

S Q U A R E P E G

## 94% OF FAMILIES FEEL SCHOOL HAS HARMED THEIR CHILD'S MENTAL HEALTH

A survey carried out by Square Peg and submitted to the DfE's Consultation on Attendance has revealed an uncomfortable truth about the negative impact current school attendance policy has on children and young people who are struggling.

Square Peg, a grassroots social impact organisation campaigns to raise awareness around barriers to school attendance to effect change and improve outcomes for children who are marked as persistently absent from school, or at risk of exclusion, revealed a shocking 94% of parents and carers answered the statement "*What has been the impact of school on the mental health and wellbeing of your child?*" as 'Negative' (29%), or Very Negative (65%).

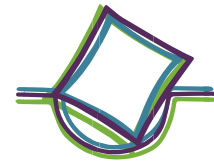
The survey, which ran across the February half term for 10 days, received almost 2,000 responses from parents and carers across the UK.

All parents and carers who completed the survey reported attendance difficulties. Over half stated their child or young person was attending school for less than 50% of the time since the new academic year began in September, with more than 20% of those not able to attend school at all, controversially referred to as 'ghost children' by Ministers and policy makers.

Parents have hit out at the term, calling it offensive, stating these are not ghost children, but **children ghosted by the professionals and services** who are meant to support and protect them. A petition started by SEND parents Susan Liverman and Maddie Roberts less than two weeks ago has already reached 4,300 signatures. It questions the DfE's focus on punitive measures against families whose child is struggling to attend school. Susan said "We all want our children to thrive in school, but many of our children don't, and when they struggle with school attendance – for a multitude of reasons – their confidence suffers further, their mental health is impacted. Adding prosecution into the mix is a sure-fire way to heap additional pressure on families that just don't need it."

Ellie Costello, a Director at Square Peg said: "Square Peg is working hard to represent all parent carer voices and grassroots parent carer stakeholder groups in any discussions around persistent absence and barriers to non-attendance."

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"It is vital any changes to policy and practice improves outcomes for our children and families who are too often dismissed and denied support, particularly for social, emotional or mental health reasons and hidden disabilities such as chronic illness, Neurodevelopmental conditions or clinical anxiety."

"Children who are young carers, BAME, live in poverty or insecure housing, are on free school meals, who are Looked After, suffered bereavement, are displaced families or refugees, English is their 2nd language or face challenges at home such as job insecurity, family breakdown or domestic violence, all experience barriers to attendance with many developing high mental health needs or have unrecognised or unsupported SEND."

"Our voices and lived experience must be at the heart of any systemic and institutional changes which must focus on support rather than threats, fines, prosecutions, child protection scrutiny or disabling accusations of Fabricated Induced Illness (an extremely rare and contentious label)."

"Irrespective of diagnosis, children and their families deserve (and are entitled to) better. When professionals and systems respond to families with derision or a core belief families and children are manufacturing needs and requiring support as attention-seekers or because they are lazy or disengaged troublemakers, the system is at risk of breaching every human, child, family and equality law there is."

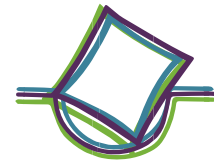
"The primary loser is of course, the child, whose development, well-being, attainment and future life outcomes are dramatically and irrevocably reduced."

"OFSTED's latest report attached to the DfE's consultation stated non-attendance at school, 'should not be tolerated' and an expectation of high or 100% attendance should be the aim. Not only is this ableist but it prioritises presenteeism and fails to acknowledge that unless a child's wellbeing, welfare and needs are supported and protected, they won't be able to settle to learn or access the curriculum."

"Parental authority, as experts in their child, is constantly ignored and overridden. It is toxic and needs to stop. We must work together when a child is unable to access school – it's a parents' worst nightmare when their child's mental health is so poor, they are unable to function let alone attend school, but often parents have been coerced and threatened into enforcing attendance, which only makes things worse."

"We know parents who found the pressure and scrutiny intolerable, opting to deregister their child simply to preserve their family's sanity and wellbeing. Others, who have been recently bereaved speak of feeling 'hounded' which exacerbated their child's needs and increased trauma to their grief. Children with chronic illnesses are left in tears or driven to self-harm due disabling low esteem, such is their distress that they must attend hospital appointments regularly and their

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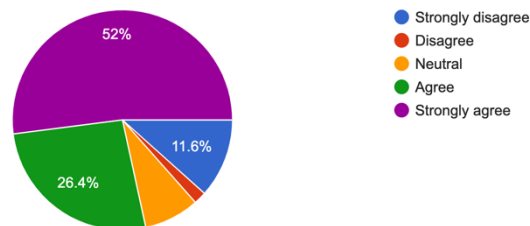
attendance is low. The intense scrutiny and surveillance of families is a pressure cooker set for disaster. If you want to understand the crisis in the demand for CAMHS and social care, look to the relentless focus on attendance and attainment. Many are familiar with the school to prison pipeline but few dare speak of the school to CAMHS pipeline.”

“The Government’s reasoning is safeguarding but our families report neither they nor their child’s welfare, wellbeing and life chances have been safeguarded whatsoever. OFSTED refers to successful schools’ approaches to attendance as ‘tenacious.’ For families it is **tortuous**.”

## ENDS

Extract from Square Peg Attendance Survey, February 2022, 78.4% agree or strongly disagree:

Q17. My child’s attendance difficulties have added vulnerabilities / increased disadvantage for us as a family  
1,960 responses



(Neutral 8.1%; Disagree 1.8%)

SEND = Special Educational Needs and / or Disabilities; CAMHS = Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services; BAME = Black & Minority Ethnic backgrounds

<https://www.change.org/p/updated-attendance-guidance-encourages-prosecution-and-fines-of-families-facing-barriers-to-attendance-undiagnosed-children-with-send-are-particularly-at-risk-time-for-positive-action-for-send-in-education/>

[https://consult.education.gov.uk/school-attendance-policy-and-strategy-team/school-attendance-improving-consistency-of-support/supporting\\_documents/Attendance%20consultation%20document.pdf](https://consult.education.gov.uk/school-attendance-policy-and-strategy-team/school-attendance-improving-consistency-of-support/supporting_documents/Attendance%20consultation%20document.pdf)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/securing-good-attendance-and-tackling-persistent-absence/securing-good-attendance-and-tackling-persistent-absence#securing-good-attendance>

<https://fullfact.org/education/children-off-school-roll-covid/>

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