentist's appointment for their child during school hours would not be acceptable.

4.5.5 Forms of non-attendance for which acceptability is mixed

However, responses to the remaining scenarios were more mixed. While two-thirds of parents/carers deemed it unacceptable for a parent to keep a child off school because they wanted their child to go to another school, a fifth (19%) said that it would depend on the circumstances, and 8% said that it would be acceptable.

A quarter of parents/carers believed that it would be acceptable to keep a child off school if s/he was being bullied, and a further 42% said that it would depend on the circumstances. Just over a quarter (28%) deemed it unacceptable to keep a child off school because the child was a victim of bullying.

Opinion was almost equally divided over whether it was acceptable or not to take a child on holiday during term-time. While three in ten (29%) said that it would be acceptable, almost the same proportion (31%) felt that it would not be acceptable, and just over a third of parents/carers (36%) said it would depend on the circumstances.

The acceptability of term-time holidays is associated with the age of the respondent's child; the level of child's attendance at school; and the level of the respondent's attendance at school. Taking a secondary school child on holiday during term-time was seen as less acceptable than taking a primary school child: 24% of parents/carers with a secondary school-age child said it would be acceptable, compared to 33% of parents/carers of a primary school-age child. In addition, fathers (particularly lone fathers) were more likely than mothers to say it was acceptable to take a child out of school during term-time to go on holiday (35% compared with 27%).

The parents/carers of children who had missed the occasional day of school during the last year were also more likely to think it acceptable to take their child on holiday during term-time than were the general population of parents/carers (50% compared with 29% overall).

While 28% of parents/carers who had never missed school (except through illness) said that it would be acceptable to take a child on holiday during term-time, this was the opinion of 38% of parents/carers who had missed at least one day of school per month (and 37% of parents/carers who had missed at least one day a week of school).

4.5.6 Responses to non-attendance

Parents/carers were asked to state how they would respond in each of three hypothetical scenarios concerning their child's non-attendance. They were asked to rate the likelihood of taking various course of action using a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is very unlikely and 10 is very likely. The scenarios were designed to assess parental attitudes towards different types of and reasons for non-attendance and assess how parents/carers judge what is and is not deemed an acceptable reason. The scenarios used were as follows:

- Scenario A: Your child does not want to go to school and complains of a stomach ache, but you suspect nothing is wrong
- Scenario B: You discover that your child has not attended school but stayed at home watching TV.
- Scenario C: Your child says s/he is being bullied and wants to take a few days off school.

4.5.7 Scenario A: Child complains of a stomach ache

Figure 7 illustrates how parents/carers thought they might respond.

The findings indicate that parents/carers on the whole are unlikely to keep their child off school if the child complains of illness but the parent suspects nothing is wrong. However, parents/carers would try to find out the real reason behind children's reluctance to go to school and if necessary, would inform the school.

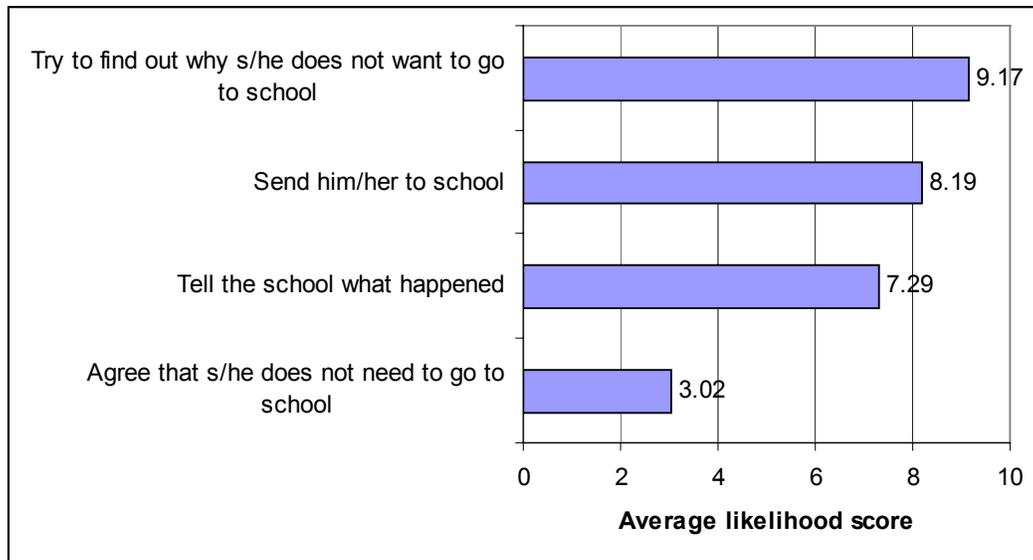
Mothers would be more likely to try to find out what was wrong than fathers (74% compared with 64% saying that they would be 'very likely' – point 10 on a scale of 1-10).

Few parents/carers were likely to agree that their child did not need to go to school if they complained of a stomach ache, but they suspected nothing was wrong (average likelihood score of 3.02).

Mothers were less likely than fathers to let their child stay at home (56% compared with 43%). Interestingly, parents/carers who were poor attenders themselves at school were less likely than regular attenders to let their child stay at home (64% compared to 53%).

Figure 7: Average score (where 1 is very unlikely and 10 is very likely) given by respondents in the following scenario: your child does not want to go to school one day and complains of a stomach ache. You suspect that nothing is wrong. How likely are you to...

Base: All parents/carers (2,000)



4.5.8 Scenario B: Child does not attend school and watches TV

Figure 8 illustrates how parents/carers thought they might respond.

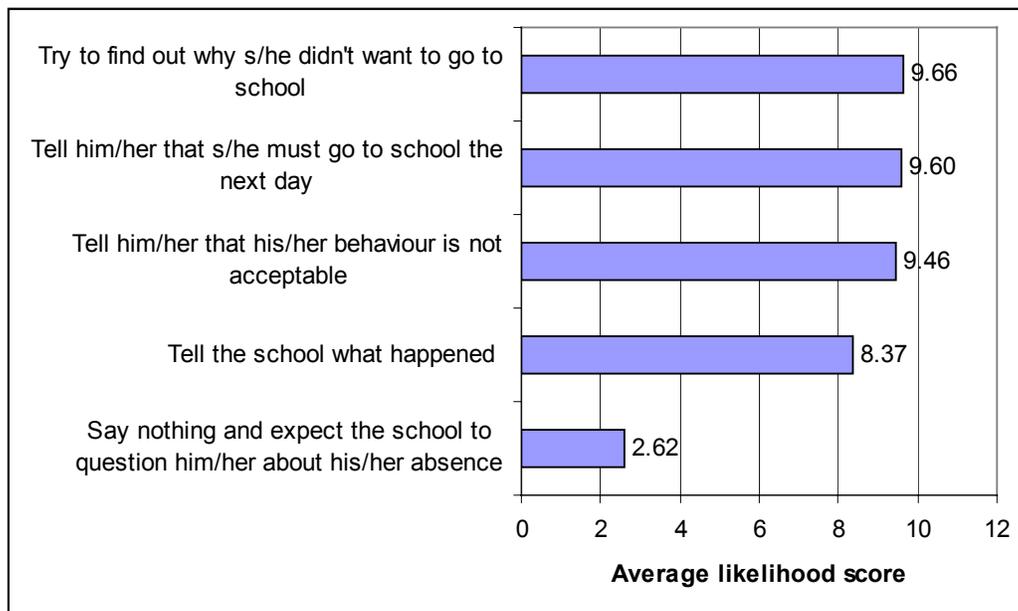
Most parents/carers say that if their child had taken a day off school to watch television, they would be very likely to try and find out why their child had not gone to school (average likelihood score of 9.66). Similarly, they would be very likely to tell their child that s/he must go to school the next day (average likelihood score of 9.6).

Parents/carers would be very likely to tell their child that their behaviour was not acceptable (average likelihood score of 9.46) and tell the school what had happened (average likelihood score of 8.37).

Parents/carers are very unlikely to say nothing about the situation to their child and expect the school to deal with the situation (average likelihood score of 2.62).

Figure 8: Average score (where 1 is very unlikely and 10 is very likely) given by respondents in the following scenario: you discover your child has not attended school and instead spent the day at home watching TV. How likely are you to...

Base: All parents/carers (2,000)



4.5.9 Scenario C: Child says s/he is being bullied

Figure 9 illustrates how parents/carers thought they might respond.

If a child had not attended school because of bullying, parents'/carers' attitudes were more mixed than for the other scenarios. Parents/carers were most likely to find out why their child was being bullied (average likelihood score of 9.8), and tell the school what had happened (average likelihood score of 9.65).

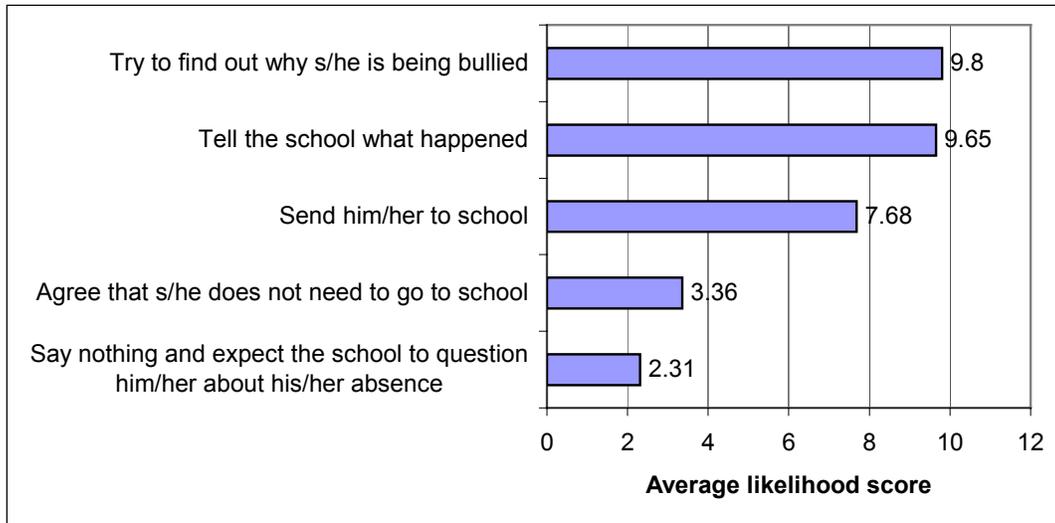
Parents/carers were also likely to send their child to school in this scenario (average likelihood score of 7.68). The average likelihood score of parents/carers agreeing that their child did not need to go to school if they said they were being bullied was just 3.36.

Parents/carers were unlikely to say nothing if their child was being bullied and expect the school to question him or her (average likelihood score of 2.31). Three quarters of parents/carers said that they would be 'very unlikely' (score 1 on scale of 1-10) to act in this way. This opinion was more likely to be held by parents/carers with degrees or higher degrees (82%), compared with parents/carers with no qualifications (67%). Parents/carers

of younger children were also more likely than parents/carers of older children to hold this view (77% of parents/carers of children aged 5-13, compared with 70% of parents/carers with 14-16 year olds).

Figure 9: Average score (where 1 is very unlikely and 10 is very likely) given by respondents in the following scenario: your child says that s/he is being bullied by children at school and wants to have a few days off school to get over it. How likely are you to...

Base: All parents/carers (2,000)



4.6 Knowledge of legal implications of non-attendance

A series of questions were asked which explored the level of parents'/carers' knowledge about various legal requirements behind attendance and the implications of their child not attending school. Figure 10 shows how they responded.

The vast majority (98%) of parents/carers understood that they have a legal obligation to ensure that their child attends school regularly and on time. Nearly the same percentage (96%) knew that they needed to ask permission to take their child out of school for any reason other than illness.

