SUPPORTING SOCIAL WORKERS TO IMPROVE THE ATTENDANCE OF CHILDREN WITH A SOCIAL WORKER

Department for Education

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Top tips guide: supporting social workers to improve the attendance of children with a social worker

The Attendance Action Alliance was formed by the Department for Education at the end of 2021 to place a focus on improving school attendance for all pupils including those pupils with persistent absence. The Alliance has brought together a coalition of school, local authority and third sector professional leaders to improve the school attendance of children and young people coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Missing any school can negatively impact a child's progress and learning, but when children are regularly not in school it can have a major impact on levels of family stress, particularly for families already facing significant adversity. That is why when thinking about attendance the message that *every school day counts* is crucial. One group of children with lower-level attendance are children with a social worker[1]. For this reason, the Chief Social Worker for Children and Families, Isabelle Trowler pledged to work with child and family social workers to identify and amplify examples of good practice to the social work profession. Social workers already do a great deal to support the school attendance of the children and young people they work with; this guide aims to capture and share some of the many tips and examples that have been shared by local areas.

This work has shone a spotlight on some truly excellent examples of social workers using innovative approaches to encourage attendance, building strong partnerships across schools and local authorities to focus on supporting the school attendance of children and young people with a social worker.

Who is this guide for and how was it created?

This guide is designed for child and family social workers, children's social care leaders, local authority education leaders.

[1] Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities, in England: 2019 to 2020 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

The guide has been created by the Office of the Chief Social Worker for Children and Families and draws on examples and strategies in place at Lincolnshire, Camden and Wandsworth local authorities.

How should the guide be used?

This guide aims to provide simple and practical points for social workers to consider in their day to day practice to support the attendance of the children and young people they work with. It also includes some prompts at a system wide strategic level for local authority leaders to actively target and improve the attendance of children with a social worker.

This document should be used as a prompt for social workers and local areas to consider their current approach to supporting the attendance of children with a social worker and to review current practices. Tips should be adapted to best fit local contexts and scenarios. Plans should be regularly reviewed and assessed for their effectiveness as part of local governance plans. Evidence on the most effective interventions to improve the school attendance of children and young people is limited so regularly reviewing approaches to support attendance is important.

For practicing social workers

Think attendance in every professional conversation about a child

Attendance should be integral to all child in need and child protection planning. Think about and work with the child or young person and their family (where appropriate) to understand the young person's relationship to education. Where there are issues with school attendance take the time to listen and understand why this is the case before identifying how the child or young person's attendance could be improved.

Attendance in assessment

When assessing a child or young person where attendance is a concern, it may be helpful to consider the below checklist to get a sense of the support currently being received and where there may be gaps to be addressed.

- What is the child's current attendance? Consider framing this in terms of days and learning missed when communicating with the child and their family because what might sound like a high percentage of attendance can still mean a lot of school has been missed. If attendance is under 90% (or at risk of dropping below 90%) what is the plan to improve it?

- Low level attendance is usually a symptom of underlying issues for the child and their family. Try to identify the underlying issues to identify what types of support might be needed.

- Is the child on track for age related expectations? (The child's teacher/school should be able to advise whether this is the case) If not:

a. Are they eligible for pupil premium funding such as free school meals/Ever6 or pupil premium plus?
b. What additional support or interventions are they receiving through pupil premium and how effective are they?
c. Do they have a special or additional need or disability (SEND) or an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP)?
d. How is the education setting using the graduated approach, does this need to be reviewed?
e. What additional support or interventions are they receiving and how effective are they?
f. Are they accessing Covid 19 catch up funding or tutoring opportunities as part of the National Tutoring Programme?

- Is behaviour or suspension impacting on their educational outcomes? Is there a pastoral support plan in place? What support strategies are being used in school?

- Is mental health or wellbeing impacting on attendance? Is anxiety playing a part in low level attendance and how can the child be supported in managing that?

What can you do? How to incorporate attendance support in your practice

- Get curious about why a child is not attending school. How can the child get what they want / need without missing school?

- Draw on the support of those with whom the child has a strong, supportive, and healthy relationships. Those people are most likely to support change.

- Provide space to listen and, provide additional and individualised support.

- What is the child doing instead of attending school? Is home more fun than school? Can the internet be turned off during school hours?

- It takes a family commitment to support a child to return to full school attendance. How can you support the family to think through how best to do that?

- Do you contact the school before they do a home visit to find out how things are going at school? Schools hold invaluable intelligence.

- All local authorities have an attendance support team who will be able to provide advice and guidance.

