

When Attendance Becomes Distress: A SEND-Informed Response to School Avoidance

Moving from enforcement-first practice to belonging, adjustment and recovery

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EXECUTIVE ABSTRACT

Absence among pupils with SEND is substantially higher than among pupils with no identified SEN. Attendance data can reveal a problem but cannot explain it. This paper argues for a formulation-led response that distinguishes unwillingness from inability, treats behaviour as information and rebuilds attendance through safety, adjustment and trusted relationships.

The attendance gap is a warning signal

In the 2025/26 academic year, absence was 13.64 per cent for pupils with an EHC plan, compared with 5.80 per cent for pupils with no identified SEN. Persistent absence affected 36.94 per cent of pupils with an EHC plan. These figures should prompt urgent action, but punitive interpretation can worsen the underlying problem.

A child may be absent because the environment produces sensory overload, communication breakdown, bullying, unpredictable transitions, unmet health needs or repeated experiences of failure. Attendance is an outcome of fit between learner and environment, not simply a measure of family compliance.

Distinguish avoidance from distress

The phrase 'school refusal' can imply deliberate defiance. For some neurodivergent learners, non-attendance is better understood as a stress response after demands exceed available coping resources. Distress may appear at home because a child masks at school or because the transition itself has become associated with threat.

Assessment should reconstruct the attendance journey: when difficulty began, which settings or times are hardest, what the learner communicates verbally or behaviourally, what adjustments have been attempted and what recovery looks like after attendance. This is formulation, not excuse-making.

A return plan must change the conditions

A reduced timetable or phased return can provide temporary relief, but it is not a solution unless the causes of distress are addressed. Plans may need predictable routines, a safe arrival, a trusted adult, sensory adaptations, communication support, curriculum changes and explicit recovery time.

Success should initially be measured through regulation, connection and sustainable participation, not only hours on site. Increasing attendance faster than safety can be rebuilt may produce another collapse and deepen the learner's belief that adults do not understand.

Families need partnership, not suspicion

Parents managing severe attendance distress often reorganise employment, sleep, transport and family life while trying to maintain education. When institutions begin with threats, families may withhold information or disengage. Clear legal responsibilities must be accompanied by curiosity and shared problem-solving.

A single coordinated plan should identify the lead professional, adjustments, health input, communication arrangements, review date and contingency if the plan fails. The child or young person's views should be gathered through their preferred communication method.

The institutional test

Schools should track patterns by SEND status, need, timetable, lesson and transition point; examine exclusions and part-time arrangements; and review whether ordinarily available provision is actually accessible. Local systems should provide rapid multidisciplinary consultation before absence becomes entrenched.

The goal is not to lower expectations. It is to create conditions in which participation becomes possible again. A SEND-informed attendance strategy treats presence as the consequence of belonging, safety and appropriate support - not as an isolated behaviour to be compelled.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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AUTHOR NOTE

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