

Family Experiences of Resolving School Attendance Problems: Will the proposed Schools Bill improve things?

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Since compulsory education was introduced in England in the late nineteenth century, various social and political discourses have instilled a strong belief in the importance of educating children through a system of mainstream schooling. To reinforce this expectation, absence from school has been socially and politically constructed as problematic either through a punitive focus upon truancy as deviance, or through a pathologising focus upon 'school phobia' or 'school refusal' as maladjustment or neurotic behaviour, supported by sometimes biased or flawed clinical research. These approaches have repeatedly placed blame within the child and their family, while failing to investigate school-based and wider systemic factors of influence.

The legislative response to truancy has essentially remained the same for over a century and reflects the dominant belief that absence from school is indicative of parenting failure and/or children's disaffection from education. However, it is argued that this punitive approach has proven over time to be unsuccessful in reducing levels of absence (Zhang, 2004; Sheppard, 2010; 2011; Epstein, Brown & O'Flynn, 2019).

Epstein, Brown & O'Flynn (2019) studied the experiences of 126 parents of children experiencing difficulties attending school. They concluded that *'the punitive approach leads to harm for parents, children, and vulnerable families. It also appears to be ineffective in getting reluctant and fearful children back into the classroom'*. Donoghue (2011), and Epstein, Brown & O'Flynn (2019) posit that the use of criminal law is both inappropriate and ineffective, with the former arguing for an alternative civil, child welfare approach, and the latter for a social pedagogy based, holistic approach, as it *'may provide a more effective framework for addressing the multifarious and socially complex problem of truancy'*.

Research conducted by Kendall *et al.* (2004) explored the effectiveness of prosecution for school absence from the perspectives of parents who had been prosecuted, magistrates and court clerks, and Local Education Authority and Education Welfare Service staff. The findings suggested that the most beneficial aspect of prosecuting parents was the message it sent out to other parents, rather than resolving absence. Kendall *et al.* (2004) found professionals observed that even if prosecution improved a child's attendance it tended to only be a short-term improvement, indicating that the underlying reasons or problems had not been addressed and resolved. Furthermore, according to Donoghue (2011), legal sanctions can only be an effective deterrent if the parent is the only cause of a child's school absence; or if the child is of an age

where a change in approach by the parent will be effective in resolving any problem or barrier preventing attendance. It could therefore be argued that although there needs to be a systemic response to truancy, a rethink about the aims and appropriateness of the current legislative response is required.

The Department for Education (DfE) continues to focus upon these assumptions of school absence as truancy, deviance, and parenting failure. This is evident again in the Schools White Paper (2022) which fails to recognise or address current systemic barriers; especially those that hinder parents attempting to fulfil their legal duty to ensure children struggling to attend school do receive a suitable, effective, full-time education (section 7, Education Act 1996).

What do parents experience when they seek to resolve school attendance problems?

My recent PhD study investigated the experiences of parents who attempt to resolve their children's school attendance problems (SAPs). This study involved forty members of an online support group for parents with children struggling to attend school. This support group (called Not Fine in School) was established in November 2017 and has a current membership of 28,680 (with an average of around 1,000 new members joining each month). The participant's accounts featured forty-seven children (twenty-nine males and eighteen females). These parents had been supporting their children and trying to resolve their attendance problems for between 1 and 12 years at the point they took part in this study.

Parents described how a combination of systemic factors including: discourse directing blame at children and families; truancy-related cultural narratives; negative working relationships; professional lack of compliance with legislation (with no accountability); a lack of relevant understanding of SAPs, SEND, and child mental health; inflexible policies and harmful practices; and the impacts of systemic failings such as the underfunding of education, health, and local government services, all contributed to diminish their power and agency to achieve a resolution. This made it difficult for parents to comply with their legal duty to ensure children access a full-time, suitable education. This lack of power and agency forced some parents to engage in complex battles, which sometimes ended with them removing children from school rolls altogether.

Reported factors that had influenced school attendance

▪ Special Educational Needs & Disabilities

The existence of special educational needs or disabilities (SEND), especially those that were unrecognised or inadequately supported, was particularly significant, with forty of the forty-seven

children having a SEND that had been diagnosed prior to, or during, the period described in parental accounts.

These diagnoses included Autism, Pathological Demand Avoidance (a PDA profile of autism), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID), Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Dyscalculia, Dysgraphia, Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD), Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Tourette's Syndrome, Mutism, Sleep Disorder, and being Gifted and Talented.

There was not one professional however that could relate or appreciate the barriers in my son's way to accessing an education that was suitable for his needs

For 30 out of the 47 children discussed in the study, parents expressed concerns about autism either as a suspected or diagnosed influence upon their difficulties attending school. Of these 30:

- 4 children had been diagnosed as autistic before they started school.
 - A further 5 children were diagnosed as autistic within the period described in parent responses.
 - 4 children were suspected to be autistic and were waiting for diagnostic assessments to be carried out
 - 1 child was suspected to be autistic and supported in school as if he was, without needing a diagnosis.
 - 13 parents had tried to raise concerns about a possible link to autism, and all had their concerns dismissed by school staff, however all 13 children went on to receive an autism diagnosis eventually – 10 through the NHS and 3 through a private assessment.
 - 3 parents suspected their child is autistic but had not sought assessments.
 - 5 parents described their autistic child as 'masking' their autism in school. One parent has twin boys who are autistic – one twin masked his difficulties in school, one twin didn't mask his difficulties. The twin who didn't 'mask' was supported by the school, while the twin who masked wasn't supported and school insisted he was 'fine in school' even when his parent tried to advocate for him.
 - 1 parent reported that her autistic daughter had explained that she wanted to be in a school with children who were like her, suggesting that she felt that she did not fit into, or belong in the mainstream school environments she had experienced.
- **Physical and Mental Illness**