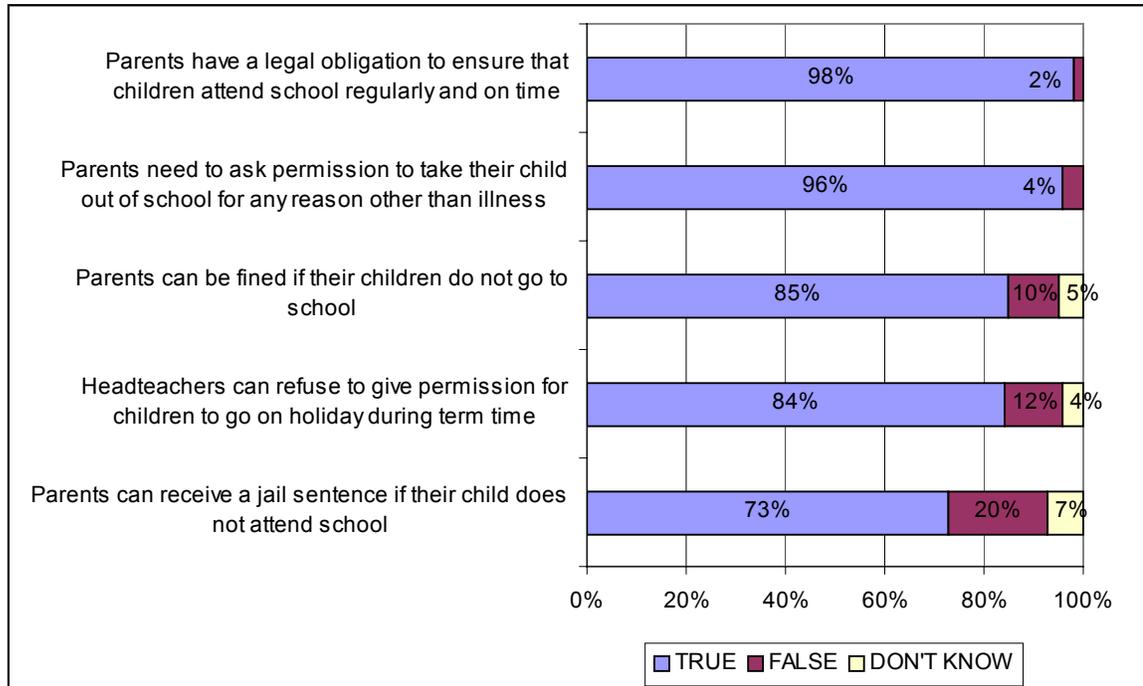
Parents/carers were slightly less aware of the powers of the school or the penalties that could be legally imposed on them if their child did not attend school (although knowledge was still generally high). Eighty-five per cent of parents/carers knew that they could be fined if their child did not go to school, but one in ten (10%) was unaware of this, and fathers were slightly more likely than mothers to hold this view (13% compared with 9%).

While the majority of parents/carers (84%) knew that headteachers can refuse permission for parents/carers to take their children on holiday during term-time, more than one in ten

(12%) overall were not aware of this, and this view was more prevalent among fathers than mothers (17% compared with 10% respectively). Parents/carers with no qualifications were also more likely to hold this belief than were parents/carers with any qualifications (20% of non-qualified parents/carers compared with between 11% and 13% of parents/carers with some formal qualifications).

Just under three quarters of parents/carers (73%) were aware that they could face a fine or imprisonment if their child did not attend school. However, a fifth of parents/carers (20%) were not aware that they could receive a prison sentence if their child did not attend school. Once again, the lack of awareness was more likely to come from fathers than mothers (28% compared with 17%). Parents/carers with whom the school had had contact about their child's poor attendance were also less likely to be aware that they could face a fine or imprisonment than were parents/carers who had not been contacted (25% and 19% respectively).

Figure 10: Percentage of respondents who indicate that the statements about the legal requirements behind attendance are 'true', 'false', or they 'don't know'.
Base: All parents/carers (2,000)



4.7 Further Analysis

Further statistical analysis was undertaken and this is reported more fully in Appendix 2. In summary the key findings are as follows:

- Factor analysis was undertaken in order to explore possible relationships between the various questions in the survey and to identify whether certain groupings of questions explained variations in responses. The results of this analysis indicated only very weak groupings of questions.
- Cluster analysis revealed that responses to the questions tended to be extremely homogeneous and that there were no strongly distinctive clusters of respondents.
- The results of the CHAID analyses confirmed a relationship between the child's reported attendance at school and:
 - The parents'/carers' own attendance record, and
 - Whether the school has ever contacted the parent to discuss their child's non-attendance.

4.8 Summary of findings

It is clear from the findings from the telephone survey that parents'/carers' attitudes towards education were generally very positive with the majority (97%) agreeing that a good education would help their child to get ahead in life. Indeed parents/carers were supportive of their child's efforts to perform well at school. For example, almost all respondents (96%) agreed that parents/carers should encourage their children to get the best grades in exams that they can. Similarly, almost all respondents (96%) agreed that parents/carers should encourage their children to get the best grades in exams that they can. Parents/carers also agree that gaining qualifications would help their child get a better job (93%) and 90% also agreed that children learn important life skills at school.

Overall the parents/carers that were interviewed were broadly confident about their role as parents/carers. Almost nine in ten parents/carers (89%) agreed that they were confident in their abilities to bring up their child, while 86% agreed that they enjoy the challenges of

raising their child. Parents/carers were also aware of the support they received from schools in this process: two thirds of parents/carers (66%) agreed that they receive a lot of support from their child's school

Most parents/carers also recognised that school attendance was an important issue and one which they should be concerned about. The majority of parents/carers (96%) agreed that regular attendance at school is equally important for primary and secondary school age pupils

Parents/carers do, on the whole, see the onus of responsibility for their child's attendance being on themselves (98%). Around a quarter (24%) see that some of this responsibility is shared with the school.

The majority of parents/carers (85%) said that their child had never missed a day of school in the last 12 months, unless s/he had been ill. The small percentage of parents/carers who reported that their children had missed school in the last 12 months precluded any detailed analysis. However CHAID analysis revealed a relationship between parents/carers own reported attendance and the reported attendance of their child. While 15% of all parents/carers reported that their child had missed some school in the last 12 months, this figure rose to 26% amongst those parents/carers who reported their own attendance at school was poor.

Parents/carers generally tended not to accept non-attendance at school. For example, almost all parents/carers felt that it is unacceptable to take a child out of school to wait in for a plumber (98%), earn money (97%) or go shopping (96%). Missing a lesson because they did not like a particular subject and keeping their child off school to care for a sick relative or friend was also considered unacceptable by 94% and 80% of parents/carers respectively. More than two-thirds (65%) did not consider it acceptable for a child to take a day off school 'now and again'.

However, taking their child to the doctor or dentist during school hours, which would be authorised by schools, was seen as acceptable by nearly half (47%) of parents/carers and a further third (35%) said that it would depend on circumstances. Opinion was almost equally divided over whether it was acceptable or not to take a child on holiday during term-time. While three in ten (29%) said that it would be acceptable, almost the same proportion

(31%) felt that it would not be acceptable, and just over a third of parents/carers (36%) said it would depend on the circumstances.

A quarter of parents/carers believed that it would be acceptable to keep a child off school if s/he was being bullied, and a further 42% said that it would depend on the circumstances. Just over a quarter (28%) deemed it unacceptable to keep a child off school because of bullying.

Parents/carers responded to three different scenarios concerned with school attendance and on the whole their responses confirmed that they tended to encourage their child to attend school. In the first scenario parents/carers on the whole are unlikely to keep their child off school if the child complains of stomach ache but the parent suspects nothing is wrong. Most parents/carers would try to find out the real reason behind children's reluctance to go to school and if necessary, would inform the school. In the second scenario, most parents/carers say that if their child had taken a day off school to watch television, they would be very likely to tell their child that their behaviour was not acceptable and tell the school what had happened. In the final scenario, if a child had not attended school because of bullying, parents/carers were likely to find out why their child was being bullied and tell the school what had happened.

The majority (98%) of parents/carers understood that they have a legal obligation to ensure that their child attends school regularly and on time. Nearly the same percentage (96%) knew that they needed to ask permission to take their child out of school for any reason other than illness. However slightly fewer parents/carers were aware that headteachers can refuse permission for parents/carers to take their children on holiday during term-time (84%), that they could be fined if their child did not go to school (85%) and just under three quarters (73%) were aware that they could receive a prison sentence if their child did not attend school.

5 Findings from interviews with parents/carers referred to Education Welfare Services

This chapter provides a detailed analysis of the interviews with parents/carers whose children are known by the Education Welfare Service (EWS) to be poor or non-attenders. Interviews were conducted with 22 parents/carers across seven Local Education Authorities (LEAs) across England, which included two London boroughs. Twenty households were visited; in two of these, a couple was interviewed.

The main aim of the interviews conducted with parents/carers was to examine the attitudes of parents/carers towards school attendance, and to identify if they differ from those the general population of parents/carers who responded to the telephone survey.

An additional aim was to examine how the parents/carers of children who are poor attenders can most effectively be persuaded to meet their responsibilities in ensuring their child's regular attendance at school.

5.1 Respondent profile

Seven LEAs in England were selected to reflect geographical diversity. Throughout this chapter, the participating LEAs have not been named to maintain confidentiality. Respondents were selected by the EWS. Interviews were conducted in-home and parents/carers were each given £25 to thank them for their time and cover out-of-pocket expenses.

The profile of respondents is shown in Figure 11. In total 18 mothers/female carers and 4 fathers/male carers participated in the research. Most of the parents/carers that were interviewed shared some common characteristics: most were from low income families and the majority were lone parents/carers. With the exception of three lone parent families, the majority were female-headed.

Figure 11: Description of the key characteristics of respondents that were interviewed.

LEA			
North West industrial town	Young mother Lone parent 6 children in total 2 boys not attending	Older mother Lone parent 2 children, both not attending	Older mother Lone parent 2 children, both not attending
Inner London borough	Lone mother 2 secondary school-age children, both not attending	Lone mother Partner who does not live with her 1 son not attending	Lone mother 5 children (4 still at home, incl. 1 toddler) 2 children not attending
Outer London borough	Young mother Lone parent Not in relationship 1 child in primary school not attending	Young mother Lone parent Not in relationship 1 child in secondary school not attending	Older father Lone parent 1 child in secondary school not attending
North West town on city outskirts	Younger mother Lone parent 2 children 1 daughter not attending	Older Mother Married 1 child not attending	Older Mother Lone parent 1 son not attending
South West market town	Older mother and male partner (both interviewed) 3 children (incl. one left school; one toddler). 1 daughter not attending	Younger mother Lone parent 5 children 2 older children not attending	Older mother Lone parent 2 children 1 child not attending
Midlands county town	Younger mother Lone parent 1 child in primary school not attending	Older mother Married 1 child in secondary school not attending	
North West coastal town	Father and partner (both interviewed) 1 daughter not attending	Father Lone parent 1 son not attending	Father Lone parent 2 children not attending

The sample was composed only of parents/carers who were known to the Education Welfare Service (EWS) and were receiving support from the Education Welfare Officers (EWOs). It is also likely that as the sample was selected by the EWS, the parents/carers who were interviewed would be more likely to be parents/carers that cooperated with the EWS. Indeed, it is possible that these particular parents/carers may have had more knowledge about attendance issues. Additionally, it should be pointed out that there was no

representation from families who opt out of formal education and choose instead to educate their children at home.

5.2 The interviews

The interviews were conducted in the home of the parent/carer. In a few cases the non-attending child was at home during the interview, but usually preferred to be in another room.

The topic guide used to conduct the interviews with parents/carers is presented at Appendix 4.

5.3 The findings

Analysis of the interviews indicated that the reasons given by parents/carers for their child's poor attendance were very varied. In most cases the parents/carers provided multiple reasons which they considered had contributed to their child's poor attendance. Many parents/carers described how they were tackling multiple problems (such as housing, debt and health issues) A number of the parents/carers had experienced difficulties related to school attendance with their child over a period of months and some over a period of years, and as a result the issues and problems that contributed to poor attendance sometimes changed over time. Parents/carers often described their situation as complex and difficult to tackle effectively.

Parents/carers appeared to respond in different ways to tackling their child's poor attendance. We identified four different approaches that parents/carers adopted. We recognise that any 'typology' can only reflect some of the commonalities between types and minimises the differences within types. We also recognise that the small number of interviews conducted means that the groupings are fairly broad-brush and that further research would be required to validate or elaborate on this 'typology'. A description of the four types follows:

1. *Parents/carers who are trying hard*

- Parents/carers have tried hard to encourage their child to attend school using a variety of methods.
- They have worked co-operatively with the EWO and have usually tried all the approaches that have been recommended.
- They usually have a good relationship with the school and maintain regular contact and good communications. They may often call the school and check that their child is there.
- Reasons for non-attendance were often centred on illness, an educational need or behavioural problems experienced by the child
- Parents/carers are happy to engage with support services and are appreciative of any help received, although sometimes frustrated because they would like intervention to take place sooner and be more tailored to their individual needs.

2. *Powerless parents/carers*

- Parents/carers frequently describe how powerless they feel in bringing about change in their child's attendance at school.
 - Parents/carers often have multiple social and personal problems which may require additional support from both EWOs and other professionals.
 - Support from the EWS may not always be taken up because of other events taking precedence in their lives.
 - The lives of the families in this group were characterised by chaos and lack of organisation. Their children's education, although important, is lower down on their list of priorities than it might be among other parents/carers because other matters are more pressing, for example, paying the rent and fear of eviction.
 - Parents/carers in this group were most likely to be lone mothers who have suffered family breakdown and in some cases, domestic violence. They may have low self-esteem and therefore be unable to pass on positive messages to their children
 - Parents/carers were more likely than others to have left school early themselves and have fewer qualifications, and may also have had poor attendance themselves
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3. *Over-protective or dependent parents/carers*

- Parents/carers in this group tended to behave in ways that could be seen as over-protective or dependent.
- Parents/carers in this group gave bullying and illness as reasons for their children's non-attendance, and were likely to condone their child missing school.
- Often parents/carers were concerned by the frequent reporting of "bullying" in the media.
- In some cases, it appeared that the parents'/carers' main response to bullying or illness was to withdraw their child from school.
- Parents/carers often reported that the school was not doing enough to tackle bullying.
- In some cases these parents/carers were less keen about the help and support they received from the EWS and from the school.
- Parents/carers in this group often wanted to receive advice and counselling, and strongly disliked simply being 'told' that their child must attend school. Other parents/carers were keen to find another school for their child.

