

Safeguarding and Attendance

Enhanced membership

As a DSL, your role also encompasses the need to understand the processes within your setting when responding to children missing education. With high absence levels continuing to be a key focus area across the country, the role of the DSL and senior leaders responsible for attendance policy are more connected than ever before. High absence rates, in particular repetitive and/or prolonged absence from education, are linked to safeguarding issues such as [missed educational opportunities](#), [child exploitation](#), [crime](#) and [serious violence](#). They may also be indicative of [neglect](#), concealment of abuse or children being [young carers](#) amongst other safeguarding issues. **Cultivating a culture** in your setting to promote curiosity and care, regular school/college attendance and a **communication and intervention strategy** are important aspects to consider alongside data analysis.

The Department for Education guidance, [Working together to improve school attendance 2022](#) (updated 2023), highlights the need for schools to have a senior leader who is prioritising the improvement of attendance, and that **improving attendance is everyone's business**. It also places an **expectation on designated safeguarding leads** to discuss the setting's analysis of the regular attendance reports. Getting the **culture** right and making sure our schools, colleges and alternative education provisions are **safe places** for all children and young people to attend are of paramount importance.

Useful reading for DSLs from the Children's Commissioner includes: [Attendance is everyone's business](#) and [Back into school: New insights into school absence - evidence from three multi-academy trusts](#).

This set of materials is divided into three sections:

1. Exploring your universal approaches and communication culture as a setting that encourages regular attendance and supports vulnerable children and young people.
2. Reflection on your current responses and processes for children missing education, including your use of data.
3. Reviewing a range of targeted strategies, which offer personalised and effective intervention to all children, including those with a social worker, or those in need of early help.

Section one

Universal prevention and approaches to cultivate an attendance culture: reducing absence for all

Learners are more likely to attend education settings if they:

- see it as valuable and important to them and their future;
- have good relationships with their teachers and enjoy their learning experience;
- feel safe, seen, secure and supported in their setting – *the essentials for secure attachments*;
- have parents who are positively engaged with their setting.

Do your learners feel safe, and do they know what to do if they do not?

How settings create **safe environments** and respond to **prejudiced and bullying behaviour** is critical when we consider improving attendance for all learners. For example, Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSiE) 2023 acknowledges that children and young people who identified as, or are perceived to be, LGBTQ can be targeted in schools and colleges and highlights LGBTQ learners as needing more support and focus.

Questions for reflection

The most important place to start is with this: Do you know why children and young people in your setting are missing education, especially if they are repeatedly absent and/or absent for prolonged periods? Seeking learner perspective is the foundation for improving attendance. On what level do you know? Is this surface level absence code analysis, or is it child centred, precise understanding?

- *How does your pastoral system support the crucial **key adult** relationship for vulnerable children and young people? Does someone who knows them, and their situation, notice when they are absent and follow this up?*
- *Is there close linkage between your attendance monitoring and safeguarding recording systems?*
- *How confident do you think your staff are in being the **attachment figure** many vulnerable learners need?*
- *Have you developed **vulnerable learner support groups** and approaches, for example, for [young carers](#) (who worry about leaving an unwell family member) and LGBTQ learners? In some settings they allow young carers to go home at lunch to check on their family member, or they can make telephone calls during break or lunchtime.*

- Do you know how **safe your learners** feel in your setting and within their community? How are you using this information to shape policy, training and your resource deployment to improve attendance?
- Are your [anti-bullying](#) and behaviour policies effective? How do you know this?
- How are you ensuring that all learners feel a **sense of belonging** in your setting?

Your attendance communication strategy

A fundamental characteristic of settings that are improving attendance is their **communication strategy** – a planned, sequential and targeted approach to all those involved—staff, parents and learners.

Do you have a communication strategy for attendance?
Is it detailed with a weekly flow of information out to all involved?
How do you know it is effective?

Suggested evidence of a strong communication strategy:

- **You have an attendance communication plan for staff.**

This may involve a weekly attendance statistics briefing with analysis of improvement or concerns for particular vulnerable groups, actions they can take to safeguard these young people and reminders about the importance of accurate register taking, and attendance-focused training sessions on creating belonging and safety.