When my son was in year 5, he had a terrible time of continuous stomach pains, day and throughout the night for months non-stop. The school didn't believe him. They said they knew what a child in pain looks like, and he is

not a child in pain. He had the stomach issues investigated but this took months of referrals and appointments with different doctors/hospitals. Meanwhile, the school offered a phased return with my son in control but as soon as he was in, they went back on everything they had promised him.

Physical illnesses were a factor that impacted upon the abilities of 14 of the 47 children to attend school, either because they were too unwell, or children were not being adequately supported in school (following DfE statutory guidance 'Supporting pupils at school with medical conditions').

These illnesses included Asthma, Cystic Fibrosis, Migraine, continence issues, heavy and painful periods, Irritable Bowel Syndrome, Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome (PoTS), Ehlers Danlos Syndrome, hypermobile joints, Cerebral Palsy, Trigeminal Neuralgia, and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

- Parents reported a main cause of 26 children's attendance problems was a form of anxiety including social anxiety or separation anxiety, 14 had a diagnosed anxiety disorder
- Some experienced anxiety triggered by a traumatic experience. These trauma inducing events involved bullying, a relative's death, or seeing something traumatic such as an attempted suicide, or car accident
- For some children their trauma was triggered by a school-related event such as the loss of a supportive staff member, actions by school staff that caused a loss of trust or respect
- 3 children had a diagnosis of depression
- 16 parents observed a significant decline in their child's wellbeing after they were forced to attend school in a state of distress
- 10 parents described their child saying they wanted to die; 3 parents described their child experiencing a mental breakdown; 2 parents reported children making a suicide attempt; and a further 3 parents described their child as suicidal.

My son would force himself to get up and get ready for school, it was like dragging a heavy weight out of bed. Sometimes he would sit on the end of the bed dressed for school, tears rolling down his face - saying he couldn't go in - he would go back to bed.

▪ The impact of school environments

The school he was in destroyed his human will and need to learn. Saying the words, learn, school, education, teach, teacher, GCSE, exam, would lead to instant meltdown, like violent house trashing meltdown. I still can't say

those words now to him or in any part of my life and I am a teacher, saying teacher makes me squirm now.

Parents identified a range of factors within school environments which they perceived were influential. It seems relevant to consider that parents have very limited opportunities to influence many of these school-based factors, yet these factors have a significant impact upon their ability to achieve a successful resolution of children's attendance problems.

- Some children experienced sensory difficulties or overwhelm within the school environment, which would often be experienced by autistic children
- Some children were reported to have experienced bullying that triggered their school absence
- Many children's difficulties were attributed in part to the school climate, ethos, and policies. Parents perceptions of this were related to: children having a fear of doing something wrong or making mistakes at school and then being punished or shouted at; children feeling under pressure to perform well academically; children expressing a fear of doing tests; children expressing they felt trapped, unsafe, or overwhelmed in school
- Some children's attendance problems occurred during the transition between primary and secondary school, or during times of significant academic pressure such as the lead up to taking SATs

My son has been struggling with school ever since he moved to secondary school. He was always really hyper and stressed when he got home. Talking at a million miles an hour, angry and aggressive, unable to settle. He made it sound like he had spent the day in a war zone with things kicking off all the time. School holidays were completely different, and he was like a different person, so much calmer and more like his old self.

These findings echo those of the Office for the Children's Commissioner (2022) who surveyed 550,000 children of which 'approximately 6,500 children, 1.7% of respondents, were not in school. This cohort comprised of 4,600 children in home education (1.1% of respondents) and 1,900 children out of education entirely (0.6% of respondents).' Their report concluded that:

'[T]here are various factors in children's lives that are linked with them being more likely to be out of school. These include demographic factors (...boys much more likely to be out of school than girls) and a wider set of wellbeing indicators, where children with different additional needs are more likely to be missing from education settings. Children's free-text responses suggest the barriers to being in school are having SEND without having the right support in school, mental health problems, bullying, the pressure of the school environment and physical illness.'

The impact of experiencing school attendance problems

The following extracts indicate how experiencing school attendance problems can impact upon children and parents:

My daughter's whole personality changed. She had always been a happy child who liked school. She was easy going and popular amongst her peers. She got very low and very anxious after starting secondary school though.

Not coping in secondary school completely destroyed him. It's not like it's just one thing in your life and everything else is just fine. It destroyed him. It took a long while after deregistering to begin to build his self-esteem up again. It's like the school broke him as a human.

She became a completely different child. As a toddler she was a real extrovert, had no fear and was very strong-willed. When the school attendance difficulties started, she became very frightened, withdrawn and fought like a tiger when we tried to make her attend.

My daughter talked of ending her life just to stop the torture of having to go to school.