4. *Apathetic non-engaging parents/carers*

- Parents/carers in this group may have been offered support and interventions but don't respond or responded minimally.
- The children of parents/carers in this group may be missing school with or without their parents'/carers' knowledge.
- Parents/carers may have been poor attenders themselves and may have left school pre-16 without qualifications. They are the group least likely to see the value of formal (academic) education
- Some parents/carers in this group appeared to fail to respond to or engage with their child, and in some cases they may be condoning non-attendance
- Parents/carers in this group seemed to be more concerned about possible fines and imprisonment than parents/carers in the other groups.

Although these four groupings of parents/carers appear to be quite distinct, we recognise that individual parents/carers may not fit neatly into a single group, or that they may have

characteristics which set them apart from these groupings. For this reason we would be cautious about using a typology for diagnostic purposes or to determine appropriate interventions. The main value of these groupings may be to reflect some of the diversity of attitudes to improving attendance.

In the following paragraphs we describe more detailed aspects of parents/carers attitudes to education and attendance, and we discuss their views about what support they require to ensure that their child's attendance improves.

5.4 Attitudes towards education

5.4.1 Value of school and education

There was a general feeling among all respondents that education is valuable and school should not be missed. This view prevailed regardless of whether parents/carers had been regular or poor attenders at school themselves. Where their own educational achievements had been poor (whether as a result of non-attendance or not), parents/carers wanted better for their children.

"I think [education] is very important for my children, because I failed, I've got no exams and I look back on my life and I think I wish, I just wished I'd stuck it out instead of being naughty" (Lone mother, South West market town)

"If you're not in school you're out of school, you're getting into trouble; you're meeting the wrong sort of people. When you get older, things get more serious. You know you're not going to get no qualifications; you're not going to get a job. And if you're going to be like that at school, then you're going to be like that with work, aren't you?" (Lone father, Outer London borough)

5.4.2 Pressures of school today

There was a general feeling among parents/carers that there is more pressure on children academically in the current education system than there was when they themselves were at school. Many of the parents/carers sympathised with their children over the number of exams they have to sit and the amount of homework they receive.

"I think a lot is expected from children, especially... in junior schools, they have all the SAT tests, and, I know they have got to be tested to a certain degree, but yeah that's it. I think the teachers are under a lot of pressure to be able to put it across to

the children in the amount of time they have [available].” (Mother in two-parent family, South West market town)

“He’s just scared of [exams]; he’s just scared of them. I said there’s nothing to be scared of but – and of course all the teachers kept bombarding him with was ‘You’ve got to do well because you’ve got your SATS coming up’. And of course the more they did that the more terrified he got basically. I don’t know why they have to do so many exams to be quite honest.” (Mother in two-parent family, Inner London borough)

There was a perception that teachers were also under pressure in the current education system to deliver a demanding curriculum, with the implication that they may have less time to spend with individual children. This may also mean that teachers had less time available to help children who may have problems related to poorer attendance.

“Sometimes I feel the teachers haven’t got enough time to sort out one child who has not settled in his class or something. Because they have got a class of what 30, 35 children, and they haven’t got the time or the patience now.” (Lone mother, South West market town).

5.4.3 Academic, vocational and social skills

Most parents/carers recognised the importance of learning and wanted their children to do well at school. They also considered that academic qualifications are very important, particularly in securing a good job in the future. A few parents/carers think there is too much of a focus on academic ability and that other factors, such as the ability to get on with other children and adults, is equally as important as formal qualifications. A few parents also felt that learning to cope with a structured environment like school is useful and would help prepare their children for the world of work.

“For me I think social skills are more important than education: they have got to have that drive. Obviously they have got to have some nous about them...Confidence, respect, assertiveness things like that but they have got to have some education otherwise they can’t do the job.” (Lone mother, North West city outskirts)

“I believe in the education system. I do think it is very important and even if I could get her to go until Year 11 just for that sort of learning – [that is] how to cope in that

[structured] environment. I think what frightens me more than anything else [is] that she hasn't got structure and that – the skills that you develop at school to take on in to adulthood. Because I think those are more important than what you gain academically to be honest, because I think the academic can come at a later stage.”
(Lone mother, Inner London borough)

When parents/carers reflected on their own experiences of school many felt that children today had more opportunities. However, a few also felt that as a result of the National Curriculum some children might have less choice about the particular subjects they could chose.

“In some ways I am quite envious; equal opportunities didn't exist in my day. There were subjects that I would have loved to have done but couldn't because I was a girl. The subjects that I think I would have been good at! And I think kids these days – it's sad that they don't take the opportunities that are available...” (Mother in two-parent family, Outer London Borough)

“I think the national curriculum means that the children have to do [certain] subjects [and that] they have less choice in some respects. Even from ten years ago.... I think that the number of subjects that they can actually choose to do [now] is less. They can't always do the subjects they want because it doesn't fit the timetable because the compulsory subjects seem to get more and more!” (Mother in two-parent family, Outer London borough)

5.5 Attitudes towards attendance

5.5.1 Value of regular attendance

All the parents/carers were convinced that regular attendance was important. All stressed that children would learn more if they attended school regularly. Similarly, all the parents/carers said they wanted their children to attend school regularly. Most said they worried about their child's education if they missed school.

“So, if you are even off school two or three times you know in a month, you haven't, you won't be learning that again, and then you will have to catch up and you will find it hard.” (Lone mother, South West market town)

Poor attendance is not seen as a new problem by parents/carers. Indeed, a few of the parents/carers said they when they were at school their own attendance had been poor. In the case of a parent whose own attendance at school had been poor (because of a lack of friends in the third year), her impressions were that schools now are far more strict about attendance.

“When I [was] a kid it wasn’t as big a deal as it is now... You wouldn’t see the wag officer until you’d been off for at least 6 weeks, do you know what I mean... it was a bit more carefree” (Lone mother, North West city outskirts)

Some of the parents/carers considered that the problem of poor attendance had worsened since their generation was at school, and virtually everyone recognised that poor attendance was seen as more of a problem nowadays that it had been in their childhood.

“Yeah, because I finished school in the, in the 80s, and I think it was becoming a problem then, because I knew there was six or seven of them in like the last year, quite regularly playing truant, but I think from late 80s it has got worse.” (Father in two parent family, South West market town)

In addition, they felt that in the past it was more acceptable to miss school. Also the nature of “truancy” was seen to have changed. In the past it meant that “kids used to bunk off and go and play in the woods”, whereas now it was more normal for them to either stay at home or be found in shopping centres or children’s parks and play areas.

“None of our families knew we were doing it so... I mean my mum would get me ready for school in the morning, send me off to school, I’d go to the bus stop, make out I was going to school and then I’d end up not going. But as far as my mum knew, I was at school. I used to come home and say – oh yes I’ve had this lesson today or whatever but I’d been nowhere near the school.” (Lone mother, Outer London borough)

5.5.2 *When do parents/carers find non-attendance acceptable?*

There were some circumstances under which parents/carers generally agreed that a child should be allowed to miss school. These included the death of a family member, recovering

after an operation and illness. However, in the case of illness, parents/carers said it would depend on the severity, and admitted that on occasion, they gave their child the benefit of the doubt.

“Umm... for just a tummy ache I would say you should go to school... [but] you know, it is something you can't monitor so you have to take their word for it. I had that problem with [child]. You know, he would say 'I feel sick' and you'd be thinking 'Well, are you?' Sometimes you'll hear [sick sound] in the toilet and again you don't know whether they are being sick or not...” (Lone mother, Inner London borough)

In most other situations parents/carers considered it was not acceptable that a child should miss school. So for example it was seen as unacceptable to miss school to wait in for a plumber, to care for a relative or to go on a shopping trip. The fact that a child disliked school or disliked a particular subject or teacher was also seen as an unacceptable reason not to attend school. Most parents/carers also thought that it would be unacceptable to take their child out of school for a holiday. A few however said that some parents might have to do it, if the parents could only take their holidays from work during term-time. Parents/carers were more undecided about whether or not bullying would be an acceptable reason for non-attendance. Most parents/carers felt that it *should not* be a reason not to attend school, but that it might depend on how severe the bullying was, and what was being done to tackle it. A few parents/carers were particularly concerned about bullying and said that they would want to protect their child by not sending them to school if they were being bullied. In this regard, parents'/carers' views about when it is acceptable or unacceptable for their child to be absent from school did not differ from the views expressed in the telephone survey.

5.5.3 *Reasons for non-attendance*

Parents/carers gave a wide variety of reasons why their child's attendance was poor. However this did not mean that they thought these reasons were acceptable or that they condoned their child's absence. In most cases parents/carers were clear about what they thought was acceptable and unacceptable, and they stressed that they conveyed their views to their child. Indeed many parents/carers said that they frequently talked to their child and tried to convince them that they should attend school. In most cases this appeared not to be very successful.

The main reasons given by parents/carers for their child's poor attendance were illness, behaviour problems (including attention problems) bullying, the school environment or a particular subject or teacher. In many cases there was more than one reason. For example,

it was often mentioned by parents/carers that initially their child had missed school through illness and that it had proved difficult to get their child back to school because of an additional problem (such as the child became anxious about school or concerned about being bullied on return to school).

Sometimes protracted illness created other difficulties. For example, in one family, a child had a number of illnesses, which had meant he had missed almost a year of school. His mother had tried to send him to school when she thought he was well enough to attend, but it had become very difficult to encourage him to return.

“I don’t want my children at home, I want them to go to school, but if they are ill or if they are depressed or what, what can I do? The school nurse knew about it...I went to see her, told her, you know, we have got a few problems. I mean I’ve had to drag [him] into school you know crying, and one of the teachers would have to take him off me, and then I’d have to phone up and see if he was alright, and he was still crying. And sometimes they’d phone up and say ‘Can you come and collect him?’”
(Lone mother, South West market town)

There were a number of cases where a parent said their child had missed school because of bullying. Although not seen generally by parents/carers as a valid reason for non-attendance, sympathy was expressed by many towards children who suffered from bullying.

“I mean, I know why a lot of children are truanting, I know why. They’re getting picked on. Its not because they hate school, they just don’t want to be picked on. I can understand that. It must be awful to go through a school gate knowing that you’re going to have children picking on you all day. It must be an awful experience.” (Lone father, North West coastal town).

Many parents/carers admitted being very concerned about bullying and were keen to discuss the different types of bullying such as verbal, or physical, and that it could occur within the school grounds or outside school. They also were concerned that while some children are able to ignore it, others could become traumatised by the experience and refuse to go to school.

Parents/carers varied in the extent to which they sympathised with their child. Their approaches tended to fall into one of the four types previously discussed:

- Some said they tended to be fairly strict and strongly encouraged their child to return to school,
-

- Some said they felt powerless to do anything and looked to others for support
- Some tended to be very protective of their child, and
- A few tended to be rather apathetic about encouraging their child to return to school

For those parents/carers who had negative experiences at school – for example, those who did not get on well with other children or were bullied – they were more likely to sympathise with their child.

A chaotic home environment was also viewed as a contributing factor to non-attendance. In a number of families, there had been domestic violence, child abuse or the break-up of parental relationships. Parents/carers admitted that the effects of these kinds of events can change the parent-child relationship, to the extent that children may be pressured to mature more quickly and to deal with adult issues before they are ready.

Parents/carers whose domestic situations were chaotic were aware of the effects on their children, and drew attention to the fact that such pressures could lead to other problems including attention-seeking and violent behaviour. This in turn could lead to a refusal to go to school or non-attendance, which the parent did not necessarily know about.

5.5.4 Hidden causes of non-attendance

Despite there being obvious causes for non-attendance in some cases, it was clear from many of the interviews that the reasons being given for non-attendance often masked a deeper underlying problem. Indeed, rather than there being one obvious reason for poor attendance, it was more likely to be a result of a number of factors, which were often difficult to discover.

“You never ever get to the bottom of what is bothering (my child)” (Lone mother, North West ex- industrial town)

Parents/carers interpreted some of the more superficial reasons given by a child for not wanting to attend school as warnings of something deeper.

