



Most school-anxious children do WANT to attend school however their difficulties and anxiety become overwhelming. They care about their education and want to succeed, however they need understanding and support at home and at school. They may need adjustments to their daily routines, timetables, or even their school environment. Pressure to focus on attendance rather than a child's needs can make things even harder to fix.

## A Child is Struggling to Attend School - What can we do?

Increasingly children and young people are reporting school-based anxiety in addition to other mental health and SEND difficulties. These issues are not simply behavioural problems. Research acknowledges they are highly complex, multi-dimensional difficulties, requiring an individualised approach which assesses the triggers, difficulties and needs of each child. Early intervention, with professionals and parents working together, is vital to minimise any impact on education and wellbeing.

Unfortunately, many parents report being blamed and pressured to force attendance, without due regard to the complexity or severity of their child's difficulties.

Many parents find teachers insist a child is 'fine' one they are in school. If you describe a student as 'fine in school' please ensure:

- ✦ You have a good working definition of the word 'fine'
- ✦ You have gathered evidence as to why you make this assumption
- ✦ You consider descriptions of the child's difficulties by someone who knows them well
- ✦ You consider the impact of any diagnosed or undiagnosed /suspected SEND
- ✦ You consider the possibility that he /she may be masking their difficulties
- ✦ You consider the relevance of the 'Fight, Flight, Freeze or Submit' range of reactions to stress and anxiety
- ✦ You consider that describing anxious children as 'fine in school' means they are less likely to access the help they need to attend regularly and achieve their potential.

We recognise that schools have limited resources, but many helpful actions including empathy and understanding are cost free!

Please direct parents to our facebook family support group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/NFISFamilySupport/>

and the NFIS website:  
[www.notfineinschool.org.uk](http://www.notfineinschool.org.uk)

### Support Mental Health Issues in Children & Young People

Children experience mental health difficulties for a range of complex reasons. The Government recommends that schools develop a mental health policy that creates an environment where young people with anxiety feel supported, understood, and able to seek help, making it more likely they will feel safe and able to attend school.

### Absence due to Physical or Mental Illness should be Authorised

Families need support rather than threats of fines or prosecution (which rarely help to resolve attendance difficulties). The potential legal implications of unauthorised absences will add to a child's anxiety and substantially increase the difficulties families face. Consideration of the long waiting times and high thresholds for referrals to NHS specialists indicates that attendance cannot take priority over health needs.

**Conduct Assessments for SEND** Many children have an underlying SEND that contributes to their difficulties; this can include Autistic Spectrum Conditions, ADHD, Sensory Processing Disorder or Dyslexia. SEND also include Social, Emotional or Mental Health Difficulties, which may affect a child's ability to establish friendships, cope with a variety of strong emotions, and increase a child's vulnerability to bullying. Remember your duty to use best endeavours and reasonable adjustments.

**Collaborate to Create a Child-Led Support Plan** High levels of anxiety can be classed as a disability and as a barrier to learning requiring the use of assess-plan-do-review cycles. It is important to ensure that children, their parents and health professionals participate as fully as possible in developing support plans that are flexible, child-led and individualised. Plans must be communicated to all staff and combined with relevant staff training and whole-school awareness. If children struggle to engage, they need patience and an experienced professional to help them access the right support.

### Make a Referral for Assessment by an Educational Psychologist

An Educational Psychologist can assess an anxious child and recommend appropriate interventions. This input can be useful as inability to attend school is often a symptom of a significant need or problem that requires more specialist knowledge and insight.

### Take action if Bullying or Sexual Assault are reported to you

There are legal duties on schools and LAs to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. School anti-bullying policies should set out the actions which will be taken to prevent or address bullying. The DfE have produced peer sexual violence guidance for schools & colleges.

Recovery can be a very slow process for many children and young people despite everyone's best efforts. Helping them to feel **connected, significant and welcomed** will encourage that big step back into school

In the absence of a national strategy for school attendance difficulties, we base this information on current legislation & statutory guidance:

Children & Families Act, 2014

The Equality Act, (2010)

Supporting pupils at school with medical conditions (DfE)

Education for children with health needs who cannot attend school (DfE)

Mental health and behaviour in schools: Departmental advice for school staff: March 2015 (DfE)

SEND Code of Practice (2015)

Special educational needs and disability: A guide for schools and alternative provision settings

The Education Act, 1996

Technical Guidance for Schools in England (Equality & Human Rights Commission, 2013)

Preventing and tackling bullying

Keeping Children Safe in Education, (2019)

Sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges

Alternative Provision (2013)

### Support Referrals to CAMHS & other Health Care Professionals

Where significant health problems occur, schools should facilitate a student's access to more specialist support including Paediatricians, OT and SaLT. The school nurse, or school staff can support or provide further evidence to expedite a referral. Parents can also ask for referrals through their GP or Paediatrician. Unfortunately long wait times for referrals can compound the problem, but support from schools goes a long way to ensuring students gain access to necessary treatment.

**Apply for an EHCP Assessment** An EHCP application is crucial if a school does not have the expertise or funding to fully identify a child's needs, or to offer the provision or support a child requires to access an effective education. Parents can also make an application to the LA for an EHCP assessment, but a joint approach will be the most beneficial way forward.

**Social Care / Early Help Referrals** Families may benefit from early help support. Any referrals should be assessed quickly and thoroughly as school attendance difficulties are not necessarily safeguarding or parenting problems. It is vital that there is multi-agency understanding of the issues and policies surrounding these difficulties. Any interventions must be led by professionals who are suitably qualified and experienced in SEND, mental health difficulties and school attendance difficulties.

**Explore your Local Authority's Local Offer** Schools can collaborate with other local services and providers to meet individual needs effectively. The Local Offer can be an invaluable source of resources, information, advice and relevant support.

### Provide Homework & Connections While the Student is Absent

Not supplying learning opportunities during absence means a student gets further behind, adding to anxieties around returning to school. A school's duty to educate does not stop because a student is absent due to illness, SEND (diagnosed or not) or bullying. Schools should notify the LA if absence due to illness lasts over 15 days (consecutive or cumulative). The LA then have a duty to ensure that a child receives alternative educational provision whilst absent.

There are many reasons why a child may experience attendance difficulties. These reason/s can be obvious, or baffle everyone.

**When a child is struggling, adults must recognise that their reactions can help or make things a whole lot worse.**

The combination of pressure from schools, threats of fines and prosecution and social service referrals does nothing to ease the strain on families, and does not reflect evidence based practice. Caregivers and schools can have differing priorities, but the focus needs to be on working together in the best interests of the child.

**The number one rule of getting a child to go back to school is: DO NOT FORCE THEM**



**Let's work together to resolve school attendance difficulties**