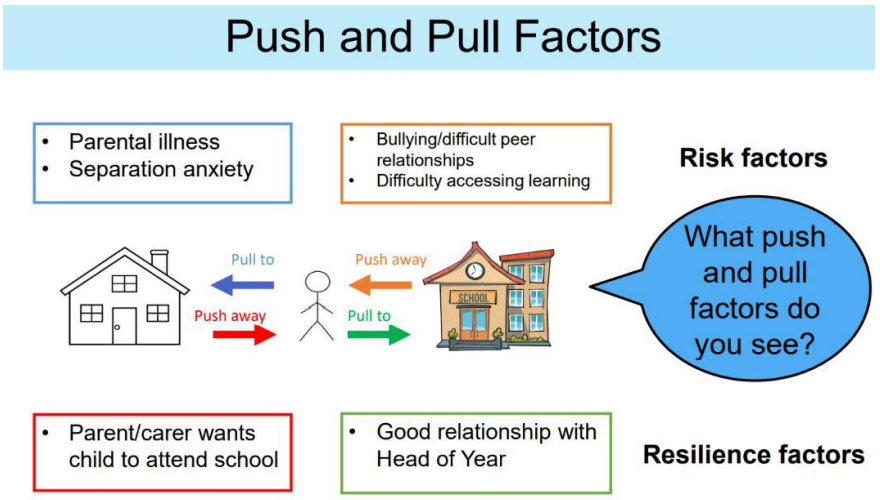
Some evidence has shown that interventions and engagement with the parents of children struggling with attendance can have the greatest success[1] so a whole family approach to resolving attendance concerns should be the default approach subject to individual circumstances.[2]

[2] Attendance interventions rapid evidence assessment | EEF (educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk)

Consider the push and pull factors and opportunities to strengthen or overcome these as appropriate

The graphic below illustrates some of the barriers and push and pull factors that might be impacting a child or young person's attendance at school. Paragraph 84 of Working together to improve school attendance[3] requires schools to inform the social worker if a child is absent unexpectedly or without authorisation.

Developing an understanding of these push and pull factors can be an effective way to identify adjustments needed to support the child's attendance. For example, an agreement for a young carer to be able to use their phone at school to check-in with an unwell family member might be an effective adjustment to allow them to attend school. At the same time agreeing an open door policy with the head of year could be an effective pull back to school.[4]



Proactive partnership working

Every area has a different local system for education and children's social care. Make a point of learning who the relevant education partners are in your area. The virtual school head and your authority's attendance support team can be a good places to start if you are unsure. It might be that you organise for your team to meet with or hear from relevant education partners to identify shared priorities and how to work together effectively. This should include a particular focus on the data available to partners, how it is currently shared, and opportunities to use data more effectively to better monitor and understand the attendance of children and young people with a social worker.

[3] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-improve-school-attendance
[4] download.asp (royalfree.camden.sch.uk)

Local Authority and senior leadership level

Develop local plans for attendance that involve partners in children's social care, early intervention, police and health professionals

Plans should focus on how to monitor, understand, and improve the attendance of children and young people with a social worker in line with paragraphs 82-84 of Working Together to Improve School Attendance[3]. For example, ensuring every child in need and child protection plans addresses attendance as standard.

Consider whether an attendance focused audit of children's social care cases might be helpful. Some areas thematically audit child in need and child protection plans including an audit focused on how social work practice is used to support attendance.

Make attendance everyone's business

Do all professionals working with children and young people in your authority understand how they can work with partners to deliver on their responsibility to support attendance and in particular the attendance of children with a social worker?

Is there a plan for supporting children who are excluded/suspended from or at risk from being excluded/suspended from school to ensure that children with a social worker do not have gaps in their attendance?

Case Studies

A social worker based in a Wandsworth school demonstrates the impact a whole family and child focused approach can have in overcoming challenges with attendance.

What were the concerns?

Child A's resistance to attending school was escalating and the mother's strategy of trying to force her child to attend was not working. The young person's father seemed unable to understand his child's additional needs and how being ASD affected him. Child A was increasingly becoming an elective mute and not speaking at school.

There were concerns that mum was singlehandedly supporting her child in the home. The family and primary school were both concerned about the child's transition to secondary school. Child A displayed increased anxiety when the transition was discussed.

What was happening when the social worker started to be involved?

Child A stopped attending his mainstream school completely and eventually the specialist provision they had been in receipt of. This meant that Child A was home all day everyday with little engagement or stimulation despite his mother's best efforts.

What did the social worker do?

The school based social worker introduced themselves to the young person at their specialist provision. On that visit Child A stayed in the hallway refusing to join the class. To engage Child A the social worker showed them some pictures of the farm animals at the school they would be transitioning to.

When the young person stopped attending school completely the social worker continued to visit them every week at home and included updates on the farm at Child A's new school on each visit. The social worker joined the family when they visited the school so they could see the social worker would be there physically and made three visits to the family over the

What difference did this make?

Child A started at their new school where their attendance has been good. They have now developed the independence to travel to school alone. Child A's presentation is unconventional, but they have developed the confidence to be their true self at school and have made some friends.

Child A is no longer mute at school and the social worker has established a trusting relationship with the parents, they continue to contact them if they have any concerns about Child A that the social worker can then pick up in school. The social worker continues to visit child A at home

The following example from Greenwich practice working in conjunction with the charity SHiFT is another example of how consistent and child centred work can make a big difference to the outcomes and direction of a child's story: https://thecommissiononyounglives.co.uk/guest-blog-from-shift/.

If you have any questions about or feedback on this guide, please contact: Office.OfTheChiefSocialWorker@Education.gov.uk

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