“In the beginning he said that he was skipping school because he didn’t like one of the teachers, but in the end it turned out that he wasn’t going to school because he was so worried about his father and me breaking up”. (Lone mother, Inner London borough)

It was clear that in some of the families interviewed, children were using illness as an excuse to mask bullying or to avoid certain lessons.

“I know she doesn’t get on with her classmates and when she says she has a stomach ache I know it’s because they have been taunting her”. (Lone mother, South West market town)

5.6 Attitudes towards responsibility for attendance

5.6.1 Parents’/carers’ responsibility for attendance

Although parents/carers on the whole agreed that it was their responsibility to ensure their children attend school, some pointed out that there are limits to what they can do. At some point, they argue, there is an onus on the child to be responsible for their own attendance.

“Well, all I can do is get her to the bus stop. Then it’s out of my hands. If the bus doesn’t turn up, what else can I do? There was one time I sent her [to school] in a taxi, and it cost me nine quid one way. I can’t keep doing that.” (Lone father, North West coastal town)

A lone mother agreed that it was her responsibility, but stressed the difficulties of trying to get five children to school each morning, pointing out that she could only fulfil her responsibilities if other parties – that is, the school and EWS – were understanding and supportive.

“I think it is up to the parents to make sure their children go to school, but if you are in a situation where you can’t watch them or you have got little ones, you are relying on the school to phone you. Then that is all you can do. There is, I suppose everyone is responsible, the children, the adults and the school to make sure the children go to school. At the end of the day, it takes the school to work with the children, and the mum to work with the children, so it is, and the children to work with both sides. If that child doesn’t want to work then you have got no chance.” (Lone mother, South West market town)

5.6.2 Powerlessness

In some cases, parents/carers may be involved in the cause of their child’s non-attendance without realising, or may feel that there are factors beyond their control that prevent regular attendance. One mother mentioned that she found it difficult to mix with other people and

was concerned that her child's non-attendance was due to his having a similar character, and she felt powerless to do anything about the situation.

"I still haven't got any friends and I'm not one of these people that mixes and I think [child] takes after me." (Lone mother, North West ex-industrial town)

The parent's powerlessness was often manifest as a feeling of helplessness. They described how they had tried different approaches to getting their child back to school and that each had failed. As a last resort they had then tried to bribe their children with treats in return for their attending school.

"When you have tried everything and it has not worked you say to yourself: "I give up". I even tried offering [Child] a trip to Disneyland if he went to school. But even that doesn't work! " (Lone mother, Inner London Borough)

The lack of power that some parents/carers experienced was often clearest in examples where punishment or discipline had been tried and failed. In one case, a child had been 'grounded' but had jumped out of the window and gone out regardless. However at least one parent described how they were able to regain power over their child's behaviour:

"[Child] was the controller. I was just his puppet I think... I've changed as well [because] I've put the ground rules down and that and he listens to me now.... Once I would scream and shout and it would make him worse but now I just don't react." (Lone mother, North West ex-industrial town)

5.6.3 *The child's role in poor attendance*

A number of parents/carers considered that some children were more likely not to attend school than other children, even from the same family. In some cases parents/carers described how one child in the family may have a poor attendance record while the others were regular attenders.

"I didn't have the problems with [my two older children] as I do with [this child]. You know now I've got the parent order with [child], it is just his general attitude at home as well which I didn't get from the others. And like school, if I wake him up for school, he'll tell me where to go, swearing... You know, and I sort of think, 'Well where did I go wrong?' because I didn't have it before and then you've got this one."

But since being on the parenting order and speaking to other parents/carers I found that I am not alone and other parents/carers have the same problem, you know, [their] other children are fine and just one particular child that's gone off the rails so to speak." (Lone mother, Inner London borough)

For these parents/carers, whether or not a child attended school was thus seen very much as a product of an individual child's character and their experiences.

"...it depends on the individual. I mean you do – you get kids that are being bullied and vulnerable [who] obviously don't go to school because... they are frightened to go to school. And then you get other kids that just don't want to go to school because they can't be bothered." (Lone father, Outer London borough)

5.7 Support and intervention

5.7.1 Knowledge of law and attitudes towards sanctions

Almost all of the parents/carers were very familiar with the legal aspects of non-attendance at school. Most said that the EWO had explained the situation to them on their first visit, and had subsequently reinforced it. Most parents/carers were therefore aware that they could be fined and eventually go to court if their child did not attend school, although there was often considerable uncertainty about how a situation could reach this point.

"Well, I know you can be brought to court and I know... I think the first [measure] is signing a document saying that you will make sure your child goes to school. And then when you go back the next time you are given a prison sentence —about six months now, I'm not sure." (Mother in two-parent family, Inner London borough)

Some specifically mentioned that so long as they did what the EWO asked them to do then any negative sanctions could be avoided. However, there was some uncertainty about this.

Although parents/carers tended to agree that penalties had to be enforced in certain circumstances, most parents/carers did not see sanctions being the most appropriate approach in their case. One interesting exception concerned a parent who mentioned that the threat of a court case would be a deterrent because she saw the social stigma attached to appearing in court, and considered that to be far worse than simply paying a fine.

*"I keep reading the [local paper] and seeing Mums getting fined...a couple of hundred. It's not that [though]; it's the going to court and your name being mud."
(Lone mother, North West city outskirts)*

On the whole, however, prison sentences were seen as being a harsh measure because they split up the family and were seen as unlikely to improve the situation.

"I think the fines are harsh.... and the prison sentence, because we do try. Parents do try their hardest, but at the end of the day we can only do what we can do, you know, we can't sit with them 24/7. I have threatened my kids to go to school with them. I have threatened to sit in every lesson with them. Do you know, I have done that, and they are not bothered.. I know children have got to realise, but I've known parents ... go to prison and the children are still doing it [missing school]." (Lone mother, South West market town)

A few parents/carers suggested that preventative measures such as support units for poor attenders would be more effective than punitive measures such as prison sentences for parents:

"I do not agree with the prison sentence because I think it destroys families. I think myself there should be special units in each school for children.... I mean they're a tiny minority... I know they are." (Lone father, North West coastal town)

Those parents/carers who felt that poor attendance was partly due to the child's personality and behaviour also considered that the child shared some responsibility for attending school. Some parents/carers said that they could only do so much to ensure their children attended school. They believed that there is some onus on the child to be responsible for their own attendance, and, particularly in the case of older children.

"I know they [the government] are trying to stop truancy and they are putting parents in prison and everything... [But] if they went to prison and they got back out, what is to say that the child [is not] going to do it again? That is what I am trying to say; if [the parents] are trying, they are trying to get them to school, even if they brought them to school, they won't know if their child is going to get back out that gate and walk back out, because in secondary school it is easy to get in and out of the school." (Lone mother, Outer London borough)

However, for other parents/carers whose family circumstances might be described as chaotic, their child's education and attendance were lower on their list of priorities than other matters. One mother said that she was aware of the threat of being sent to jail, but seemed to have a passive approach to her child's non-attendance, shrugging it off with a smile. In this particular case, the prospect of becoming homeless was a far more pressing issue.

5.7.2 Support from schools and Education Welfare Service

While legal action was seen by parents/carers to have its place in more extreme cases, a 'softer' approach was felt to be more appropriate for most families. Parents/carers felt that earlier intervention and personal contact would prevent the problem from reaching the stage where legal action needed to be taken.

"I think what I would have liked was some sort of direct contact with [my child] in the home at the early stage. So you'd want a home visit from somebody of an official capacity from education or even somebody from the school – well maybe not from the school because that may have not been appropriate but somebody who said 'You have to go to school' at a very early stage before it became a set pattern."
(Lone mother, Inner London borough)

"...there should be special units [for poor attenders to reintegrate into mainstream school]. But the government is not prepared to do that. They insist on the mainstream for every child but it just doesn't work for every child." (Lone father, North West coastal town)

Generally, EWOs were valued by parents/carers for the time, support, sympathy and constructive ideas they bring to families. In particular they mentioned how help liaising with the school was very useful, particularly when parents/carers lacked the self-confidence to contact the school themselves. Also a number of parents/carers felt that EWOs were particularly helpful in negotiating timetable changes with schools. However, some parents/carers did not know that EWOs were able to do this, until fairly late on. Some parents/carers had been in situations whereby an EWO had provided intensive counselling for their child (and, in some cases, the parent) and this was seen as extremely helpful.

“To be honest with you, if it wasn’t for the EWO I don’t think I would have got [child] back into school and I would have ended up in prison.” (Lone mother, North West ex-industrial town)

Views about the extent to which schools had been supportive varied considerably. Most felt that the schools had tried to their best to encourage attendance but had limited resources to do much more. A few were enthusiastic about the efforts made by some schools:

“They have done everything ... and I’ve done everything they have asked me and I’ve helped them in every way I could. I couldn’t fault the school....They understood what I was going through and what I needed to achieve to get [child] into school... they gave the help to me and I put it into practice.” (Lone mother, North West ex-industrial town)

5.7.3 Improvement areas

Almost all the parents/carers described how they wanted to see help and support available at an early stage. Many felt unsure where to turn in the beginning and did not know who to contact to get advice. Some mentioned that they would like to have a variety of sources of information both at the school and independently. A number of parents/carers wanted to have more readily available basic information about attendance problems. In particular they wanted to have written information that provides the “facts” about poor attendance at school and information about what parents/carers can do, as well as contact details of professionals that can help

“In the beginning you just do not know where to turn for advice or help. You feel like you are on your own, and no-one cares. If you had a booklet about the subject you’d realise you were not alone, and that you could get help..” (Lone father, North West coastal town)

Some parents/carers mentioned that although they had tried to ensure their child attended school and had been proactive in contacting their child’s school about the issue, they had not received the necessary support from either the school or other agencies when it was needed.

“Well, initially you see, the first year that [child was not attending school] I was completely distraught about it and I kept sort of trying to get people involved and I was phoning the school and I was phoning various different people [in the EWS and

Social Services]. But I think we got missed because the school we were at is an out of borough school so I think that is kind of maybe why things weren't picked up sooner. So by the time things were picked up – and I initiated it – you know I kept on phoning people...” (Lone mother, Inner London borough)

“If Social Services had kicked in when they should have kicked in, we wouldn't have been taken to court.” (Mother in two-parent family, South West market town)

Some parents/carers felt that it was important not to take their child's reasons for non-attendance at face value. They felt that it was important for parents/carers, schools and other agencies to get beneath the surface and approach the problem in a sensitive and appropriate manner, according to individual circumstances. The approach adopted by the school and EWS was not always appreciated by parents/carers who felt they were doing their best, as the quotes below suggest.

“I've tried to get it through to the school [about the difficulties at home] but it [was] like banging my head against a brick wall. Haven't I got enough to cope with without them pulling me into school for this and pulling me into school for that? All they were interested in was getting her attendance up and that is all they want.” (Lone mother, North West city outskirts)

“I think if there is a problem... I know education welfare do come and visit and get onto you. But I think they ought to listen to both sides of it, and not just think, 'Well ugh, your child is not going to school, we are going to take you to court, and you are going to be fined for this.'” (Mother in two-parent family, South West market town)

A lone mother with a child who had missed a lot of school through illness thought that her situation could have been handled more sensitively.

“I think the headmaster should have said to me 'Now we have got in touch with the Education Officer, and you will be getting, sending a letter [with a fine for non-attendance]'. Maybe if he had just said that to me, person-to-person, but he didn't, all I, I got a letter and that was it, it was such a shock.” (Lone mother, South West market town)

A few parents/carers suggested that schools should play a bigger part in ensuring children attend, and one suggested that money should be set aside from the Connexions funding to specifically improve attendance:

“One of my big frustrations is where’s all this Connexions money going? All I’ve been told every time is – ‘Oh, she doesn’t fit the criteria or...’ and that really does frustrate me because I know a lot of money has been put into Connexions and they have got links into the school, and yet I haven’t been able to access the service from them at all..” (Lone mother, Inner London borough)

A number of parents/carers suggested that an attendance book, which most schools now have, would be a useful monitor. This would be completed for each child at the beginning of lessons (in conjunction with the normal register taken twice a day) and any absence from subsequent lessons would be followed up by the school.

Some parents/carers took this one step further, and felt that a dedicated liaison officer in each school, who is solely responsible for attendance, would be valuable.

“I think there should be some sort of liaison officer....that works within sort of ten schools or an area.. [The officer would ask:] ‘Why was your child off last week?’ and if, like work, if you have more than three days off work, you need a sick note. I think they ought to bring something in like that for schools.” (Father in two-parent family, South West market town)

Although a liaison role between schools and the EWS is carried out already by EWOs, parents/carers felt that there should be someone employed by each school to check on attendance. There was, however, recognition that this would represent an additional cost to schools.

5.7.4 Sanctions aimed at the child

A number of parents/carers suggested that some sanctions should be brought against non-attending children, rather than focusing solely on punishing the parent. This was particularly the view of parents/carers who felt they had little or no control over their children.

