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# Children who have difficulties attending school

Disclaimer: This evidence summary includes relevant literature identified from searches on the above topic, it is not an exhaustive list, it presents key finding and not recommendations for practice.

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# Introduction

Children who have difficulty attending school can sometimes be referred to as emotional based school avoidance or school refusal. However, these terms can be problematic as they don't reflect all the issues these children are experiencing. So for the purpose of this report, we will use the term children who have difficulties attending school. This report looks at the reasons children may have difficulty attending school, what needs they might have, and it also shares some of the experiences of these children and their parents.

# Reasons children may have difficulties attending school

- Academic pressures including tests [2, 4]
- Bullying (by child or adult) [2, 4]
- Friendship issues [2]
- Social anxiety [2, 3]
- Learning difficulties [2]
- Ineffective SEND support [2]
- Ineffective support for physical ill health (chronic and/or acute medical conditions) [2]
- Undiagnosed SEND [2]
- Undiagnosed Physical Illness [2]
- Home related worries [2, 3]
- Sensorial difficulties [2]
- Mobility difficulties [2]
- Executive functioning weaknesses [2]
- Unstructured break times [2]
- Separation anxiety [2, 3]
- Emotional development delay [2]
- Not feeling difficulties are understood or believed [2]
- A lack of a sense of belonging in the school environment [2]
- Behaviour policies that are excessively harsh or punitive [2, 3]
- Not feeling safe in the school environment [2, 4]
- Adolescent brain or hormonal changes [2]
- Trauma [2, 4]
- Sexual or physical assault [2, 4]
- Classroom disruption [2]
- Changes to routines or staffing [2, 4]
- State and trait anxiety [3]
- School anxiety [3]
- Parental depression [3]
- Adverse childhood experiences [4]
- Socio economic status [4]
- Unequal access to support services and resources [4]
- Poverty/homelessness [4]
- Bereavement [4]
- Family separation/divorce [4]
- Neglect [4]
- Addiction [4]
- Transition from primary to second level school [4]
- School size [4]

# Needs of children who have difficulties attending school

Survey of 151 Local Authorities (LAs) in England, and deep dives with 10 LAs, identified 6 ambitions:

- Ambition 1. Ask, listen, communicate: decisions about children's education need to be made with children, their families and other adults in their lives - reasons for children not attending are complex so need to be explored fully with proper engagement. Many children felt not listened to.
- Ambition 2. Meet children where they are: all children receive support in school, through families of schools - too many children are missing school because of unmet SEND or mental health needs, bullying that has not been addressed or problems at home. Many children felt lack of understanding of their needs.
- Ambition 3. Exclusion as a trigger for intervention: children should receive a fantastic education, regardless of setting, always and receive targeted support following exclusion or suspension - children who are excluded or suspended should have their needs assessed, and a plan should be put in place for those needs to be met.
- Ambition 4. Let children be children: no child should feel that they need to miss school to support their family – need to be identified and supported so that they can be in school full time. Some children felt responsibilities at home were taking priority over education including; providing care for a family member, caring for their own child, or providing financial support for their parents.
- Ambition 5. Attendance is everyone's business: school leaders have a relentless focus on attendance and work together with LAs to ensure children are supported to be in school and to attend regularly - schools, LAs, social care, NHS workers and community partners all have a responsibility to see the child in school every day, and to wrap support around that child.
- Ambition 6. No more 'known unknowns': lack of information should never be a barrier to keeping children safe and ensuring they receive a high-quality education - LAs and schools need clear data to identify children not attending regularly or missing from education.

Report also includes examples for each ambition of child-centred approaches they identified. [1]

# Voices of children and parents who have experienced difficulties attending school

“What I really would have loved […] is if they had an assembly asking the kids how do you think we can help more […] instead of talking among themselves […] you are not actually asking the kids how we can help” – Girl, 14, attending AP (alternative setting for children who cannot attend mainstream school) three times a week. [1]

“It would be nice if staff looked for signs of someone needing help. People like me would like to be confronted if they need help” - Boy, 15, attending an independent special school. [1]

“This is how a school should be – different bits for different classrooms. They speak to you like normal people, not like some dumb kid. More practical stuff, like the kids with ADHD get to do more practical stuff’”- Boy 15, on a managed move. [1]

“When they kick you out of school, they just leave you for ages […] and then, they just expect you to get back into that routine […] and it’s not that easy” – Boy, 15, attending AP. [1]

“At school I’m 3 years behind - I feel like I’m not getting the right amount of support with my work. I’m really scared of going to secondary school because I feel like I’m not going to get the support and I’m worried I’m going to get picked on for it’” – Girl, 11, young carer. [1]

“What would have helped would be one person taking responsibility and saying I make sure all these things come together quickly […] we were waiting and it got worse and worse and worse until we reached crisis point because we were hanging on” - Mum of 13-year-old girl out of school. [1]

School Trauma: The Childs Voice by Hull Parent Carer Forum
https://youtu.be/xialijCMh08
- Video that describes how children feel who experience school trauma [5]

Teach Me by Anna Cottrill https://youtu.be/0hOUR0Aykcw
- Video that includes the voices of many children with SEN talking about how they feel [5]

Walk in my Shoes by Erin Davidson https://youtu.be/KSKvazfTLv8
- Video of the voice of a girl with autism and her experience [5]

School by xPearl_Heartx https://youtu.be/ylZbsgsfgE0
- Video of he voice of a girl with autism and her experience [5]

B, 11 years old, ASD
‘This school is ruining my life. I am angry all the time and it’s really frustrating. When I am in school I am trapped. If I ask to get out of class they just tell me to do deep breathing and that makes me have a panic attack. Because I mask, they think I am fine in school. They are doing nothing. If I go in all the time, I just come out.’ [5]

Sasha, age 15, wanted to be in school. She has been failed by a lack of suitable education provision.
‘Don’t mistake us for “not trying”. We have tried, and this is where it got us.’ [5]

Tyler, 4 years seeking appropriate education, East Sussex County Council
‘My worrys at school 1. Being bullyed 2. Starting to be hurt 3. Hurt myself 4. Not going to school cause the bullys.’ [5]

Age 12 - Out of school for 2 years. Waiting for an ASD assessment for 18 months. On her 5th ‘My Support Plan’ but no EHCP. “She is clever but it’s the anxiety and social situation she cannot cope with”. ‘Are you OK? – She’s fine’. [5]

# Summary

Much of the research suggests difficulties attending school is a complex issue that requires proper investigation to find out the issues faced by the child and then to provide support to meet the needs of that child. Common themes from the voices of children were their issues being dismissed, unheard, blamed, lack of support and long waits/forgotten.

# References

[1] Children's Commissioner (2022) 'Voices of England's Missing Children'. Available at: https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/voices-of-englands-missing-children/ Accessed: 2/3/23

[2] Not Fine in School (2022) 'Research'. Available at: https://notfineinschool.co.uk/research Accessed: 2/3/23

[3] Tekin & Aydin (2022) 'School refusal and anxiety among children and adolescents: A systematic scoping review'. *New Directions for Child & Adolescent Development*, 2022, (185-6) pp:43-65. Available at: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/cad.20484?saml_referrer ABSTRACT ONLY

[4] Devenney & O'Toole (2021) 'What Kind of Education System are We Offering': The Views of Education Professionals on School Refusal'. *International Journal of Educational Psychology*, 10 (1) pp:27-47. Available at: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1308448.pdf Accessed: 2/3/23

[5] Not Fine in School (2022) 'Experiencing school attendance problems & barriers?'. Available at: https://notfineinschool.co.uk/home/f/hes-fine-in-school Accessed: 3/3/23