

[Home](#) ▾ [Parenting, childcare and children's services](#) ▾ [Safeguarding and social care for children](#)  
▾ [Child and family social work](#) ▾ [Improving the attendance of children with a social worker](#)



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Guidance

# Social workers and other practitioners: attendance considerations

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**Applies to England**

Contents

[Attendance considerations in professional conversations about a child](#)

[How social workers can help](#)

[The impact of attendance on future outcomes and wellbeing](#)

[Checklist for support](#)

## Attendance considerations in professional conversations about a child

School attendance should be integral to all child in need and child protection planning. The [children's social care national framework](#) sets out how practitioners should:

- recognise attendance as a key protective factor
- use absence to identify wider needs
- support families to improve attendance

It also explains that practitioners should help children and young people to access the education services they need to improve attendance and attainment.

Educational attendance is also identified in the early career standards for newly qualified child and family social workers set out in [early career standards: professional standards for child and family social workers](#) as an important factor in keeping children and young people safe and achieving positive outcomes.

## How social workers can help

Your regular contact with vulnerable children and their families, including before attendance issues emerge, means you are well placed to identify concerns early and collaborate with schools and local authority teams to provide support or raise risks where needed. Where in place, it is particularly important to have strong relationships with your local authority school attendance improvement team.

## The impact of attendance on future outcomes and wellbeing

The government's [Best Start in Life strategy](#) is giving children strong foundations before they even reach school, through high-quality early learning and support for families.

Once they start school, regular attendance becomes essential to build on those early foundations. By attending every day, they are far more likely to:

- achieve
- thrive
- secure better life chances

The evidence is clear that regular school attendance is one of the most important factors for future success. For example, children who miss just 2 to 4 weeks a year in year 11 have half the odds of achieving a grade 5 in English and maths compared to similar children attending well. Research by the Department for Education (DfE) shows that the mental health of children who are severely absent (that is, missing 50% or more of school) is around twice as poor as that of those who miss only 1% of their schooling.[\[footnote 1\]](#)

Children with a social worker are at greater risk of poor attendance, and social care's involvement should include strengthening routines, stability, and engagement with school to help reduce this risk.

As emphasised in [working together to safeguard children](#), education is essential for children's:

- progress
- wellbeing
- wider development

Being in school is a protective factor against wider harms, including:

- exploitation
- radicalisation

Persistent absence [\[footnote 2\]](#) from school can also be a warning sign of risks and concerns about a child's safety and welfare.

To support effective working across the local authority area, schools are expected to inform a pupil's social worker if there are unexplained absences from school.

Children missing education officers, or a school's point of contact in the school attendance support team, should also inform the social worker if the pupil's name is to be deleted from the school register.

## Checklist for support

Consider the following suggestions when supporting a child or young person.

## Explore reasons for absence

Social workers are uniquely placed to help schools understand the barriers that prevent children from attending. Keep the child's voice central, explore their relationship with education and keep in regular contact with the school. Be curious about possible reasons for absence, including:

- caring responsibilities
- travel difficulties
- mental health issues
- bullying
- challenges with learning

Low attendance may indicate unmet needs or wider safeguarding risks, including exploitation.

**Action:** Once reasons are identified, agree clear and proportionate actions with:

- the child
- their family
- the school
- relevant local authority colleagues, including multi-disciplinary family help teams

Ensure these actions are included in the child's plan and reviewed regularly.

## Address any safety concerns

Some children may struggle to attend because they feel unsafe:

- at home
- in the community
- on their journey to school

**Action:** Work with the child, the school and local authority colleagues to identify and implement measures that improve safety, such as safer travel arrangements.

## Involve the family and carers

Parents, carers and wider family members are essential to making school attendance a priority. This includes adults responsible for children in:

- residential care
- foster care
- kinship care

**Action:** Involve caregivers in assessment and decision-making wherever appropriate, and support them to understand the importance of attendance and how they can help improve it.

## Support transitions

Attendance tends to fall during key transitions, such as moving from primary to secondary school. The largest drops are seen in children eligible for free school meals. Attendance then tends to fall again as children move into years 8 and 9.

**Action:** Check school place applications early and discuss what support the child may need to settle into a new environment, including travel arrangements and any additional help required at the new setting. Continue to support the child as they progress through the early years of secondary school.

## Use live attendance data

Current attendance levels and emerging patterns can signal changes in need.

**Action:** All local authorities have access to near-real-time pupil-level data on attendance via the [monitor your school attendance service](#). Local authority school attendance support teams can use their DfE login to enter the service via [view your education data](#).

It is important for social workers and practitioners to look beyond short-term patterns and explore trends over longer periods when reviewing live data. Understanding whether attendance is improving, declining or fluctuating – and aligning this information with a child’s chronology – can help identify:

- emerging risks
- protective factors
- potential solutions

This longer-term view often reveals far more than headline figures alone.

Social workers should also ask school leaders about these trends to develop a fuller picture of what is driving attendance changes. Working with the virtual school head or local authority attendance colleagues to interpret both real-time and historical data supports early identification of concerns and informs next steps.

A [case study from Norfolk County Council](#) explains how data has informed their strategic approach.

## Look for patterns

Absence may be more frequent on certain days or at certain times, for example:

- Fridays and Mondays
- during weeks with in-service training days

- before or after holidays

**Action:** Explore these patterns with the child to:

- understand the reasons
- identify what support could make their attendance more consistent

## Share information

Regular communication helps ensure professionals have a shared understanding of risks and barriers.

**Action:** Maintain frequent updates with the child's school and other professionals to share relevant information that can support attendance.

## Frame attendance in practical terms

Families may not realise the impact of missed days.

**Action:** Explain attendance clearly – for example, by describing what 90% attendance means in days and lessons missed, and discuss how this affects learning and wellbeing.

There are 190 days of school a year, so 90% equates to 19 days missed, or in a typical secondary school, more than 100 lessons.

## Attend training to improve knowledge

Understanding the causes of poor attendance supports better decision-making and planning.

**Action:** Take up training opportunities through your organisation, such as those offered by the virtual school or learning and development teams.

## Useful links

- [Working together to improve school attendance](#)
- [Children's social care national framework](#)
- [Working together to safeguard children](#)
- [Keeping children safe in education](#)
- [Early career standards: professional standards for child and family social workers](#)
- [Families first partnership programme](#)
- [Giving every child the best start in life](#)
- [Children's social care dashboard](#)
- [Mental health issues affecting a pupil's attendance: guidance for schools](#)
- [Promoting the education of looked-after and previously looked-after children](#)
- [Children's social care: virtual school head role extension](#)
- [DfE school attendance toolkit for local authorities](#)

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1. [Relationship between mental ill health and absence in students aged 13 to 16](#) ↩
  2. Attendance below 90% is classed as persistent absence and requires targeted support by schools and local authority school attendance teams and other practitioners, where appropriate. ↩

[↑ Back to top](#)

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