“The honest to god truth is that the government is giving the kids that much control over everything... I have got no power so if I rang the police I would be the one is

fined... there is no punishment for the child... I think parents should be given some more control back...." (Lone mother, North West city outskirts)

Some parents/carers felt that in extreme cases of non-attendance (i.e. where a child had refused to attend school and parents/carers had been unable to enforce attendance for a number of months), extreme measures should be taken, and suggestions included a child being taken into care for a temporary period, carrying out community service or being sent to a boarding school where non-attendance would be unavoidable.

"I strongly think that the child should be punished... if they have help and they know there are people at school that can help them and they are still truanting then yeah, I think they should be punished...My sister has got a £2,000 fine and my nephew doesn't give a damn... he still wags school." (Lone mother, North West city outskirts)

"I think it's the kids that should get punished... I think they should get taken into care for a bit to learn." (Lone mother, North West city outskirts)

A number of parents/carers felt that if a truanting child was required to attend a court hearing (accompanied by their parent(s)/carer(s)) then it might make them think more carefully about their attendance.

"...any orders should be faced at the child, it might make the child stand up and think, 'Well, you know this has happened to me - not my mum, but to me.' I think maybe then children might have a different attitude in going in to school; it might change things as well." (Lone mother, Inner London borough)

5.7.5 Truancy sweeps

Truancy sweeps are carried out by partnerships of Police Officers and Education Welfare Officers. Under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, they have powers to pick up (but not arrest) children found out of school during term time and take them to a designated area or return them to school. The parents/carers that took part in these interviews generally felt that truancy sweeps were helpful. It was felt that truancy sweeps sent out the right message in that they enforced attendance, but that such 'spot-check' measures were seen as having a limited impact and were reactive rather than preventative.

“Oh yes, I think [truancy sweeps] are good as well. Because if children are out and they have been seen then they are going to be brought back to school. And hopefully they are the ones who get caught truanting and they don’t do it again – but, I think it depends on the child.” (Lone mother, Outer London borough).

5.7.6 Other interventions

Several parents/carers discussed the use of other interventions such as support schemes, parenting skills courses and mentoring, all of which were designed to help them encourage their child’s attendance at school. In general these measures were seen as very positive. Again parents/carers emphasised the importance of ensuring that these approaches had to have elements that were tailored to their individual needs (including such issues as timing, location and particular problems faced by their child) if they were going to be successful.

Outward bound courses aimed at improving the self-confidence of children with poor attendance were also considered to be a very positive contribution. The parent of one boy who attended an outward bound course agreed that it had helped her son to meet other people, through access to an inspirational adult had led to his self-confidence and attendance at school improving..

Another example included a scheme called ‘CHARM’, whereby a child had had a mentor for a period of time, who would take him out on educational excursions.

“...she was very good and I think they do a brilliant job..... I thought it was a fabulous scheme and I just hope he can get back on to it – anything like that.” (Mother in two-parent family, Inner London borough)

However, a few parents/carers felt that use of these ‘more pleasant interventions’ may encourage some children to miss school so that they can benefit from the special attention that some courses or mentoring schemes attract. In the case of the child mentioned below, non-attendance at school meant that she could instead attend a college where wearing make-up was permitted, and vocational lessons were included in the curriculum.

“She knows how to work it so much... they get information, the kids talk to each other. There is a thing called APP¹⁹ now where they can go to college when they

¹⁹ APP is ‘Alternative Provision Programme’ whereby a Year 11 child may, under certain circumstances, attend college instead of school in the hope that their attendance will be improved.

are 15, and to get into that you have to be really naughty in school, but she wants to go and so she is really naughty. No other school will accept her so she is going there. If she hadn't had that information then she wouldn't have done." (Lone mother, North West city outskirts)

5.7.7 Preventative measures and a joined-up approach

Parents and carers felt that it should not just be their responsibility to ensure their child attends school, but that the schools and LEAs should work together to monitor attendance more closely. A multi-pronged approach was seen as being far more effective than the efforts of one party alone. The need for closer liaison between parents/carers, schools and children was seen as being vital in ensuring that children do not slip through the net, as the quote below reveals.

"Like another friend, her child didn't go to school for four months, he was playing truant, and she was sending him to school... and she gets a phone call from the school saying, 'Do you know your son has not been in for four months?', and that was it, she had no idea." (Lone mother, South West market town)

In some cases, joint working between parents/carers, school and the EWS was already in evidence. In one particular case, the headteacher of a school, an EWO and the parent had had a meeting in which they had drawn up a parenting contract. The agreement required that the child would attend a certain number of lessons on particular days. This proved to be highly successful. It was felt that it had worked because realistic expectations had been discussed and agreed, and all parties felt committed to making the contract work.

In summary, parents/carers tended to agree that there is no one, single answer to the problems of poor attendance, but that interventions need to be tailored to suit individual families. It was however recognised that this would not always be possible due to staffing and financial constraints. However, where more than one agency were involved with a family more should be done to ensure they all worked together with the same aims.

5.8 Summary of findings

Twenty two parents from 20 households were interviewed. Although this represents a small number of parents/carers there was some evidence that four groupings of parents/carers could be identified, as follows:

- **Parents/carers who are trying hard:** This group try to encourage their children to attend school using a variety of methods. They tend to work co-operatively with the EWO and have usually tried all the approaches that have been recommended.
- **Powerless parents/carers:** This group describe how powerless they feel in bringing about change in their child's attendance at school. They often have multiple social and personal problems which may require additional support from both EWOs and other professionals. Their children's education, although important, is lower down on their list of priorities than it might be among other parents/carers.
- **Over-protective or dependent parents/carers:** Parents/carers in this group tended to behave in ways that could be seen as over-protective or dependent. Bullying and illness were the main reasons given for their children's non-attendance, and were likely to condone their child's missing school. Parents/carers in this group often wanted to receive advice and counselling, and strongly disliked simply being 'told' that their child must attend school. Other parents/carers were keen to find another school for their child.
- **Apathetic non-engaging parents/carers:** Parents/carers in this group may have been offered support and interventions but don't respond or responded minimally. Some parents/carers in this group appeared to fail to respond to or engage with their child, and in some cases they may be condoning non-attendance.

The key findings are as follows:

- Parents/carers unanimously agreed that their child's education is valuable. Most parents/carers recognised the importance of learning and wanted their children to do well at school.
 - All the parents/carers were convinced that regular attendance was important and all stressed that children would learn more if they attended school regularly.
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- There were some circumstances under which parents/carers generally agreed that a child should be allowed to miss school. These included the death of a family member, recovering after an operation and illness. In most other situations parents/carers considered it was not acceptable that a child should miss school.
 - Parents/carers gave a wide variety of reasons why their child's attendance was poor. However this did not mean that they thought these reasons were acceptable or that they condoned their child's absence.
 - The main reasons given by parents/carers for their child's poor attendance were illness, behaviour problems (including attention problems) bullying, the school environment or a particular subject or teacher. In many cases there was more than one reason.
 - Although parents/carers on the whole agreed that it was their responsibility to ensure their children attend school, some pointed out that there are limits to what they can do.
 - Almost all of the parents/carers were very familiar with the legal aspects of non-attendance at school. Most said that the EWO had explained the situation to them on their first visit, and had subsequently reinforced it.
 - Although parents/carers tended to agree that penalties had to be enforced in certain circumstances, most parents/carers did not see sanctions being the most appropriate approach in their case. On the whole prison sentences were seen as being a harsh measure because they split up the family and were seen as unlikely to improve the situation.
 - Generally, EWOs were valued by parents/carers for the time, support, sympathy and constructive ideas they bring to families.
 - Some parents/carers mentioned that although they had tried to ensure their child attended school and had been proactive in contacting their child's school about the issue, they had not received the necessary support from either the school or other agencies when it was needed.
 - A few parents/carers suggested that schools should play a bigger part in ensuring children attend school, and suggested greater use of attendance books and more liaison with parents
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- A number of parents/carers suggested that sanctions should be brought against non-attending children, rather than focusing solely on punishing the parent. This was particularly the view of parents/carers who felt they had little or no control over their children.
 - Several parents/carers discussed the use of other interventions such as support schemes, outdoor pursuits courses and mentoring which were designed to help children reintegrate into the education system after a period of non-attendance. In general these measures were seen as very positive.
 - The need for closer liaison between parents/carers, schools and children was seen as being vital in ensuring that children return to school.
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6 Conclusions and recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

The research had two aims. Firstly to identify whether there were any differences in parents'/carers' attitudes towards attendance between the general population and a group of parents/carers whose children were currently not attending school. Secondly, to examine the views of parents/carers towards the support they received to improve their child's attendance.

The selected approach involved conducting a large-scale quantitative survey of 2000 parents and small-scale qualitative interviews with parents/carers of children who were poor/non-attenders in 20 households. The qualitative data provides a wealth of information about parents/carers attitudes to education, parenting, and attendance, as well as information about their knowledge of the law concerning attendance. The telephone survey revealed that the views of parents'/carers' were relatively homogeneous and it was not possible to identify statistically reliable clusters of respondents with distinctive attitudes. Further analysis concentrated on identifying any relationships between the child's reported attendance and other questions. This revealed that parents who had the poorest attendance at school had a greater proportion of children with poorer attendance.

The qualitative research has confirmed that parents/carers share many of the attitudes of parents from the wider population. Specifically they share positive attitudes about the value of education, and the importance they place on ensuring that their child receives a good education. The interviews with parents/carers also confirmed that they have similar views about what would be an acceptable reason and an unacceptable reason for a child not to attend school. Both groups considered it was unacceptable for a child to miss school to wait in for a plumber, to look after a sick family member or because they disliked lessons. Both groups also expressed similar mixed views about the acceptability of missing school as a result of bullying. Parents/carers from both groups also both accepted that they were responsible for ensuring that their children attend school. In virtually all respects the attitudes expressed by the parents/carers of children with poor attendance in the qualitative interviews was more or less identical to those views expressed by the wider population in the telephone survey. Knowledge of the law concerning attendance was relatively good in

the general population of parents/carers, and perhaps unsurprisingly very good amongst parents/carers who took part in the qualitative interviews.

Overall, this research has not identified any differences in the attitudes of parents in the general population and those in the interview group regarding: views about education, views about acceptability of non-attendance, and understanding of the law regarding poor attendance.

However, there was evidence that different parents/carers approached tackling poor attendance in different ways. Clearly there is a need to be very cautious about this, because of the small number of interviews conducted. However, we did identify four different types of parents/carers:

- Parents/carers who try hard to tackle poor attendance
- Parents/carers who describe themselves as feeling powerless to tackle poor attendance
- Parents/carers who appear to be over-protective or dependent on their child
- Parents/carers who are either apathetic about tackling poor attendance or who appear not to engage with the school or other support professionals

Further research would be required to validate and elaborate this typology.

It is possible that while these parents/carers may have similar attitudes on attendance to parents from the general population, they behave in different ways as a result of other factors. Clearly social factors such as domestic problems including relationships, finance, housing, health, educational experience and other factors may play an important role.

6.2 Recommendations

Parents/carers identified a number of suggestions regarding how support for them and their child could be improved. Much of what they have suggested is already being taken forward by the DfES.

Based on the information we have collected from this research, we propose the following:

1. Better communications. Parents/carers often appeared to lack information about poor attendance and possible approaches to helping improve their child's attendance. We would

recommend that the DfES considers the means by which parents/carers could have access to this type of information from a range of sources (EWOs, School Liaison Officers, Publications, Telephone Helplines and the Internet, for example). It was clear from the research that in some cases, parents/carers were initially unaware of what support services exist or how they could find out about them.

Bullying was given as a reason for poor attendance by some parents/carers, and in other cases, parents/carers suspected that their child was being bullied but hiding this behind other reasons for non-attendance. Tied into the need for better communications, we would suggest that the DfES continues to place emphasis on the need for schools to make their bullying policy and procedures clear to all parents and pupils.

2. Multi-agency working. Parents/carers often described how they were tackling multiple problems (such as housing, debt and health issues). While the Education Welfare Service (EWS) provides a very useful service, which the parents/carers in this study valued, it is possible that in some cases, earlier involvement of multiple-agencies may have been beneficial. This is particularly relevant in cases where the real causes of non-attendance are hidden behind a reason deemed 'acceptable', either by the parent/carer or the child. We are aware that work is already underway in this area. In some schools they have successfully brought together staff from a variety of different agencies to work together with families. Similarly, the DfES is already involved in a number of initiatives to extend this approach, such as through work on Behaviour and Education Support teams (BESTs) , Behaviour Improvement Programme (BIP) and Extended Schools²⁰.

