



School attendance

Debate briefing

Tuesday 23rd January 2024

Centre for Mental Health and the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition (CYPMHC) welcome this Westminster Hall debate on school attendance on Tuesday 23rd January, led by Vicky Ford MP. Often, issues with attendance are linked to children and young people's health needs, and growing evidence supports a link between mental health problems and special educational needs and disabilities with absence from school.

We believe a much more co-ordinated approach to school attendance is required, that puts in place support to address the needs of the child or family. Members of CYPMHC often tell us how approaches to attendance need to be more flexible and take into account the individual needs of children and their families. This briefing provides further insight and sets out recommendations for change.

Summary

- In 2023, about 1 in 5 children and young people aged 8 to 25 years reported a mental health problem, such as anxiety and depression (NHS Digital, 2023). This is a rise from 1 in 9 in 2017.
- There are significant links between mental health problems and school absence: according to data from NHS Digital, children and young people with mental health problems are almost seven times as likely to have had 15 or more days off school in one term (NHS Digital, 2023).
- There is no attendance code that reflects mental health as a cause for absence however, one of the most common reasons given for persistent absence is mental health problems.
- Efforts to improve attendance should emphasise identifying and supporting children and young people's needs. This includes creating supportive and inclusive school environments that prioritise whole education approaches to mental health and wellbeing, working with the whole family, and putting in place systems of support around schools.
- Centre for Mental Health and the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition are calling for:
 - **The introduction of a mental health absence code**
 - **The full, national roll out of Mental Health Support Teams in all schools and colleges**
 - **A fully resourced, national implementation programme to support every school and college to adopt a *whole school approach* to mental health and wellbeing**
 - **Increased investment to Integrated Care Systems to deliver a comprehensive pathway of mental health support.**

1. Absence, mental health and special educational needs and disabilities

There has been a worrying rise in mental ill-health among children and young people in England over recent years. The latest figures from NHS Digital finds that 1 in 5 children and young people aged 8 to 25 years reported a mental health problem, such as anxiety and depression, in 2023 (NHS Digital, 2023). The number of children and young people with special educational needs is now close to 1.5 million, with mental health problems one of the most common reasons for children having special educational needs (SEN).

Issues with attendance can often stem from children and young people struggling with their mental health. This can be for reasons both within and outside of the school environment, such as bullying, trauma, caring responsibilities, or a stressful home environment. Evidence suggests a link between attendance in school, mental health and wellbeing, and special educational needs and disabilities:

- Data from NHS Digital highlights a link between school absence rates and mental health problems; children with a mental health problem were seven times more likely to have missed 15 days of school in the Autumn term 2022, compared to those without a mental health problem (NHS Digital, 2023).
- Emotional difficulties may lead to symptoms such as fatigue, difficulty concentrating, lack of motivation, or anxiety-provoking stimuli in the school such as social interaction, performance situations, or academic assessments all of which may impact a child's ability to attend school.
- Research from the Department for Education further shows that the proportion of pupils who were absent from school due to anxiety or mental health problems was higher amongst pupils that had been bullied (32% compared to 16% of pupils that had not been bullied) (Department for Education, 2022).
- Research from the University of Swansea highlights that children and young people with neurodevelopmental disorders, mental health problems, and who self-harmed were much more likely to miss school than their peers (John et al., 2021).
- Disabled pupils and those with SEN are disproportionately represented in both absence and persistent absence figures (Department for Education, 2022).

Government statistics show clearly that those on SEN support are more likely than non-SEN pupils to be absent, while those in receipt of Education, Health and Care Plans are yet significantly more likely to, suggesting a possible correlation between complexity of need and poor attendance levels.

Whilst having a mental health problem or special educational needs does not mean a child or young person cannot attend or take part in some form of education, it is important to note that the lack of proper identification of need and subsequent support act as significant barriers to attendance.

2. A mental health code of absence

There is no separate mechanism for education settings to record absence for pupils with mental health problems, meaning that mental-health related absence is not commonly authorised by schools due to the requirement to provide medical evidence (Education Select Committee, 2023). Research from Mind highlights that this requirement to provide medical evidence can be challenging for young people who face lengthy delays to access mental health support (Mind, 2021). For example, in 2022/23, NHS Children and Young People's Mental Health Services (CYPMHS) only met 37% of estimated diagnosable levels of mental health need in England.

