

Improving attendance: findings and principles for communication with parents

This is a summary of the latest research conducted by the DfE to help improve attendance. It sets out the possible ways that schools can communicate with parents for optimal impact. Hopefully, this is further useful context about school attendance and the actions that the DfE and therefore schools are taking.

The Department for Education commissioned the Attendance Action Alliance to undertake some research about the parent's role in supporting children's school attendance.

Attendance data shows an increase in absences due to illness, and anecdotal evidence suggests that many parents have lowered their threshold for keeping an ill child home from school. In addition, a number of pupils are missing school due to unauthorised absences, such as holiday absence.

To gain more insight into the drivers behind such absence, and how schools effectively communicate with parents to reset attendance expectations, the DfE commissioned Thinks Insight & Strategy to carry out primary qualitative research with parents of children aged 5-16 to test this proposed messaging and provide clear recommendations for future communications.

They recruited 47 parents in order to:

- Understand their views on school attendance and absences.
- Understand their interpretation, understanding and engagement with proposed messages.
- Identify attendance messages that best resonate with them, including which specific messages resonate best for each type of absences (e.g. mild illness, holidays).
- Identify messages that are most effective in changing attitudes and motivate parents to avoid unnecessary absences.
- Identify the messages that most resonate with key parent audiences (e.g. parents of children with SEND, parents from disadvantage backgrounds).

Their findings are:

Communication

- Parents prefer direct communication from schools about attendance, but may find it challenging.
- Few parents in the sample had seen news coverage on attendance, with 'other parents' typically being the only other source of information on the topic beside the school.
- Few have received direct guidance on mild illness.

- DfE is seen as an authoritative source, but communicating in partnership with other organisations and through multiple channels may help maximise reach and ensures messaging is impactful.
- Use data specific to each child and contextualise that data by talking about lessons missed NB: parents found this new and thought-provoking.
- A firm, factual tone lands well, though parents do want to hear a balance between empathy and firmness.
- Clear reminders of guidance and school policy relating to mild illness might have swayed parents who were 'on the fence' about whether to send their child in or not.
- Making unevidenced or unrealistic claims about attendance is not likely to be received well by parents, nor is generalising about a child's experience to make it seem like all children face the same issue.
- Highlighting the wider benefits of school attendance resonates with parents' prioritisation of overall well-being.

Parents of pupils with SEND:-

- Find positive, future focused messaging encouraging. While the social aspects of school are important to this group, sweeping statements about benefits of school for their children do not sit well.
- Prefer recognition that their child has unique needs and this is crucial to achieve resonance with the issues of attendance.
- For parents of children on FSM, it is important to highlight the mental, social, and support benefits of school beyond academics to encourage and inform.
- Messaging that emphasises improved "life chances" or success in the future is seen as intimidating.
- Showing empathy towards the experience of being a parent and recognising the context of each situation is particularly important for parents of children on FSM.



The research showed that parents' responses to the tested messages suggest that when talking to parents about attendance it is best to:

Lead with individualised data about absences.

This helps parents know messaging is relevant to them and can drive home the scale of missed learning. More context of what this means (e.g. comparisons to the average) should increase impact.

Frame absences in terms of numbers of lessons, rather than days or weeks, missed.

This information is often described as 'new' and thought provoking by parents and challenges their assumption that days missed are easily caught up.

Emphasise the holistic benefits of school.

Referring to the positive impact of school on social and mental wellbeing leads many parents to reconsider absences. They also feel this is helpful in showing the Government understands the value of attendance.

Refer to formal guidelines. This is most important in the case of minor illness, where NHS guidelines give parents much needed confidence and clarity. However, parents also say reminders about school policies is a 'non-judgemental' way of talking about absences.

Adopt a factual rather than punitive tone. Avoid being seen to say that allowing absences means a parent isn't concerned about their child's future. Instead, be factual and when speaking about impact, and show you recognise parents' circumstances.

Be careful to generalise about children's feelings and experiences. Suggesting 'all' children have specific needs and experiences can risk being dismissed by parents who feel this doesn't apply to them, especially those whose children have SEND.