It wasn't until he was severely depressed and suicidal when he was obviously too unwell to attend school that we stopped trying to get him in and the pressure eased. I feel we lost our boy then for a while and it has taken many months to get him back.

My daughter is an extremely intelligent girl with aspirations to be an engineer, unfortunately how she has been mistreated has resulted in total fear, extreme anxiety around education and schools.

As a mum it's been hell, it's been harder than anything I've ever faced in my life, including life-threatening illness. Watching your beautiful, enthusiastic, funny, clever, and creative child deteriorate in front of your eyes over a period of time is absolutely heart-breaking.

Having to force my children to go to school has been a horrendous experience, especially for [son A], as he has little support in school. You know that you are damaging both their mental health and your relationship with them, but you feel under such pressure to "get them in" because "they're fine once they're here".

I felt that I was being placed in an impossible situation, alone with no one by my side, where I either cooperated with the system or trusted my gut instincts to support my daughter's health and face the wrath of the school system, a fine and potential prosecution.

At the time, I was just trying to do my best, do what was expected of us as parents. Society, schools, mental health workers, Drs, friends, family etc expect you to send your child to school. So you take them. But nobody sees the deep distress. What they might occasionally witness is a young child who is upset being carried across the park to school, but as soon as they cross the school gates the child's head goes down, the shoulders slump, they stop crying and they might walk in defeated. Occasionally they might witness the child being restrained by staff to stay in school. But that is occasionally. And when in school, 99% of the time they see a quiet child, who follows rules, gets on with work, then leaves to go home. My son tells me he was too terrified to do wrong, speak out, ask for help or draw attention to himself in anyway at all. That's why school see him as 'fine in school'.

Online contact with peers in similar situations provided shared support and information. Hearing many other similar stories also prompted recognition that rather than individual families being isolated or unusual cases, as many had been led to believe (and feel they were solely to blame), there was recognition that it was more the case that it was the education system and wider systemic response to SAPs that was problematic, as families were all fighting similar battles.

As a result of their experiences parents come to a realisation that their first duty had to be to their child, and not to the education system. For many families the resolution they achieved was not the one they had hoped for at the outset of their journey, but it was a resolution that reflected a change in their perception of the problem and their altered priorities as a result.

We no longer push her in to school like school is the most important thing and we have to conform. We know that it isn't, and there are other options. We have told her that we will home school her, and she can choose. But we

think about it carefully and weigh up the pros and cons much more pragmatically. I no longer have respect for our education system (or CAMHS) in the way I had before and realise that we must listen to and respect our children much more.

It was through the experience of others that I began to join the pieces together along with snippets of information or 'worries' that my son was able to share. It was then I realised that my son's refusal was directly related to unmet needs and a lack of working together between myself and his school - They wouldn't accept he wasn't fine, and I wouldn't accept he was.

When my daughter was screaming and begging me not to send her, she was trying to tell me that the system was harming her. [...] We invalidated her voice because we did not listen to her, we kept sending her to the places that were breaking her. Although we did do it for the right reasons.

The reported outcomes

- Only 1 out of the 47 children had been able to return to their mainstream school and re-establish a normal pattern of attendance. This happened after he spent some time at home having been signed off as too unwell to attend. This was followed by 18 months where he made tiny steps of progress as he was allowed flexibility. The focus throughout was on him feeling safe and in control. He spent a further 6 months making small steps of progress while attending a medical needs unit until he felt ready to return to his original mainstream school.
- 7 children remained on roll at mainstream schools with reduced/low levels of attendance
- 6 children had a place in a SEND school arranged through an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP)
- 5 children were being educated through alternative provision arranged by their Local Authority such as forms of home-based tuition, online schooling, or hospital school
- 7 children were being home educated
- 13 children were not accessing any type of educational provision
- 8 children had reached the age of 16; of those, 4 had gone on to college, 2 were being home educated while taking A levels, and 2 were too unwell to be involved in any educational activity.

What are the barriers parents encounter when they try to resolve school attendance problems?

It was apparent that parents expected the professionals they approached would have 'frontline' experience of SAPs and be aware of policies, pathways, services, or provisions that may help. Parents reported both positive and negative experiences of contact with schools; however, by far the greater part of parents' accounts consisted of negative experiences. The positive responses experienced related to schools empowering children and parents by offering help at an early stage. Parents appreciated help provided by professionals who were knowledgeable about SAPs, SEND, mental and physical health, navigating policy and legislation. Parents looked for kindness, empathy, and support which allowed children a degree of control within their attendance context, so that they had some flexibility to make small steps of progress with minimal pressure. To facilitate this, schools needed to manage their own expectations around attendance data and policies, and parents found that this could be a significant barrier to achieving a positive resolution.

Parents described experiencing a combination of systemic factors which included:

- **Dominant discourses seeking to direct blame at children and parents**

Parents often felt blamed, criticised, and judged. Navigating this range of difficult experiences had an emotional impact on parents, triggering powerful feelings including shame, guilt, panic, frustration, and anger.

As the school refusal escalated, we had a family support worker involved, who tried to negotiate with school to make some adjustments and to acknowledge our son's needs. The school persisted with their opinion that our son was making good academic progress and was always fine in terms of his behaviour and what they witnessed. Once the Occupational Therapist had been in and testified that she saw signs of anxiety, I began to lose confidence that the staff at school were able to meet his needs and became quite frustrated and angry that it was constantly placed back in the family and home, in terms of managing him - even though the support services who were coming to us from Early Help had assessed me at home and agreed that we already had everything in place that they would recommend.