3. Joined-up working. It was clear from the interviews with parents/carers that they valued a "joined-up" approach that involved themselves, EWOs and schools working together. In many cases, it was only when all three parties became involved in a joint plan that progress on attendance started to be made. Recent moves to encourage the use of parental contracts with parents of poor attenders and which identify an agreed set of actions that each of the stakeholders will follow, seem to be a very positive step forward, and one that the vast majority of parents/carers would support.

4. School-based support and initiatives. Parents/carers accepted that it is their responsibility to ensure their child attends school, but felt it would be helpful if their child's

²⁰ Department for Education and Skills (2003) Towards the Development of Extended Schools, Anne Wilkin, Kay Kinder, Richard White, Mary Atkinson and Paul Doherty

school was able to monitor attendance more closely. Suggestions included an 'attendance register' which would be taken at the start of every lesson, and a dedicated liaison officer who would telephone the parent if their child was absent. Both of these suggestions are already in operation in many schools in England. Clearly, there are financial costs associated with extending the implementation of these, but we would recommend that schools aim to provide speedy contact with parents/carers when a child is absent, in order to prevent the absence becoming long-term. Many parents/carers in this study expressed satisfaction with the opportunities for their children to pursue more vocational courses at school. There were a number of examples whereby the school and the EWO had been able to arrange changes to individual children's timetables to encourage attendance. Often parents/carers said they were unaware that this was a possibility and therefore did not discuss possible changes with the schools. We would recommend that schools routinely review the curriculum requirements of poor attenders. It may also be useful for the DfES to consider how this strategy can best be promoted to parents/carers. Parenting classes may also be useful in cases where parents/carers have low self-esteem and self-worth and feel powerless to do anything about their child's poor attendance. We would suggest that activities are provided through schools to engage parents/carers in developing their parenting skills, self esteem and confidence.

7 Appendix 1: Development of research instruments

This appendix describes how the study instruments were developed so as to ensure inclusion of the key issues around poor attendance.

In the first instance, we aimed to review existing literature on parents'/carers' *attitudes* towards attendance. This was conducted in September 2003 and revised in March 2004. While there is a large body of literature on the reasons for non-attendance, it was discovered that literature on parents'/carers' attitudes towards attendance was scarce. That literature which *did* exist on parents'/carers' attitudes is reviewed in Chapter 3. The fact that little research has thus far been conducted into this topic (despite the large literature about attendance in general) further validates the need for the current research.

The literature review was used to help identify the key areas to be included in the questionnaire for the telephone survey of parents/carers. Information was collected from a variety of Internet sources using info4local.gov.uk and google.com as search engines. Those websites explored in depth included:

- Department for Education and Skills (www.dfes.gov.uk/schoolattendance)
- Social Exclusion Unit (www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk)
- National Foundation for Educational Research (www.nfer.org.uk)
- General Teaching Council for England (www.gtce.org.uk)
- Scottish Centre for Research in Education (SCRE) at the University of Glasgow (www.scre.ac.uk)
- National Statistics/ONS (www.statistics.gov.uk)

On completion of the literature review, a series of depth interviews and focus groups was conducted with key stakeholders: Education Welfare Officers (EWOs), Educational Psychologists, DfES policymakers and parents/carers themselves. The content of these discussions was also used to inform and develop the questionnaire for the telephone survey of parents/carers, as well as the topic guide for the qualitative interviews with parents/carers.

The findings of the literature review on parents'/carers' attitudes towards attendance have been presented in Chapter 3. Below, the findings from the key stakeholder discussions are described in detail.

7.1 Interviews with key stakeholders

In order to feed back the results of the literature review and further develop the content of the quantitative and qualitative research (a telephone survey and depth interviews with parents/carers respectively), interviews were undertaken with key stakeholders, defined here as:

- Education Welfare Officers (EWOs)
- Educational Psychologists
- DfES policymakers
- Parents/carers who have been referred to EWS.

The methodology for the key stakeholder interviews has been described in Chapter 1. The process and outcomes are described below.

7.1.1 Interviews with EWOs and Educational Psychologists

The views of EWOs and Educational Psychologists were very similar. EWOs often tended to be the first to become involved and only in some cases would Educational Psychologists become involved. When Educational Psychologists were involved, problems with attendance were often only part of the presenting problems. Although both types of practitioners felt there was not a "typical referral" there were some commonalities, which they frequently observed.

"There are a number of factors that pop up more often than not. We're looking at things like the pressures on families I guess, like financial ones. And quite often it's the parents' attitude to education and how important it is, what was their expectation of education, and do they see it as being of much value." **Educational Welfare Officer**

EWOs described how families they worked with often were on low incomes. Often the family consisted of a lone parent, usually the mother. Male partners were often absent or

only infrequently “on the scene”. Even if a male parent or partner was around practitioners thought they rarely get involved unless they consider that the issue has got so bad they would be better to intervene.

“When fathers get involved they often seem to have quite a dominant role, as if “it’s got to this point so I’d better get involved and sort it out now”. **Educational Welfare Officer.**

In the case of lone parents/carers, they were usually unemployed. In many cases they were already receiving support from one or more agencies such as Social Services or Health.

Practitioners described how many families often found it difficult to discuss attendance issues with their child’s school, and that this often results in a delay in support being made available. Despite this, the practitioners described how most families were keen to support their child/children return to full school attendance. However, practitioners often considered that parents/carers saw themselves as “powerless” to do anything. Most practitioners also felt that parents/carers were very grateful for the support they were offered, and that only a small minority rejected help.

There was considerable agreement among practitioners that school attendance problems usually begin in primary school and at that stage are characterised by a history of frequent absences for minor illnesses. By secondary school unauthorised absence has become more habitual and is frequently unexplained. Practitioners talked about children learning to “work the system”. For example, this might mean taking absences after registration had been completed.

Practitioners considered that the most frequently reported reasons (by both parents/carers and children) for non-attendance in secondary school was bullying. Of those we spoke to, many felt that this reason had become much more common in recent years. However some practitioners felt that while this was offered as a reason, in fact the reasons might be very different.

“In terms of unauthorised absence, for non-attenders the main causes are bullying, which is not always proven or true. Quite often that is used. There’ve been cases highlighted where compensation claims have been involved and we get that a lot of that at the initial assessment”. **Educational Welfare Officer.**

A breakdown in parental discipline and control was seen by a number of the practitioners, as a major reason for frequent unauthorised absence.

“A huge amount are clearly beyond parental control and have no boundaries, and make it very clear that they won’t be dictated to. They’re a somewhat easier group I guess in that you can remind parents that the child is out of control and they have something to do with that.” **Educational Welfare Officer.**

Practitioners strongly supported the view that parental attitudes were an important factor in determining their child’s school attendance.

“It’s a majorly important factor. If the parents always encourage their child to go to school, even if they have a headache, then there’ll be less non-attendance. If the parents wish to overprotect or play on the safe side, then non-attendance will increase.” **Educational Psychologist.**

In particular they mentioned that parents/carers who felt that education was irrelevant to their child were often the least concerned about their child missing school.

“Where education is seen as irrelevant or of a poor standard or ethnically not appropriate, then of course they won’t encourage their child to go to school.” **Educational Psychologist.**

Some practitioners felt that the curriculum in secondary schools tended to be too geared towards academically able children and as a result, less able children became disaffected with education and dropped out of school. In some cases parents/carers sympathised with their child’s lack of interest in school, and may stop encouraging them to go to school.

“And then there are families where the child is not academic and around the age of 14 or 15 they don’t want to be at school, they want to be at work, and in those instances the family and child feel education is not as important as it’s not going to actually benefit them. Those kids need a more vocational rather than academic route of curriculum, so for the last two years they just won’t go to school.” **Education Welfare Officer.**

A number of practitioners also mentioned that some parents/carers could be over-protective.

“In some parents, if they see distress in the child, they tend to collude.” **Educational Psychologist.**

A number of the parents/carers themselves had had poor attendance at school, and had limited formal education and often no educational qualifications. Some practitioners also

mentioned how some parents/carers had given up trying to persuade their child to return to school and that children sometimes understood this to mean that their absence was condoned by their parent (although that was not always the case).

7.1.2 Interviews with parents/carers

Throughout the interview, parents/carers were encouraged to think about the situation of parents/carers in general, rather than their own and that of their child/ren. All the parents/carers were able to do this, and a few commented that it was very interesting to talk about poor attendance without specifically mentioning their child/ren.

All the parents/carers considered that there were a large number of possible reasons why children would not attend school. The reasons they gave were similar to those identified in the literature review and in the group discussions and interviews with practitioners. Bullying was seen as a major cause of poor attendance and many of the parents/carers were concerned this appeared to be increasing.

“Bullying. A lot of kids have to put up with bullying and I think this is one of the main reasons why they stop going to school.” Parent.

A number of the parents/carers felt that schools were mainly interested in the brighter children and that they did not do enough for the less academically able children. Also a few of the parents/carers thought that less able children would not be motivated by the curriculum. They wanted to see more practical teaching and teaching that was aimed more to work.

“What good are GCSEs if you are not going to get them? If you don’t think you will do very well in your exams some children will think ‘what is the point of going to school?’.” Parent.

A number of the parents/carers also thought that children who do not do so well in class might end up feeling like failures and that this would make them feel very demotivated. Most felt that the schools could do more to stimulate children and to find ways of getting children to learn. Some felt that schools tended to be too pre-occupied with league tables and as a result spent much less time on less able pupils. A number of the parents/carers wanted more individual or group tuition for children who have poor attendance, and teaching that was specifically tailored to the child.

Parents/carers also thought that schools were not doing enough to keep children at school. They felt that closer monitoring of children would improve school attendance. In particular

they were concerned that some children would leave immediately after morning registration and not return for the rest of the day. One parent suggested that children should be locked in the school until the end of the day.

Parents/carers also felt that when children go absent from school, the schools should alert the parents/carers immediately. Most talked about how schools employ an external company to call them and let them know that their child has left school. However they felt that this often happened too late for parents/carers to respond.

There was also a view that other parents/carers of poor attenders often found it difficult to ask for help. Sometimes they did not know who to ask for help or what help was available. They also felt that some parents/carers might wait too long to ask for help. They thought that other parents/carers might lack the self-confidence to deal with schools. Some felt that this might be a particular problem for lone parents/carers, who could feel particularly unsupported.

Some of the parents/carers recognised that other parents/carers might be over-protective of their child and keep them off school for minor illness or other minor problems. Some felt that parents/carers might like to have their child at home for company.

The parents/carers were all very pleased with the support they had received from the Educational Welfare Officers, but felt that school could offer more support.

Some of the parents/carers thought that parenting classes might be helpful for some parents/carers. However, all of the parents/carers were critical of fining and imprisonment.

7.1.3 Interviews with DfES

In the group discussion with policy staff the results of the interviews with stakeholders was fed back. The session was used to examine the areas where further information could be collected in the main stages of the survey. In the session policy staff discussed the Departments main work in the area of attendance and their main priorities for future work. This information was used to clarify the specific areas to be investigated. In the final part of the session the policy staff reviewed and amended a draft questionnaire for the telephone survey.

7.1.4 Summary of findings

Both practitioners and parents/carers identified a similar range of possible factors that they considered were linked to school attendance problems. There were some small differences

in the emphasis they placed on certain factors. In general practitioners were more likely to identify social factors, particularly poverty, other types of disadvantage and lone parenting than parents/carers were. Conversely, parents/carers were more likely to identify bullying as a main reason behind poor attendance and they also felt that curriculum issues contributed to poor attendance for some pupils, particularly the less academically able. Parents/carers said that they would like to see schools monitoring attendance more closely and that they would like to be better informed and supported in their efforts to get their child to attend.

8 Appendix 2: Further analysis

Factor and cluster analysis

Factor analysis was undertaken in order to explore possible relationships between the various questions in the survey and to identify whether certain groupings of questions explained variations in responses.

A 12 factor solution was developed, but the factors were found to be relatively weak with low eigen values. Nonetheless a cluster analysis was run to produce 4-, 5, 6 and 7 cluster solutions. The six cluster solution was considered to be the best solution and further analysis was conducted using it. It was hoped that from this analysis that there would emerge meaningful clusters, with parents/carers in each cluster holding a particular set of attitudes towards attendance. However, in reality, although it was possible to distinguish the six clusters, the variations were too small to be of any statistical significance. A second cluster analysis was run using the raw questions, rather than the factors, but again the cluster solutions were felt to have very limited explanatory power. The main reason for this would seem to be that responses tended to be extremely homogeneous and the subsequent level of variation between clusters was very small.

CHAID analysis

CHAID (Chi Squared Automatic Interaction Detector) is an exploratory method for classifying categorical data and can be used as an alternative to cluster analysis. CHAID analysis looks for interactions of variables within a data set. It divides the sample through a series of splits across a set of independent variables, which produce the greatest discrimination in a dependent variable (as defined by the researcher).