*Do your staff understand the importance and expectations of greeting vulnerable learners back into education, being professionally curious about reasons for lateness or absence and helping them to catch up on any work missed? Are **returning vulnerable learners** part of the daily communication about attendance in your setting? For example, your front office/reception staff have received additional training to make sure that they **warmly greet families** and children who arrive late. They know who your vulnerable learners are and make sure that they receive a smile and warmth when they arrive. They draw on their relationships with children and young people to notice when things are concerning and can then link them in to emotional and other support within your setting.*

*How well do staff in your tutor/pastoral system prioritise **time to talk** with learners about their attendance, to welcome back disadvantaged and vulnerable children, or children where a pattern of absence is emerging, and talk about why they are not attending?*

- **Your senior leadership team prioritise time each day to welcome vulnerable and disadvantaged learners back to the setting.**

- **The attendance data is shared every day with staff.**

For example, this is how many learners we missed today in year 7 - with reminders to think openly about why there is absence.

- **You have an attendance communication plan for parents.**

Researchers have found that “nudges”— reminders to parents and carers about absences—can improve attendance. This could involve weekly emails/text communication to all parents whose children have achieved the setting attendance target. You quickly recognise where this strategy is having an effect or not, and explore other strategies that might be more successful. Highlighting learners from disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in these communications is part of your approach to celebrate great attendance that week!

How are you sure that parents fully understand the expectations you have about attendance, requests for term-time absence and your processes for following up absence on a daily basis, and when absence becomes a concern? Have you considered there may be language and/or literacy barriers, or fears they may hold about school/college or authorities in general? How do you overcome these?

*You may have developed an **attendance fact sheet**, which you share at all admission meetings and new parents’ events which sets out your expectations and approach to dealing with absence – how accessible is this?*

*You may send automatic messages to parents where you haven’t heard back from them about absence, or where their child has missed at least one day. **You think carefully about the language in these messages**- making it supportive, positive and caring “We missed Jack this week. I hope he is feeling better, and we are looking forward to seeing him on...”.*

*You may ensure that your communication to parents each week includes **“what’s going on next week in our setting”** so their child really doesn’t want to miss out!*

*You may send a termly email template to all parents which sends them their child’s attendance for that term - many parents and carers aren’t aware of how many days their child has missed. **Breaking this down into learning time missed is another useful idea.***

*Talking about attendance is always part of parents' evenings or other events - **It is everyone's business!***

*You have a focus on attendance communication for **transition periods** in your setting.*

You periodically check how families and children who arrive late are made to feel.

*Do you use built in **return to education home visits** during the start of year INSET days, or after end of term breaks where pastoral staff and the DSL can see vulnerable learners **face-to-face** and make sure they are ready to return to your setting? Do you check that they have got their uniform and equipment ready, or if they need support? You let them know you are looking forward to seeing them return.*

*When vulnerable and disadvantaged learners are missing education, you may have a **daily routine of going to visit them** to check they are okay and let them know you have noticed they are not in your setting – these are supportive visits for parents and learners. They are an opportunity to build relationships with families who have the most difficulties, recognise need and respond accordingly to improve both safeguarding and attendance.*

*You regularly signpost parents to a dedicated section on your website about attendance and the support available if their child is worried about attending your setting. **They know who to contact.***

*You hold drop-in sessions for parents if they want to talk to a member of staff or the DSL about their child not wanting to come to/not being brought to your setting. **You have an open-door approach. Who attends these, and who doesn't – why?** Devise new strategies for 'hard to reach' families and if the impact on the student continues these are escalated to safeguarding concerns.*

How effective is your approach to engaging parents? Do they feel that it is supportive, personalised and in partnership- not punitive and process driven? Do you capture feedback from families on their perception of your work?

- **You have an attendance communication plan for learners, to drive your message that showing up really matters!**

Attendance, and what may be preventing it, is discussed on a weekly basis- in assemblies, in tutor group/pastoral sessions, in lessons. Do your learners feel listened to? Do they see evidence of changes as a result of their participation/suggestions?

You have **prioritised time** in tutor/pastoral sessions for discussion about the importance of attendance, making time for each learner to review their attendance.

The importance of attendance and the support any learner can get if they are worried about attending is highly visible around the setting. Where are posters and other information sited? Have your learners been involved in the creation of and siting of the posters/information?

You promote a clear **achievement culture** where attendance and achievement are linked—attend today and you will achieve tomorrow! Or Attend to Achieve. Every Day Matters. How is this message linked to messages around support, well-being, the importance of belonging etc.?

What after school enrichment programmes do you have? Are they well communicated to learners—does it make them want to be at your setting, especially on Fridays (from data, this is shown as a day most regularly missed)?

Section two

Responding to absence

The **daily response to absence** is the foundation for early intervention and keeping children safe in education. Processes must prioritise this, be in line with [Guidance on Children Missing Education \(CME\)](#) and build in a **daily lens** on our most vulnerable and disadvantaged learners.