School: For a long, long time I trusted what they were saying. I took their criticism of my parenting to heart, doubting myself. I thought they were the 'experts' and that they would support my daughter appropriately. I eventually found I had been wrong on every count. They would call me in for meetings, where they discredited my daughter's problems and told me I was

too soft, too gullible, spoiling my child who they said was fabricating her health problems. As I defended my daughter providing medical reports from specialists and paediatricians and asking them to put in place measures to support her, they then began to indicate I was fabricating her health and anxiety issues and coercing her into pretending to be ill to back up my fabrications.

- **Socially constructed narratives relating to school absence as truancy, and a belief that reluctance or inability to attend school should be punished**

From the perspective of parents, their experiences mostly indicated a lack of empathy, compassion, and little interest in supporting them and their children. Responses appeared critical, punitive, and hostile, and a general feeling of indifference was apparent.

They told him he was breaking the law and that mommy could get into very big trouble. She told him some parents even go to jail 'and then who would care for you? When our son sat there with no words, she added, "if you don't go to school, mommy can't go to work...and if mommy can't go to work, she won't be able to pay for you to live in this house...and then where would you live?"

Together with the LA, the school repeatedly threatened both my daughter and myself that she would be put into care, and I would go to prison if she didn't improve her attendance.

No card from the class saying they were missing him, nothing. We received a request to donate for the Leavers Party, but nobody actually asked him to go. That was very hard. I can't imagine how he felt. I had no parents contacting me to ask how we were doing. Not one.

We requested school send work out, my daughter still wanted to learn, but they refused saying it meant they were agreeing with my daughter being off school and they thought she was perfectly well enough to attend.

Parents questioned whether such approaches were conducive to resolving SAPs, or whether they were more likely to exacerbate children's feelings of anxiety, guilt, and isolation, and consequently make a return to school more difficult for them.

- **Negative and ineffective working relationships between parents & professionals**

The relationship between schools and families was central to parents' journeys, as school is the site of children's difficulties and therefore the focus of many interventions. It was therefore crucial for parents and school staff to work in partnership to identify and overcome the barriers stopping each child attending. The success or failure of these working relationships depended upon the beliefs, knowledge, and approaches implemented by those involved. Positive working relationships were described by 5 parents, which centred around empathy, flexibility, a willingness to listen and learn from each other, and a willingness to work in partnership to find a solution for the child (as demonstrated in the following extract).

My son's SENCo was very understanding and is experienced, and she has seen it many times. She said some children managed to come back, some do not. She said she is there, when he is ready to return, and he can go back in on a reduced timetable at his own pace.

However, instances of negative working relationships were coded 55 times within parent accounts, and these involved the perceived breaking of trust; poor communication; not honouring plans and agreements; dismissing diagnoses made by medical professionals; and being dismissive of information provided by families.

My son's two primary schools were both dismissive and again sometimes patronising. I would get told he'd grow out of things, he was fine when he was there, they didn't see anything, lots of 'oh yes but loads of kids do that.

At age 6 he was refusing to go to school often, didn't sleep, didn't have an appetite, and had constant headaches & tummy aches. I took him to GP, and they agreed anxiety. I explained this to school, and they said they see no anxiety in school, his T-shirt came home soaked everyday where he'd chewed the neck of it plus his fingers bled where he'd chewed the skin and nails off.

I am flummoxed at the aggressiveness of services and schools, their obstructiveness, the fact that professionals will give opinions that amount too lies to stop children getting the support they need.

- **Ineffective and negative working relationships between professionals within different services**

There is a legislative expectation that different services will work in partnership to support children (e.g., Children and Families Act, 2014). Parents noted the problematic nature of this expectation, with a clear lack of respect and cooperation between services.

The Paediatrician was helpful, he wrote a lengthy report confirming the physical health issues (migraine, IBS, mobility issues, tip toe walking) as being very real physical outcomes of severe anxiety, triggering by sensory issues, all relating to school attendance. His opinion was that CAMHS should assess her and would be best placed to help her. School and LA totally disregarded his report.

It's often felt to us that CAMHS staff despaired of some of the stuff that the school did with my child, but they didn't have the power to change anything. The school could ignore advice from a psychologist with no come back.

The CAMHS caseworker was very supportive of my child and me, she put things in place that gave me evidence to present to the school, she came to meetings with me and was subsequently treated absolutely abominably by the head teacher, SENCo, and class teacher of my daughter's second school. It was shocking to see the way a fellow professional was treated by my daughter's school, but it was also eye-opening. I realised after that meeting that the school would do or say ANYTHING to defend their position even if it meant behaviour that was totally unprofessional towards medical staff.

- **A lack of professional compliance with policy and legislation (with little accountability)**

Parents queried why the current education system appears to adopt a 'one-size-fits-all' approach that fails to respond appropriately to differences in children's needs, abilities, and circumstances. Parents also reflected upon the concept of inclusivity and legislation requiring schools to make reasonable adjustments to support individual needs and disabilities.