Taking the percentage giving a positive answer on the dependent variable, the analysis examines all the other input variables to discover where there is greatest discrimination. The process continues at each point in the tree until no further significant splits are possible, or until the remaining sample size precludes further analysis.

Two CHAID analyses were undertaken using children's attendance as the dependent variable, and exploring the extent to which children's attendance was correlated with other questions. In addition a number of dummy variables were also created to reflect

acceptability of taking time off school for a variety of reasons, and these were included in the analysis.

CHAID ONE: In the total sample only 15% of parents/carers (a total of 293) reported that their child missed some school other than through illness. This relatively small proportion restricts the levels of sub-analysis that are possible using CHAID. However, it was sufficient to show a relationship between reported poor attendance of their child and the parents'/carers' attendance at school.

Amongst the 554 parents/carers with the poorest attendance record (that is those who reported missing the odd day at school, a day a month or a day a week) the percentage of their children who they reported missed some school was 26%. By contrast the 1442 parents/carers who were more regular attenders (that is those who reported missing the odd class or never missing a day at school) reported that only 10% of their children missed school. At the next level of analysis it was found that those parents/carers who had reported that they themselves had poorer attendance at school, and who agreed with the statement that "now and again it was OK for a child to take a day off school" (a total of 183 parents/carers) were found to have reported that 38% of their children had missed school. Those 371 parents/carers who were poor attenders but disagreed with this statement, reported only 19% of their children missing some school.

Those 1442 parents/carers who were more regular attenders and who scored zero on the acceptability score (that is they indicated it was unacceptable to take their child out of school for a range of reasons) reported the lowest percentage of their children missing school (5%), whilst those who indicated some agreement with the acceptability of taking a child out of school reported that 14% of their children missed some school.

CHAID TWO: The second CHAID analysis was performed using the same dependent variable but after removing the question concerning the parents'/carers' reported attendance, in order to explore any other relationship between the questions or variables. The results of this indicated (perhaps unsurprisingly) that those parents/carers who had been contacted by their child's school to discuss their child's attendance, reported a greater percentage of their children missing school than those parents/carers who had not been contacted by their child's school.

As before, 15% of the total sample reported that their child missed some school other than through illness. Of the 223 parents/carers who reported being contacted by the school to discuss attendance, 36% reported that their child missed some school. By contrast of the

1773 parents/carers who had not been contacted by the school only 12% reported that their child had missed some school.

The results of the CHAID analyses therefore confirm a relationship between the child's reported attendance at school and:

- The parents'/carers' own attendance record, and
- Whether the school has ever contacted the parent to discuss their child's non-attendance.

While the second finding is unsurprising, the link between the parents'/carers' attendance at school and their child's attendance is interesting, and was supported by some of the findings from the qualitative research conducted amongst parents/carers.

9 Appendix 3: Topic guides for development work

Parents' Topic Guide: Parents' Attitudes to Attendance

1. Introduction

- Thank participants for agreeing to take part
- Explain that the DfES is examining what more can be done to reduce truancy
- By truancy we mean non-attendance at school without the agreement of the school
- Explain that this session will be aimed at getting their views about truancy and the support that parents need to help their children
- Explain that the session is about their views **in general** and not specifically about their children
- Explain that we would like their views on a questionnaire that we are planning to use with parents (both those with children who truant and those who don't)
- Explain that we are a market research company and that they need to talk to their EWO about any concerns they have about their situation
- Explain that everything they say will be confidential and will not be reported back to the EWOs or the schools
- Explain that at the end we will ask them to sign for a £25 cash "thank you" which is to cover their expenses and time.

2. Why do children Truant?

What are some of the reasons why children truant from school?

What types of children are more likely to truant?

What is acceptable truanting and not-acceptable truanting?

What are the key things that professionals need to learn about working with families with children who truant from school?

3. Parents' Attitudes to Truancy

In what ways do you think that parents' attitudes affect their child's/children's attendance at school?

How important are the following issues?

-Parents' views about the importance of education

-Parents' views about the school

- Parents' views about authority
- Parents' views about the teachers and headteachers
- Parents' views about their child's reasons for truancy
- Impact of social or cultural differences

What other factors are important?

Why do some children in the same family not have problems with school attendance?

4. Support to families

What kind of support **do you think** is needed to improve attendance patterns?

What kind of support **do professionals think** is needed to improve attendance patterns?

How are differences of opinion managed?

5. Parent Questionnaire

(Hand out draft questionnaire and ask parents to complete it)

In general, what do you think about the content of the questionnaire?

As a parent what would you think about being asked some of these questions?

What questions are missing?

6. Future Actions

What more do you think can be done to improve childrens' attendance at school, by

-DfES

-LEA

-Schools

-WEA

-Educational Psychologists

-Anyone else

Any other comments / views / observations.

THANK AND CLOSE

Professionals' Topic Guide: Parents' Attitudes to Attendance

1. Introduction

- Thank participants for agreeing to take part
- Explain the purpose of the session is to explore Educational Welfare Officers' (and Educational Psychologists') views about the impact that parents' attitudes have on the attendance of their children at school
- By truancy we mean non-attendance at school without the agreement of the school
- Explain the different phases of the research

2. Professionals experience

Can you explain what your role is?

How long have you worked in your current role?

What are the key things new people in your role need to learn about working with families with children who truant from school?

3. Families with children that truant

Is there such a thing as a typical referral?

Who refers the family?

Where do they see the family?

How long is each session?

How many sessions are typical? (Range?)

Who attends?

What help do they offer?

What are some of the main causes of truancy that you come across?

How do families respond? Are there differences between mothers and fathers? Truants and siblings?

How do you decide when the help you are offering should end?

Are there particular types of families that they tend to see? What characteristics do they have? What about exceptions to these patterns?

4. Parents' Attitudes to Truancy

In what ways do you think that parents' attitudes affect their child's/children's attendance at school?

How important are the following?

- Parents' views about the importance of education
- Parents' views about the school
- Parents' views about authority
- Parents' views about the teachers and headteachers
- Parents' views about their child's reasons for truancy
- Impact of social or cultural differences

What other factors are important?

Why do some children in the same family not have problems with school attendance?

5. Support to families

What kind of support **do you think** is needed to improve attendance patterns?

What kind of support **do parents think** is needed to improve attendance patterns?

How are differences of opinion managed?

6. Literature review

(Participants will have received the literature review in advance of the meeting.)

In general, what do you think about the content of the literature review?

Is the balance right in your view?

What is missing?

7. Parent Questionnaire

In general, what do you think about the content of the questionnaire?

Is the balance right in your view?

What is missing?

8. Future Actions

What more do you think can be done to improve childrens' attendance at school, by

-DfES

-LEA

-Schools

-WEA

-Educational Psychologists

-Anyone else

Any other comments / views / observations.

THANK AND CLOSE

DFES TOPIC GUIDE (FOCUS GROUPS): PARENTS' ATTITUDES TO ATTENDANCE

1. Introduction (5 minutes)

Welcome and thank participants for agreeing to take part.

Invite everyone to introduce themselves. Ask participants to explain their role when they introduce themselves.

Explain the objectives of the session:

- Ensure DfES Policy requirements are fully understood by the research team and built into the research
- Ensure DfES Policy input into the parent attitudes to be researched
- Provide feedback on the themes and issues from the Professionals (EWOs/Educational Psychologists) and Family groups/interviews
- Review the parent questionnaire

Explain that by truancy we mean non-attendance at school without the agreement of the school.

2. The Research (15 minutes)

TNS provide a very brief explanation of the different phases of the research and the timetable. *(Distribute the one page handout on the phases of the research)*

- Invite participants to say what they want to get out of the research.
- How do they anticipate the findings will be used?
- Are there further
- What kind of materials would they like to see developed as a result of the research?
- How might these be used?

3. DfES Policy Views about Parents Attitudes (20 minutes)

The next part of the session will explore the potential impact of parents' attitudes to attendance at school / truancy.

In what ways do you think that parents' attitudes affect their child's/children's attendance at school?

How important are the following?

- Parents' views about the importance of education
 - Parents' views about the school
-

- Parents' views about authority
- Parents' views about the teachers and headteachers
- Parents' views about their child's reasons for truancy
- Impact of social or cultural differences

What other factors are important?

Why do some children in the same family not have problems with school attendance?

Are parents' attitudes a cause of truancy or an effect of truancy?

What kind of support do you think is needed to improve attendance patterns?

4. Findings from the Professionals / Parents' Qualitative Research (20 minutes)

TNS will present a brief summary of the results of the qualitative research with professionals and parents:

- 2 discussion groups with EWOs
- 2 sets of interviews with parents of truants in different parts of the country
- a set of qualitative telephone interviews with EWOs and Educational Psychologists

(Distribute the four page handout on qualitative findings)

- In general, what do you think about the themes to emerge?
- Are there any missing themes?
- Are the themes of equal importance? Which themes do you think are important / less important? Can a prioritised list be produced?

5. Questionnaire (30 minutes)

The next part of the session will review the questionnaire section by section and relate it to the emerging themes from the research.

- What changes (additions or deletions) are needed to the content of the questionnaire to reflect the information covered in the discussion group?
- Any other comments / views / observations?

THANK AND CLOSE

10 Appendix 4: Telephone survey questionnaire

TNS, 36 Paradise Road, Richmond, Surrey. TW9 1SE

February 2004

Parents' Attitudes to School Attendance
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JN: 60374

INTERVIEWER NAME: _____ SERIAL NO: _____
 INTERVIEW DATE: _____ TIME STARTED _____ am/pm
 RESPONDENT NAME _____
 TITLE: _____
 COMPANY: _____
 COMPANY ADDRESS: _____
 TEL NO: _____

INTERVIEWER DECLARATION:

-To be added-

Introduction

Good morning/afternoon. My name is and I'm calling from TNS in Manchester. We're an independent social research company. We are calling on behalf of the Department for Education and Skills. They have asked us to conduct a survey amongst parents and carers of children aged 5-16 years. The survey will help the Department to better understand parents' views on education and other issues such as school attendance.

All the information you provide will be anonymous and your personal information will remain confidential.

Q1 Can I check that you are a parent or carer of a child who attends a state school?

YES - CONTINUE INTERVIEW – GO TO Q1

NO - ASK TO BE TRANSFERRED TO ANOTHER PERSON IN THE HOUSE WHO IS A PARENT/CARER

Q2 The survey takes about 15 minutes; do you think you would be able to help us?

YES - CONTINUE INTERVIEW

NO - THANK AND CLOSE

Q3. INTERVIEWER CLASSIFY

1. Male	1	
2. Female	2	

ASK ALL

Q4. Can I just check that you are a parent/carer living by yourself or do you also live with a partner?

DO NOT READ OUT - INTERVIEWER CLASSIFY

Male parent/carer living with a partner	1	
Male lone parent/carer	2	
Female parent/carer living with a partner	3	
Female lone parent/carer	4	
Other	9	Discontinue

ASK ALL

Q5 And how many children do you have aged between 5 and 16?

1	1	GO TO Q6a
2	2	GO TO Q6b
3	3	GO TO Q6b
4	4	GO TO Q6b
5	5	GO TO Q6b
More than 5	6	GO TO Q6b
0	9	Discontinue

ASK IF Q5 IS 1

Q6a. And how old is this child?

Enter __ (range 05 to 16) **GO TO Q7**

ASK IF Q5 IS MORE THAN 1

Q6b. And now still thinking about your children who are over 5 years but under 16 years who are attending state school, please choose the one whose name comes first in the alphabet. How old are they?

Enter __ (range 05 to 16) **GO TO Q7**

ASK ALL

Q6c And what is his/her name? (Assure respondent that name is only taken to make the rest of the questionnaire easier to administer)

Enter text

ASK if necessary

Q7. And is that a boy or a girl?

1 Male	1	
2 Female	2	

ASK ALL

Q12 I am now going to read out a short description of something that might happen either now or in the future to <name> and I would like to ask you how you would respond in that situation. Can you say on a 1 to 10 scale, where 1 is very unlikely and 10 is very likely, how likely you think you are to do each of the following;

(a) <name> does not want to go to school one day, and complains of a stomach ache. You suspect that nothing is wrong. How likely are you to:

RANDOMISE ORDER												
(1) Agree that he/she does not need to go to school	DK	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
(2) Try to find out why he/she does not want to go to school	DK	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
(3) Send him/her to school	DK	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
(4) Tell the school what happened	DK	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	

(b) You discover <name> has not attended school and instead spent the day at home watching TV. How likely are you to:

RANDOMISE ORDER												
(1) Tell him/her that his/her behaviour is not acceptable	DK	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
(2) Tell him/her that he/she must go to school the next day	DK	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
(3) Say nothing and expect the school to question him/her about his/her absence	DK	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
(4) Tell the school what happened	DK	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
(5) Try to find out why he/she didn't want to go to school	DK	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	

(c) <name> says that he/she is being bullied by children at school, and wants to have a few days off school to get over it. How likely are you to:

(1) Agree that he/she does not need to go to school	DK	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
(2) Send him/her school	DK	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
(3) Say nothing and expect the school to question him/her about his/her absence	DK	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
(4) Tell the school what happened	DK	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
(5) Try to find out why he/she is being bullied	DK	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	

ASK ALL

Q14 For each of the following situations about **School Attendance** can you tell me whether you think each situation is acceptable, not acceptable, it depends, or you are not sure.