Unauthorised absences can subsequently lead to legal sanctions, such as fines or prosecution, against parents and families. There has been wide-ranging support, including from the Education Select Committee, for the introduction of an authorised mental health absence code, in order to eliminate the need for medical evidence in the case of mental health problems and reduce the need for intervention via prosecution (Education Select Committee, 2023).

What is more, punitive approaches to address attendance, such as fines, can be harmful to the mental health of the young person and their family, at an already challenging time. Parent-led organisations such as Square Peg have shown how the current approach to attendance difficulties, that often use sanction-based measures, can actually be counterproductive - particularly when mental health diagnoses or support are difficult to access.

There is also evidence that taking a punitive approach to unauthorised absences can result in parents withdrawing their child from school. In 2019 the Children's Commissioner for England found that many parents are withdrawing their child from mainstream education, either because they are worried about their child's wellbeing and mental health, or because they are being faced with fines and prosecutions due to unauthorised absence (Children's Commissioner, 2019).

3. Embedding a whole education approach to mental health and wellbeing

Education settings have an important role to play in promoting and protecting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. A whole education approach encompasses a complete, setting-wide, and multi-component approach to the promotion of children and young people's mental health and wellbeing and aims to place mental health as foundational to all aspects of educational life, for all students and staff.

Such approaches are crucial in making every pupil feel valued, and in supporting positive mental health and wellbeing in education settings. In their 2022 report on school attendance and persistent absence, Ofsted made clear that school leaders who have improved attendance have seldom focused on attendance in isolation. Leaders emphasise the importance of making school a safe place where pupils really want to be (Ofsted, 2022). A study by UCL and the National Education Union also demonstrates the impact of a sense of

safety, belonging and wellbeing on student performance and engagement (National Education Union, 2020).

We have long advocated for full implementation of a whole education approach to mental health and wellbeing across all education settings in order to promote positive mental health and wellbeing for all learners, and to create inclusive and supportive environments where all children can thrive.

4. Increasing the provision of mental health support

Given the links between school attendance and mental health problems, it is crucial that the provision of mental health support in schools, community and the NHS is increased. We believe that by providing accessible, timely support to families experiencing mental health difficulties, more children and young people will feel safe, supported and empowered to stay in schools.

The Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health: A Green Paper (2018) committed to the establishment of new Mental Health Support Teams (MHST) in schools and colleges with the aim of reaching a fifth to a quarter of the country by the end of 2022/23. As of Spring 2023, 398 teams are operational covering 6,800 schools and colleges and 35% of pupils in schools and learners in Further Education. An additional 100 more teams undertook training during 22/23 and NHS England expect approximately 500 MHSTs to be up and running by 2024.

While we welcome the laudable progress made in rolling these teams out, the future funding and rollout of the programme remains uncertain, and without this, we are concerned about the continued post-code lottery of MHST provision. Further funding for full national roll out Mental Health Support Teams needs to be guaranteed to ensure that all children and young people can access mental health support within schools.

What is more, in order to be able to effectively support families, schools need to be aligned with and have access to local support services. Links between schools and NHS CYPMHS are not consistently good across all areas and where NHS CYPMHS experience long waiting lists and demand, there is subsequently an increased demand on schools to hold more complex cases for mental health support while children and families wait. These difficulties in accessing support can further drive persistent absenteeism. We believe increased investment needs to be provided to Integrated Care Systems to provide a comprehensive offer of mental health support to ensure all children and young people access timely support.

About Centre for Mental Health

Centre for Mental Health is an independent charity. We take the lead in challenging injustices in policies, systems and society, so that everyone can have better mental health. By building research evidence to create fairer mental health policy, we are pursuing equality, social justice and good mental health for all. Centre for Mental Health are proud hosts of the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition.

About the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition

The Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition is a collaborative network of nearly 300 organisations and individuals dedicated to advocating for and influencing policy in relation to the mental health needs of babies, children, and young people. Our coalition consists of diverse stakeholders, including mental health organisations, youth support services, educational institutions, and concerned individuals, all united by a shared commitment to improving the well-being of children. We aim to raise awareness of the importance of mental health and ensure that children and young people have access to the necessary support and services.

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