At the beginning we listened to staff at the school, who I now know didn't have a clue! Their lack of knowledge is scary really. They were especially ignorant about unlawful discrimination against a child with a disability.

When we met with the Headteacher she really had no idea about the law on this.

Parents reported that guidance and legislation relating to the support a child should receive, or how their attendance and absence were recorded, was not always followed correctly.

The head approached me and gave me a revised attendance sheet "on reflection, we recognise that your son has been unwell, so we have changed all his unauthorised absences to illness". This was on the last day of term!!!!!!

Parent's accounts indicated a range of problems within their interactions with local authorities which acted as barriers to achieving a resolution. These problems included a refusal to conduct assessments of needs; a lack of effective communication; dishonesty and a misuse of information; a failure to provide suitable provision; and the failure to follow relevant legislation.

As for the LA, don't get me started! With my child it was horrendous from the start. First, they refused to assess for an EHCP because his needs were "well documented and understood". They caved before tribunal. Then they refused to do any of the assessments needed, even though they were perfectly reasonable. They used out-of-date private reports they knew weren't suitable. Then they refused to acknowledge my private SALT report because it stated specialist school. There was a massive lack of communication, even after several formal complaints to the Director of Children's services. I was blatantly lied to and even when I corrected them, they claimed ignorance, saying they could only go by local policy. [...] It took 49 weeks and 3 threats of Judicial Review to get a final plan. Which named his current junior school who had already said they couldn't meet needs.

When parents found themselves in situations where it appeared that a lack of accountability was hindering them in helping their children, they were frustrated and angered because there are few effective ways to take action if professional practice does not comply with legislative expectations.

- **A lack of relevant professional training and understanding of school attendance problems, plus a lack of professional capacity or agency to act**

Many parents found their attempts to resolve their children's attendance problems were hindered by the lack of official guidance or policies that clearly informed them (and others) how

to access help. Parents struggled to identify a resolution because no one knew how to help, and they noted how damaging the lack of help was for the children involved.

It really felt (and still feels) as though no one knew what to do - such a danger when it's left untreated for so long as my daughter was busy building a brick wall around herself so the longer it was left, the harder it was to get her to engage (she never did).

I have quickly learned that I could access more information than the professionals knew and that my gut instinct was the one to follow - which I always have done. Initially there was the suspicion that it was a family issue - easy to conclude when professionals did not know family dynamics. The GP I saw was very sympathetic, she had a close GP friend in exactly the same situation, however, there was little that she could do.

Constantly wading through the unhelpful people to find someone who does help is tiring. While adults who are employed to work with our children continue to blame the children for not "coping" instead of looking at their practice and working out how to help vulnerable children to stay in school nothing will change. This must come from the top and the current system which continually puts vulnerable people down and blames them for being vulnerable is making everything worse.

It was surmised that one reason it is difficult for parents to find help is that professionals working within the systems can find themselves in positions where they need to avoid taking on the responsibility for helping children and families, often in relation to financial deficits.

- **A lack of relevant professional training and understanding of SEND and child mental health**

The competency of school staff in relation to SEND was perceived by parents in this study to reflect a lack of relevant training. The parents in the study who worked in professional roles (including teaching and social work) reported that they had not received any training in relation to understanding and managing attendance problems.

Diversities like Autism, ADHD and PDA are invisible unless you recognise them through experience. Kids will often try to hide their differences, so for school staff who have no personal experience of these diversities, and even when they do have that experience, it can still be difficult to understand and

recognise. Also, teachers are dealing with huge workloads and large class sizes.

The ways that people understand and respond to children experiencing anxiety and other mental health difficulties was also seen by parents as a barrier for children to access support.

My son is in being assessed for SEN and we have been very lucky with some of the professionals involved but some of his teachers lack even basic knowledge of what it's like for a child like him and I find that terrifying. All those who work in education should have basic SEN and mental health training, otherwise they can end up taking decisions about children that can have massive implications. The Deputy Head that took the decision to stop my daughter taking part in activities she enjoyed because of her low attendance should have been given training in mental health and school refusal. What he did completely entrenched her school phobia and I find that hard to accept or forgive. I can't forgive him or the system that allowed that to happen. A lack of knowledge can be dangerous.

Frustration was also expressed by parents about the apparent failure of health services to assess and identify the underlying reasons why children were anxious and then respond appropriately:

Social misconception over what anxiety is, how it occurs in children. Absolute lack of resource to investigate properly and even if they could assess and diagnose, no facility to support and treat. I am on a low income and have had to sacrifice a lot to be able to pay for play therapy and psychology assessments for my children. They haven't ever met thresholds for support via CAMHS or other statutory or even charitable services.

▪ Senior school leadership attitudes, practices, & priorities

It became apparent within the accounts parents shared that the lack of empathy or support offered to children in schools was often driven or influenced by school senior leadership.

In year 3 her form teacher whispered to me at parents evening that she thought my daughter might be dyslexic, she couldn't act on it because the head didn't believe in SEND and she would risk losing her job(!) In year 5 I paid for a private Educational Psychologist assessment. The head refused to allow the school or any teachers to participate so the report was limited and inconclusive.

In our case it was clear the SENCo knew that senior leadership would have zero tolerance of school refusal, to the point where I was told "let's just keep this between us for now". She was later banned from talking to me.

