FREE PARENT AND CARER GUIDE

When School Attendance Becomes Difficult

A calm guide to understanding the barrier, working with school and agreeing the next manageable step.

NOTICE THE PATTERN | LISTEN | PLAN TOGETHER

Supporting the child you see - and the one you don't.

Free to download and share

START HERE

The first 24 hours

Attendance difficulty is often a signal that something has become too hard. It still needs action, but blame and panic rarely reveal the barrier.

Three useful things to do today

1. Tell school promptly. 2. Ask one calm question and listen. 3. Write down what you have noticed, including when attendance feels easier.

What to notice

- When did the difficulty begin, and what changed around that time?
- Is it worse on particular days, lessons, journeys or around particular people?
- Are there signs of anxiety, low mood, poor sleep, pain, bullying, friendship difficulty, sensory overload or unmet learning needs?
- When does school feel more manageable, and what is different then?

Try saying

'I've noticed mornings have become really hard. I'm not here to tell you off. What feels hardest about school right now?'

Keep the morning safer

- Use short, calm language. Avoid long questioning while your child is distressed.
- Do not label them as lazy, naughty or manipulative.
- Avoid shouting, punishment or physically forcing them through acute distress. Contact school and agree the next safe step.
- If they disclose a safety concern, do not promise secrecy. Explain that you will involve someone who can help.

WORK WITH SCHOOL

Ask for a small, clear plan

Share facts rather than conclusions: what changed, the pattern, what your child has said and what has already been tried. Ask what school has noticed too.

A useful plan should name

Arrival

Where and how will your child enter?

Named adult

Who will check in and be the main contact?

Support

What one adjustment or action will be tried first?

Review

When will everyone check whether it is helping?

Questions worth asking

- What does my child say is hardest, and what have staff observed?
- Is there a trusted adult and a calm place they can use?
- Could SEND, bullying, learning, sensory or health needs be contributing?
- What will happen tomorrow, who will contact me and when will we review it?
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Important

Any change to the school day should be agreed and managed by the school, be lawful, have a clear purpose, be time-limited and be reviewed. Keep communicating even when attendance is not yet improving.

NEXT STEPS

Know when to involve more help

You do not need to diagnose the problem. The aim is to notice risk, involve the right people and keep the child connected to support.

Contact the GP

If anxiety is persistent or worsening, or it is affecting everyday life, learning, sleep, eating, relationships or family life.

Contact the designated safeguarding lead

If your child describes abuse, exploitation, bullying, feeling unsafe or another safeguarding concern. Follow the school's safeguarding process without delay.

Use urgent help

If there is immediate danger or a life-threatening emergency, call 999. For urgent medical or mental-health help that is not a 999 emergency, use NHS 111.

A brief attendance reminder

In England, parents are responsible for ensuring that a child of compulsory school age receives a suitable full-time education. A child registered at school is normally expected to attend whenever the school is open, except in limited circumstances such as illness or agreed absence. If attendance is difficult, ask the school and local authority what support is available. Rules differ elsewhere in the UK.

Trusted further information

- GOV.UK - Working together to improve school attendance
- YoungMinds - School anxiety and refusal: parent guide
- Anna Freud - School attendance and mental wellbeing
- The Pastoral Hub - thepastoralhub.co.uk/signposting

Reviewed 7 September 2026. This guide provides general information. It does not replace advice from your child's school, local authority, healthcare professional or safeguarding service.