<u>RANDOMISE ORDER OF STATEMENTS</u>	Acceptable	Not acceptable	Depends	Not sure	
a) A parent asks their child to take a day off school to wait in for a plumber					1
b) A parent asks their child to take a day off school to look after a sick family member or friend					2
c) A parent does not send their child to school because he/she is being bullied					3
d) A parent does not send their child to school because they want their child to go to another school					4
e) A child misses the odd lesson because they do not like it					5
f) A parent arranges a dentist or doctor appointment for their child during the school day					6
g) A parent takes their child shopping in school time every now and then					7
h) A child misses a few hours of school to earn some money					8
i) A parent takes their child out of school to go on holiday					9

ASK ALL

Q15 And thinking about <name>, which of the following best describes his/her attendance at school in the last 12 months:

a) He/she never misses a day (except when he/she is ill)	1
b) He/she occasionally misses the odd class	2
c) He/she occasionally misses the odd day at school	3
d) He/she misses at least one day per month at school	4
e) He/she misses at least one day per week at school	5
f) Don't know / can't remember	6

ASK ALL

Q16 Has your <name's> school ever contacted you to discuss their non-attendance at school?

Yes	1	
No	2	
DO NOT READ OUT: Prefer not to say / Don't remember	3	

ASK ALL

Q17 And has he/she been assessed as having special educational needs?

1 Yes	1	GO TO Q18
2 No	2	GO TO Q19
3 Don't know / Not sure	3	GO TO Q19

IF YES

Q18 And does he/she have a statement of special educational needs?

1 Yes	1	
2 No	2	
3 Don't know / Not sure	3	

ASK ALL

Q19 I'm now going to read out a few statements that may be true or false. In your opinion are the following statements true or false?

<u>RANDOMISE ORDER OF STATEMENTS</u>	True	False	Don't know	
a) Parents need to ask permission to take their child out of school for any reason other than illness	1	2	9	
b) Headteachers can refuse to give permission for children to go on holiday in term time	1	2	9	
c) Parents have a legal obligation to ensure that children attend school regularly and on time	1	2	9	
d) Parents can be fined if their children do not go to school	1	2	9	
e) Parents can receive a jail sentence if their child does not attend school	1	2	9	

ASK ALL

Q20 Finally, we would like to ask a few questions about your own circumstances. Thinking about your own time at school which of the following best describes your attendance at school:

a) I never missed a day (except when I was ill)	1
b) I occasionally missed the odd class	2
c) I occasionally missed the odd day at school	3
d) I missed at least one day per month at school	4
e) I missed at least one day per week at school	5
f) Don't know / can't remember	6

ASK ALL

Q21 To which of the following age groups, that I am about to read out, do you belong?

Under 20	1
21-30	2
31-40	3
41-50	4
51-60	5
Over 60 years	6
DO NOT READ OUT : Prefer not to say	9

ASK ALL

Q22 And at what age did you leave full time education, including further or higher education?

Under 16	1
16	2
17	3
18	4
19	5
20 and above	6
DO NOT READ OUT : Prefer not to say	9

ASK ALL

Q23 And what is the highest qualification you have?

<u>DO NOT READ OUT</u>	
No qualifications	1
Level 1 – <5 GSCE O level / CSE/GCSE / NVQ level 1 / GNVQ	2
Level 2 – 5+ GSCE O levels / 5+ CSE (grade 1s) 5+ GCSE (grades A-C)	3
Level 3 – 2+ A levels / AS levels / NVQ level 3 / Advanced GNVQ	4
Level 4 –NVQ level 4 / Degree / Qualified teacher/nurse/doctor status	5
Level 5 – NVQ level 5 Higher degree	
Other WRITE IN _____	6
DO NOT READ OUT : Prefer not to say	9

ASK ALL

Q24 Since you left full-time education have you been involved in training, education or any other learning experience?

Yes	1
No	2
Don't know	3

ASK ALL

Q25 Are you?

READ OUT

In full time paid employment (more than 30 hours)	1
Part time paid employment (30 hours or less)	2
Unemployed and claiming benefits	3
Unemployed and not claiming benefits	4
Not working and not claiming benefits	5
In full time education	6
Retired	7
Unable to work because of sickness, ill health or disability	8
Other	9
DO NOT READ OUT : Prefer not to say	10

ASK ALL

Q26 Is English your first language (or mother tongue) or is English a second or additional language?

First language	1
Second or additional language	2

ASK ALL

Q27 What do you consider your national identity to be? Choose as many or as few answers as apply. (MULTICODE)

READ OUT	
English	1
Scottish	2
Welsh	3
Irish	4
British	5
Other	6

ASK ALL

Q28 To which of these ethnic groups do you consider you belong?

READ OUT		
White	1	GO TO 29
Mixed	2	GO TO 30
Asian or Asian British	3	GO TO 31
Black or Black British	4	GO TO 32
Chinese	5	GO TO 34
Other ethnic group	6	GO TO 33

ASK IF WHITE AT Q28 IS 1

Q29. And to which of these ethnic groups do you consider you belong?

READ OUT		
British	1	GO TO 34
Another White background	2	GO TO 34

ASK IF MIXED AT Q28 IS 2

Q30. And to which of these ethnic groups do you consider you belong?

READ OUT		
White and Black Caribbean	1	GO TO 34
White and Black African	2	GO TO 34
White and Asian	3	GO TO 34
Another Mixed background	4	GO TO 33

ASK IF ASIAN BRITISH AT Q28 IS 3

Q31. And to which of these ethnic groups do you consider you belong?

READ OUT		
Indian	1	GO TO 34
Pakistani	2	GO TO 34
Bangladeshi	3	GO TO 34
Another Asian background	4	GO TO 33

ASK IF BLACK OR BLACK BRITISH AT Q27 IS 4

Q32. And to which of these ethnic groups do you consider you belong?

READ OUT		
Caribbean	1	GO TO 34
African	2	GO TO 34
Another Black background	3	GO TO 33

ASK IF Q28 IS 6, OR Q30 IS 4, OR Q31 IS 4, OR Q32 IS 3

Q33. Please can you describe your ethnic group?

ENTER _____

ASK ALL

Q34. *Into which of the following bands does your household income belong? By household income I mean the total income of everyone in the household combined before tax and other deductions.*

Annual	
Less than £5,000 a year	1
Between £5,000 but less than £10,000	2
Between £10,000 but less than £15,000	3
Between £15,000 but less than £20,000	4
Between £20,000 but less than £30,000	5
Between £30,000 but less than £40,000	6
£40,000 or more	7
DO NOT READ OUT : Prefer not to say	9

THANK AND CLOSE

11 Appendix 5: Topic guide for depth interviews with parents

Introduction

- Thank participants for agreeing to take part
- Explain that the DfES is examining what more can be done to reduce truancy
- By truancy we mean non-attendance at school without the agreement of the school
- Explain that this session will be aimed at getting their views about the education system, truancy and the support that parents need to help their children (*ensure shared understanding of truancy*)
- Explain that the session is about their views in general and not specifically about their children
- Explain that we are a social research company and that they need to talk to their EWO about any concerns they have about their own situation
- Explain MRS Code of Conduct / that everything they say will be confidential
- Explain that at the end we will ask them to sign for a £25 cash payment which is to cover their expenses and time.
- Session will last approximately 1 hour

Warm up and respondent introductions

Please tell me a bit about yourself / how you spend your time / how many children you have and their ages (establish whether at primary school and secondary) / married or single (family structure generally) / what is life like for you as a parent?

Attitudes towards education and school

- What was school like when you were a child – what has changed and what has stayed the same
- Was truancy a problem when you were at school / Did some children miss school – what do you think were the common reasons for missing school back then / Is truancy more common today or has it always been around
- What do you feel is the purpose of an education
- What do you think of the education system now – Strengths and weaknesses

Probe on

- The curriculum / SATS / Amount of homework / Emphasis on academic versus vocational achievement
 - Individual school / Local Authority and differences
 - The school / headteacher / teachers
-

- What future do you expect (want / hope) for your kids when they grow up (career)
- How much is truancy about the individual child / Why do some children in the same family not have problems with school attendance?
- Is truancy a problem all over the country or just in certain areas /

Attitudes towards truancy

- What are some of the main reasons why some children (your children) miss school and the less common reasons? (*Probe on primary and secondary*)

Note to interviewer – to go to the third person when and if you feel it necessary as a warm up to talking about their own children

- Bullying (extent of bullying)
 - Illness (what kind of illness / e.g. tummy ache)
 - Educational visit or excursion
 - Problem with a teacher or the school
 - Not done homework and will be punished at school
 - Waiting in for a plumber etc
 - Caring for a relative
 - The child's behaviour
 - Child has special needs or is dyslexic
 - Child does not fit in / is depressed
 - Child wants / needs to miss certain lessons e.g. PE
 - Funeral / wedding
 - Doctors / dentist appointment
 - Not being able to afford the travel into school / school uniform
- There might be some occasions when a child has to stay at home – what are these reasons
 - When is it acceptable for a child to stay at home or not go to school (Probe different types of absence and what is acceptable and not acceptable and why or whether they would categorise any of these as “truancy”)

Note to Interviewer- try to ascertain whether any parents are purposefully keeping child off school because of the child's behaviour and fear of child being excluded

- What types of children are more likely to truant?
-

- Are there any situations where truancy is linked to anti social behaviour / criminal activities – Does truancy come first or the anti- social behaviour?
- How problematic is it for a child to miss school / what are the consequences – if any (*Probe for Difference between primary and secondary school*)

Attitudes to responsibility for attendance

Parents

- Whose responsibility is it for children to attend school? (*Probe why they say this, and whether they think everyone shares their view?*)
 - What role do parents play / What are your responsibilities / requirements / what do you have to do (if anything)
 - What do you think about the fact that in law parents are held responsible for their child's attendance at school?
 - What consequences are you aware of and how did you find out about these? (*Probe specifically for what they know about the penalty notice and parenting contract / what the schools policy is on attendance – how did you become aware of this – via a booklet or word of mouth*).
 - Does it make them take their role more seriously knowing they could be fined or prosecuted?
 - Do you think the sanctions/prosecutions are too strong / too weak? Do you think they might work with some parents
 - When do you think legal action should be taken – at what point in the child's truancy pattern – and why
- What role do the children themselves play / What are their responsibilities / requirements / what do they have to do (if anything)
- How much control do you feel you have
- How did you learn your child was truanting / How did this feel / what happened / How was this problem dealt with – has this helped?

(Probe for extent of schools contact and whether this is appropriate

- Where does support come from? (*Probe for School / EWS / other agencies and professionals*) / Is there enough? / too much support for parents? Or is it interference?
- What else would have helped get your child back into school?

Schools

- What role do schools play / What are their responsibilities / requirements / what do they have to do (if anything)
-

- When does the school get involved / when do they have to get involved (refer to their specific knowledge about the schools policy in not already mentioned)

Probe on

- Home visits
- Leaflets / booklets
- Asking for a reason for absence
- Asking parents to attend lessons with children
- Parenting contracts
- Breakfast clubs

- What role does the LEA / DfES / the law / the government play and does this work?

Probe on

- EWO
- Truancy sweeps
- Parenting contracts
- Youth offending team
- Connexions
- Psychological service
- Voluntary agencies – which ones?
- Parenting skills classes
- Helpline
- Support groups
- Other help

- Are the current ways of dealing with truancy working and why / why not?

Solutions to truancy

- What solutions do you think there are to truancy? (Avoid overlap from above questions)
- Should truancy be tackled in a different way as how it is being treated now
- What more do you think can be done to improve children's' attendance at school?

Scenario

I want you to imagine that you are working for the government and your role is to improve attendance levels in schools in your area. It has been noticed that crime levels are linked to truancy and children are not getting good qualifications and finding jobs

- a) What would you do generally – policy etc?
- b) What kind of things would you do to:

Help the schools (how much of a role should they take / how should schools communicate with parents)

*Interviewer to probe on how they feel about the concept of the **In school centre** if time (see stimulus)*

Help the child / Help the parents / family (What kind of help do parents need)?

- Are there ways that the DfES or schools should be communicating with you – if so, what should they be telling you and in what way / what do you need from them
- How can they best communicate with you (leaflets, TV, magazines, face to face)
- Any other comments / views / observations.

THANK AND CLOSE

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