The assistant head told me "We can't have parents dictating to us" when I asked for a minor change - very reasonable adjustment

I still don't trust the senior management, but I am no longer afraid of them. I did complain to their faces, and went to the governors, but the senior management tried to push my children out of the school. I printed lots of legal documents and pointed out what they did wrong, what they should have done for a child with medical needs, mental health needs etc. The governors swept the whole thing under the carpet. I have since learnt that they systematically do this to children with special needs who don't conform. Others have moved area because of what senior management put them through.

The issues highlighted here are complex and could reflect a range of factors that might influence the actions of senior management in schools, including a need to maintain power and conformity; school funding deficits; the pressure to maintain high attendance rates and account for attendance data during Ofsted inspections; a lack of adherence with relevant legislation; a lack of training and awareness of relevant factors such as SEND and mental health; and a lack of understanding of how to effectively respond to attendance problems.

- **Inflexible and harmful policies and practices**

The following extracts illustrate some of the inflexible and harmful policies and practices:

When I came back at breaktime they told me he had been absolutely fine, nothing to worry about - so I went away until the end of school - when I finally picked him up, he was emotionally in pieces, and furious with me for not fetching him. I explained that I had come but had been told he was fine. He broke down and said that the school were liars, they lied to him, he can't trust them, he's never going back. I was also angry and hurt by the deception: not only had they not cooperated with me or believed me, or my child, they had made things so much worse in doing so.

CAMHS? After battling for an appointment (and I mean battling) our son was turned away as he was not mentally ill but had neurodevelopmental difficulties (Autism). His self-harming and severe anxiety and depression were not enough for him to receive a service.

CAMHS were initially helpful, but we felt they were too keen to get her signed off and despite her self-harming they didn't see this as an issue because she was "coping" i.e., being in school, even though she wasn't attending lessons.

We had a recent Educational Psychologist report saying my child's voice needs to be heard. It hasn't been heard by the LA because when school get his views, they dismiss them because it's not what they want to hear.

I personally hate the lip service paid to addressing inclusivity (including mental health needs) that is then swept aside by awarding treats and rewards to children with 100% attendance.

▪ **Systemic failures within education, health, and local government services**

In considering the current response to school absence in England the background context relates to systemic crises regarding funding for schools (NAHT, 2021) (and other services), SEND provision (House of Commons, Education Committee, 2019), and CAMHS provision (House of Commons, Education and Health and Social Care Committees, 2018).

- 18 parents reported mental health service referrals for their children had been declined or delayed by extensive waiting lists.
- 16 parents reported Education Health and Care Plan applications or reviews for their children were declined then appealed, or were delayed by systemic issues

Parental experiences evidenced the ongoing failure to effectively implement the SEND reforms of 2014 (Ofsted, 2021a), and fund suitable educational provision for children with SEND (Hutchinson, 2021). These examples of systemic failure continue to be significant barriers to attendance as noted in the Education Committee First Report of Session (2019–20).

I am appalled that we really had no real help and have been ignored. I waited for someone to say this is bad, it is not right, and the right thing to do is this.... but I realise now no one can say that and they are all covering their own backs and their budgets, and they have no duty of care.

Why do our kids have to reach crisis before anything is done? Does no-one see that providing early support saves money in the long-term as it avoids crisis? Yet another fight [...] Sadly I believe much of this comes down to resourcing. Schools don't have the money or time to really try to understand the struggles of individual children who become a burden to them, and who affect their figures, which ultimately reflect badly on the school. HOWEVER, it costs nothing to listen to parents and be supportive and ultimately neglecting the needs of children at an early stage will only create the need for additional support later on.

According to a letter from the Government Legal Department (2020) on behalf of the Department for Education, existing attendance related legislation (section 19, Education Act 1996) provides what they describe as a 'safety net' to ensure children who are unable to attend school can access a suitable education via local authority intervention. However, the findings of this study demonstrate how ineffective this intended 'safety net' is in practice.

Parental experiences evidenced the ongoing failure to effectively implement the SEND reforms of 2014 (Ofsted, 2021a), and fund suitable educational provision for children with SEND (Hutchinson, 2021). These examples of systemic failure continue to be significant barriers to attendance as noted in the Education Committee First Report of Session (2019–20). The report contains observations of funding shortfalls, a lack of accountability, communication failures, poor joint working practices, and unclear pathways to support all feature in the accounts of this study's participants as systemic failures which create barriers to resolving attendance problems.

School attendance related legislation has afforded local authorities with freedom to implement their own attendance policies and practices. The accounts of parents in this study suggest that in practice this means local attendance policies often do not correctly comply with legislation. This creates a variety of difficulties for parents, as evidenced by 939 Local Government Ombudsman investigations between May 2010 and January 2022, where in 672 cases the Ombudsman upheld complaints against local authorities who failed to comply with their duties under section 19 of the Education Act 1996.

Furthermore, the lack of standardised policies for attendance coding and authorisation, combine with the crisis in CAMHS provision (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2020; 2020/21). This often means parents are unable to obtain medical evidence demanded by schools and local authorities through their local policies, without long delays. Consequently, many absences become increasingly entrenched, the family difficulties escalate, and this leads to increased risks of fines and prosecution for parents. At the same time, children are left in limbo without education or support (Myhill, 2017; Clissold, 2018; Epstein *et al.*, 2019). These systemic problems mean that

the 'safety net' the Department for Education argue will 'catch' children who are unable to attend school, through local authority organised provision under section 19 of the Education Act, 1996, fails to materialise (Parish *et al.*, 2018). Local authorities seemingly do all they can to avoid having to fund provision for children (Mortimer, 2018).