Children missing education, especially for prolonged periods and/or on repeat occasions, can act as a **vital warning sign to a range of safeguarding issues**. Ensuring you have integrated this into your new staff safeguarding training schedule is therefore essential.

What patterns and trends are your data analysis identifying? Is it leading to successful action and improvement for learners in your setting?

What reasons are being given for absence? Have these been explored further?

What day of the week are learners absent the most in your setting? Why is this, and what can you do about it?

How well are you targeting your disadvantaged and vulnerable learners?
 Have you resourced the response to daily absence sufficiently?
 Do you capture patterns of absence across groups of young people (e.g., young people going missing together, or a young person avoiding being bullied by another)?
 Do you capture patterns around specific times of day? For example, arriving late and leaving early might align with patterns of drug supply for [county lines](#).

Use the following checklists to consider and support your answers to these questions:

Daily response and process

Daily response and process: Use this checklist to help you to start to think about your daily safeguarding response and process to responding to absence in your setting	Red	Amber	Green
Registers are accurate and taken on time for AM registration (so you know who is missing quickly).			
If registers aren't taken- there is a robust process for following this up.			
First day absence call happens quickly and where reasons are not forthcoming for absence, the setting continues to follow this up.			
You have added capacity for first day absence calls so they are made quickly and could therefore lead to that learner coming into your setting later that day- you target your disadvantaged and vulnerable learners.			
The attendance administrator holds a vulnerable children list so that they can notify the DSL if any of those children are absent without reason.			
Learners (especially those who are vulnerable) who are absent without reason will have a home visit completed that day if contact cannot be made with their parent or carer.			
The setting holds at least two emergency telephone numbers for all learners.			
Involved social workers are notified of absence routinely and of missing children immediately.			

All learners are accounted for throughout the day (e.g., in secondary+ settings, registers are taken for every lesson) - you ensure that you have a robust process.			
Staff understand the system for alerting the designated safeguarding lead or deputy/senior staff as well as their attendance lead if a learner is absent from their lesson but have a present mark for that day- <i>this is especially important for learners on safety plans due to their significant mental health needs or because they may be meeting risky people off site.</i>			
Learners who are attending off-site education have their attendance checked each day to ensure they have arrived safely, and the school is advised immediately by the provider of any absence so procedures can be followed.			
The link between the DSL and the lead for attendance is strong with daily communication being a feature of this practice, including written reflection on data analysis and joint interventions.			

Analysing data

Data analysis helps us to start to ask questions about what is going on in our setting. The regularity of this analysis is important as it ensures that we are responding quickly to emerging patterns of absence. Think about where your setting is in relation to analysis of absence using the statements below.

Analysis statements	Red	Amber	Green
Attendance data for each class/year group is checked regularly.			
Attendance data for disadvantaged learners is checked regularly.			
Attendance data for learners with an EHCP/SEND is checked regularly.			
Attendance data for learners with a social worker is checked frequently.			
Attendance data for learners who are looked after is regularly checked.			

Attendance data for learners who are post looked after is regularly checked.			
Broken weeks' data is analysed on a termly basis.			
Data is interpreted by gender.			
Data is interpreted using a code analysis report.			
Data is analysed to identify spikes in reduced attendance by year group.			
The SENCo is involved in data interpretation for learners on the Code of Practice.			
The pupil premium lead is involved in data interpretation for disadvantaged learners.			
Data for year groups/vulnerable groups is shared with staff/teachers/tutors regularly.			
Attendance data is regularly benchmarked (at whole setting, year group and cohort level) against local, regional, and national levels to identify areas of focus for improvement.			
Data for the whole setting is discussed in senior leaders' meetings on a weekly basis to share insights and agree on any whole setting responses. Leaders review the at-risk cohort with specific recorded actions in relation to students that are subsequently reviewed for progress.			
Data for the whole setting, including for children with social workers, SEND and disadvantage is included in the termly governance meetings.			
You make sure that you prioritise the monitoring for learners most at risk of prolonged and/or repetitive absence (e.g., children at risk of exploitation, young carers, those with mental health needs, LGBTQ learners, learners who have been bullied).			

Section three

Targeted early and specialist intervention approaches to reduce absence for all, including vulnerable children and young people

Whole-setting, culture-cultivating approaches are important, but you should **target the majority of your attendance resources at persistent and severe absentees***. This is because the underlying reasons for absence are likely to be more significant and impactful for these learners, including the potential for neglect and abuse. You are also likely to have a smaller number of these learners who will be responsible for a large percentage of the absence in your data.