Moreover, the lack of an effective complaints procedures (Clements & Aiello, 2019), and few mechanisms of accountability when relevant policies and legislation are not followed, mean parents have few ways of seeking redress, unless they can obtain funding to initiate Judicial Review proceedings. The impact of this situation is compounded by common societal, academic, legal, and professional assumptions and beliefs that if a child or family experiences difficulties such as these, existing systems will provide support. Realising that the support you expect to find does not exist and instead as a parent you will be blamed and threatened with fines and legal action can be devastating.

Cullen and Lindsay (2019) investigated parents experiences of disagreement resolution arrangements relating to SEND, following the SEND legal reforms introduced through the Children and Families Act (2014). One aspect was an increased focus on partnership working which aimed to prevent disagreements between local authorities and families. However, it was found there remained a minority of disagreements which were difficult to resolve and '*were experienced by parents as intensely emotional and stressful*'. Their findings showed that disagreements mostly reflect a belief that a child's SEND are going unmet, and one main reason for complaints was '*delays and role dissonances experienced while seeking to ensure the child's needs are met*'.

Being autistic held significance for thirty of the forty-seven children involved, both in terms of recognition and acknowledgment of autism, and the provision of appropriate support for autistic children within school environments. School staff often failed to recognise or accept children were autistic, especially in terms of recognising when children were masking their difficulties (Beardon, 2019; Pearson and Rose, 2020). This could be linked to many instances where children were said to be 'fine in school' but at home it was clear the children had problems attending school. The need for workforce development via improved autism knowledge for teachers is discussed by Guldberg (2020), who recommends a variety of improvements in training and practice. This includes an emphasis on engagement and partnership with parents, creating an inclusive culture, and making reasonable adjustments to remove barriers to participation.

Is the proposed Schools Bill likely to reduce persistent absence?

Regarding school attendance and absence, the Department for Education suggest the aims of the proposed Schools Bill include identifying all children who are not receiving the full-time

education they are entitled to and clarifying how local authorities should apply their responsibilities and powers to improve attendance. However, there is little to suggest that the DfE acknowledge or plan to address the wide range of systemic factors that hinder children's ability to attend school.

This is evidenced by the observation offered in the School Attendance: Schools Bill Factsheet (DfE, 2022, p. 6)

The drivers of absence are wide and complex and persistent absenteeism is almost always a symptom of wider problems a family is facing.

Here there is no clear recognition that absence can be influenced by school-based and wider, systemic problems, instead the focus appears to be solely on families. The DfE go on to state:

Where support is not successful, not engaged with or not appropriate, legal intervention remains an important part of local authorities' powers to protect every child's right to a full-time education.

Again, this indicates a failure to recognise that any support implemented might be unsuccessful due to systemic failures – the only suggested remedy is to use legal intervention (against parents). There is no mention of punitive action if schools or local authorities fail to follow legislation.

The Schools White Paper proposals continue to enforce the punitive response to school absence viewed as 'truancy'.

When parents attempt to resolve attendance problems they often fail because existing policies, systems and attitudes are not supporting their efforts. Therefore, it is inappropriate and ineffective to continue to enforce legal expectations which appear to be largely unachievable in the current context. Instead, it would be more appropriate to establish a different response which acknowledges the complexity and heterogeneity of school attendance problems. This approach should recognise that many school attendance problems reflect instances where our current education system is failing to support the needs of individual children. Where this is the case the punitive response to 'truancy' is clearly inappropriate.

The ability of parents to fulfil the duty to arrange a suitable full-time education requires a fit between the child and the environment within which the child is educated (Lerner *et al.* 2006). This works adequately enough for many children, but not all. For instance, DfE (2021) data indicates a recent persistent absence figure of 916,131 (or 13% of all pupils) suggesting for a significant number of children this fit with the learning environment doesn't work.

Thinking Differently

Davies and Lee (2006) interviewed 48 young people (school non-attenders and attenders), some of their parents, and several education professionals. Their study attempted to understand why some students stop attending and others keep attending. Davies and Lee (2006, p. 208) viewed their task as researchers was to develop understanding by '*standing back from the assumption that non-attendance is a problem*'. Instead, they viewed young people as self-withdrawers who 'offer a critique of the school and the system and solve their personal problems by refusal to engage' (Davies and Lee, 2006, p.208). **They suggested that self-withdrawal is evidence of a contractual breakdown. The contract being one where the young person attends and complies at school, and in return the school offers 'a safe environment, meaningful and relevant learning, opportunities for association with friends, and dignified and respectful treatment'** (Davies and Lee, 2006, p. 208). This contractual breakdown occurs when the young person does not feel safe, protected, respected, or dignified. As a result, Davies and Lee (2006) acknowledged that rather than being a problem for the student, non-attendance can be a solution to a problem, and the problem exists for schools, local authorities, and the political community instead.

It is noted by Lees (2014) that school-based harm is created in several forms, including social humiliation, sexual abuse, various types of bullying, human rights abuses, neglect of basic needs and '*more tacit abuses of an individual sense of self*'. Lees (2014) argues that as school attendance has been promoted as beneficial to children, their safety and wellbeing should be better protected and guaranteed. Given that these forms of harm caused by, and within, our systems of schooling are recognised, this knowledge should support suggestions that children sometimes have valid reasons to avoid school, and equally, that school environments can become barriers to attendance.

In recent years this has become increasingly apparent through various reports expressing concern about the impact of systemic failures, and school-based factors which are detrimental to children's wellbeing in relation to mental health (Mind, 2021); bullying (Ditch the Label, 2020); sexual assault in schools (Lloyd *et al.*, 2021; Ofsted, 2021b); provision and support for long-term physical illnesses (No Isolation, 2021); provision and support for pupils with SEND (House of Commons, Education Committee, 2019); and provision and support for autistic pupils (Totsika *et al.*, 2020; Truman *et al.*, 2021).

The DfE need to address the reasons why children and young people do not feel safe or respected in schools, and do not feel that their learning is meaningful or relevant, then attendance might rise. Equally, if the DfE ensured that schools work to support rather than penalise those children already struggling to attend, to rebuild connections and a sense of belonging, they are likely to see absence fall and attendance rise.

Knage (2021) has argued that although SAPs have been described as a multifactorial phenomenon, the response within research has been to simplify this multiplicity by maintaining a focus on one aspect or factor of influence. Offering an alternative perspective, Knage suggests there is a need to engage with socio-cultural perspectives and theories that can more effectively help to account for the complexity of the phenomenon. Furthermore, Knage (2021) suggests that **although school absence is framed as the problem, it may not be the absence from school that is problematic, as depending upon how a child is engaged while not in school, as it is possible they could still be gaining an education elsewhere.** This perspective is an antithesis to the dominant political discourse that an appropriate education can only be gained through attendance at school.

This contrasts with reports of home education and self-directed learning leading to successful outcomes (Knox, 1990; Rothermel, 2000; Fortune-Wood, 2007; McIntyre-Bhatty, 2008; Wray and Thomas, 2013; Lees, 2014; Cunningham, 2021; Fisher, 2021). For instance, both Fortune-Wood (2007) and Wray and Thomas (2013) reported on case studies where children's symptoms had indicated cases of 'school phobia' and 'school refusal', however, once those children were removed from schools and home educated, they immediately or gradually regained their wellbeing, confidence, and interest in learning.

The Schools White Paper proposals will effectively make elective home education more difficult for families. This means where families have turned to home education as a solution to attendance difficulties, children who have already struggled to thrive in school environments, and those who have been failed by systems which should have supported them, are more likely to be forced back into those same one-size-fits-all environments and systems that have caused them harm and distress. Children and their families need more choice and flexibility, not less.

The DfE need to move away from the notion of mainstream schooling as the only acceptable form of education. We need to embrace different forms of learning and accept that children have differing needs and abilities that require different types of educational setting and approach.

Echoing Davies and Lee (2006) and Knage (2021), Frydenlund (2021) argues that the absence from school is not the true problem we need to resolve, even though it has been constructed as problematic through its causal links to other concerns. Frydenlund suggests this is faulty logic, and it is the way people respond to a child being absent from school that creates the negative impacts of school absence. Therefore, Frydenlund (2021, p.90) urges **'we need to take a closer look at the consequences we make absence have'**.

The DfE should rethink the punitive approach to school absence as truancy as it does not resolve the reasons and triggers for persistent absence.

As a representative of Not Fine in School and its membership, including the parents who took part in my research, I support Square Peg in calling for the following Asks:

1. End truancy laws - criminalising parents does not improve outcomes for the child or their family, nor does it increase attendance. It harms the most vulnerable, increases likelihood of withdrawal, disengagement, anger, resentment, distrust. It weaves intergenerational institutional cycles of harm and has no place in civil society.

- a. Replace truancy laws with a compassion-focussed response which focuses on ensuring welfare, social care, disability and SEN / educational support, mental health and appropriate healthcare needs have been assessed and provision is in place.
- b. Where it is found a child is at risk of abuse or parental neglect, there are already mechanisms in place to address this via safeguarding and social services.
- c. Ensure all efforts to work with the child and their family is a priority and protected standard.

2. Square Peg clause - Attendance Code of Practice, mapped, designed and co-produced with organisations such as ours, those with lived experience of barriers to attendance and brings together third sector organisations working across disability, SEN, intersectionality, children & families support as well as education professionals, health and care practitioners and welfare teams. The Attendance Code of Practice would set out the gold-standard replacement offer to criminalising families.

3. Introduce a Mental Health absence code - this will achieve several key outcomes:

- a. Give schools agency to authorise absence for mental ill health (too many currently do not recognise mental health as legitimate or valid)
- b. Ensure families are not caught in the 'unauthorised absence' black hole, which fast tracks them to punitive, harmful, destabilising threats of fines and prosecution
- c. Separate & identify the numbers of children struggling with disabling or clinical levels of mental ill health from the physical illness absence data and thus capture the impact of mental ill health on children's ability to access education
- d. Act as a safeguarding and pastoral 'flag' for schools to notice and check in with the family to put in place informal or formal support or refer to specialist services, as appropriate, by following the Attendance Code of Practice

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