*[Working together to improve school attendance, DfE 2022](#) (updated 2023) defines persistent/severe absenteeism as:

- Persistent - missing more than 10% of sessions.
- Severe - missing more than 50% of sessions.

This section focuses on reflecting on your **personalised engagement strategies** for learners and families with persistent and severe absence. For families where children and young people’s absence levels are severe, this would usually include an **early help plan**, coordinating other services around the child, such as housing, health and family support workers. It will be helpful for you to have a directory of support services locally that can help meet identified needs for families experiencing difficulties.

Once you have established the reasons why learners are missing education, this allows you to start to match them to interventions and approaches which will help.

For example, if your learners tell you that a high percentage **don’t feel like they belong** in your setting, then you would start to consider how you can match interventions against this identified need.

Also consider that, whilst reasons for absence are experienced on an individual level, many may be being experienced at a whole setting/cultural level. It’s a good idea to review your setting’s culture by consulting with all those involved, including learners and parents/carers. The results might help you to build a wider action plan at a more strategic level.

Use this table to gather some ideas together alongside those we have suggested to get you started:

Reason for not attending	Possible interventions/further communication/action needed
Basic needs not met, such as inadequate nutrition.	Reinforce messages to parents and learners about breakfast club where available.

	<p>Check learners are receiving free school meal entitlement where applicable.</p> <p>Make sure the kitchen staff are alert to learners not having money on their food account.</p> <p>Contact home for a sensitive conversation about available support.</p> <p>Consider the criteria for neglect. Set targets and track the progress of the learner, referring to children's social care if they are not progressing.</p>
Not having school uniform.	<p>Offer second-hand uniform support.</p> <p>Messaging to learners and families about the support available.</p>
Worrying about leaving a family member because they have caring responsibilities.	<p>Promote the young carers support available within your setting as well as external services. E.g., young carers may be allowed to phone or visit home during lunchtime.</p> <p>Identify someone to support the young carer, understand their life experience, advocate on their behalf with other staff and raise safeguarding concerns if the impact of the caring is causing significant harm.</p>
Frequent illness/chronic illness.	<p>School health nurse referral.</p> <p>Make contact with parent about a GP appointment.</p> <p>When the actual reason for the young person's health is unclear, maintain an awareness of perplexing presentations and fabricated or induced illness and take action accordingly.</p>
Issues with peer group/friendship issues.	<p>School/college clubs during break time or lunch time.</p> <p>Social skills group work intervention.</p> <p>Review the culture among young people, considering online and offline risks.</p> <p>Build a strong culture and identify when behaviour constitutes bullying or child on child abuse, taking safeguarding and disciplinary action as necessary.</p>
Anxiety or other mental health issues affecting their attendance .	<p>Review of setting's counsellor- how many learners are they prioritising from the persistent absence list?</p> <p>Peer mentoring schemes.</p> <p>Thrive assessment and intervention.</p>

	Co-working with the mental health lead. (If eligible, how well are we using the DfE training grant and implementing the mental health lead learning?)
Transition not successful.	Offer support with making and maintaining friendships. Review new pupil/student induction process.
Parental mental health.	Contact with parents and signposting support. Prioritise engagement with these families every week to build relationships. Maintain focus on the impact on the student (see also 'caring responsibilities' section above), referring to early help processes and children's social care if necessary.
Academic anxiety.	Complete a learner questionnaire - which subjects are they worried about? How well are they getting on with these teachers? Do they feel safe in the class? Use this to hold teacher conference meetings about the learner.
No sense of belonging.	Gather information from them, get to know them and build trust. Get them involved in representing the setting, joining sports clubs or the student council. Identify a key adult for daily check-in.
Emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA).	Gather information from them, get to know them and build trust. What has happened to them which has led to them feeling anxious? Your local authority may have an EBSA toolkit- if they don't Suffolk County Council's is useful. The Anna Freud Centre also provides a useful resource for addressing EBSA.

Overall assessment for your setting

You may have identified actions to strengthen your current practice in each section of these materials. Use the [Action Plan](#) to capture your progress and share with your safeguarding challenge partner.

Thinking about what you have reflected on, capture your strengths and other areas for development below.

	Section 1	Section 2	Section 3
Strengths			
Areas for development			

Discussion notes

Space for notes from discussion between you and your allocated safeguarding challenge partner around this document, the RAG ratings and action plan.

Date **Discussion**