

# Improving Attendance

Principles for Communicating with Parents and  
Carers

March 2025

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## What is this?

Qualitative research with learners, parents and carers<sup>1</sup>, schools (head teacher or other senior staff with responsibility for attendance), attainment advisors and other stakeholders was undertaken by the Scottish Government to better understand the key barriers and opportunities for communication aimed at improving attendance.

The findings from this work has been used to inform these principles for communicating with parents / carers and learners about attendance

This material would be of interest to local authority officers, senior leaders and practitioners in schools.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout when we say parent we are referring to parents and carers

# Background

Insight gathering research conducted with parents and learners highlighted many reasons impacting school attendance:

- It's an incredibly complex issue – there's not one root cause:
  1. Poor mental wellbeing
  2. The perception that pupils needs (ASN) aren't being met;
  3. A feeling that there are '*better things to do*';
  4. Not fitting in with school / issues within school
  5. Not recognising the true *value* of school.
- However, a core theme is poor mental wellbeing – both as a root cause and consequence of non-attendance that initially starts due to another reason

There were a number of themes identified from the parents we spoke to, which demonstrated they are experiencing a broad range of thoughts and feelings regarding their child missing school:

- The scars of Covid still exist: closing schools and messaging during covid led to the belief that their child doesn't need to be in school full time.
- Weighing up the risks vs benefits of attending school: e.g. the bullying, not fitting in, anxiety about being in school eroding their child's mental health and happiness vs. academic education.
- Despite their best efforts, many feel they're failing, leading to a complex array of emotions: frustration, being out of control, forgotten about and emotionally drained.
- Parents feel alone and don't want to feel that it's *only* their responsibility - they need to feel supported (not blamed). However, for some there can be a feeling of disconnect between parents, carers and schools.
- Parents lack the confidence and knowledge to know how to best support their child's attendance.
- However, they are trying their best and therefore will be naturally defensive if they are made to feel guilty, are told that they're not doing enough or are doing things wrong

- Some parents have had a negative experience when they were at school themselves, leading to greater negativity towards their child's school

During the research, parents identified a number of barriers that prevent them from engaging with schools:

1. There's a perception that schools don't have resource to deal with the challenges children and young people face, in a meaningful way
2. Parents can feel powerless (and therefore frustrated) - they've tried to engage with school previously, but it feels like nothing's made a difference or changed.
3. Parents can lack the confidence they need to engage with school i.e. they may not have had a positive experience at schools themselves.
4. Parents can feel isolated (like it's *'them against the world'*)

# What does this mean for communicating with parents, carers and learners?

- **(Re)build trust and relationships** – The insight shows that there is a clear need to start by rebuilding trust and relationships. For some parents this might take longer than others. Practically this might mean trying to engage through small steps, demonstrating an understanding of their individual needs, demonstrating a willingness to work together with parents and learners and 'leaving the door open'.
- **Understand barriers (for learners and parents)** – there are a multitude of reasons why parents may not engage with schools, or pupils may be missing school. It is important that any communications should avoid generalisations, or assume that they do not know the importance of attending school. Doing so could further alienate parents and pupils.
- **Recognise the individual needs of the learner (and the parent)** – just like there are many barriers, each learner and parent will have their own needs – e.g. information, advice, reassurance or more practical considerations (e.g. different channels of communication, times of day etc). It is important that this is reflected in communications.
- **Recognise and reflect the journey** – parents and learners may not know that rebuilding attendance can take time and trial and error to be successful. It is important that this is communicated to give realistic expectations, and that in doing so schools are 'leaving the door open' to future communications if systems put in place are not working.



# Communication Approach and Things to Avoid

Communications should follow three key elements:

1. **EMPATHISE** – To be credible, messaging must demonstrate empathy, showing parents that you understand the challenges they face, and avoid any suggestion of blame.
2. **EMPOWER** – You must empower them, by helping them believe that they are not alone and that there is help available that can make a difference
3. **ENABLE** – Messaging needs to help parents to access the support, by providing them with advice about what they can do at home, as well as information about the different approaches available, different ways of working together and what support to ask for.

It is vital that communications avoid:

- **Any insinuation of blame to the parent.** Some parents do not feel they have control over their child's attendance. Even where they have some control over their child's school attendance, they may be keeping them off because they feel attending school has a more negative impact on their wellbeing.
- **General messages about benefits of high levels of attendance:** Many parents are aware of these, but feel unable to improve the situation. For many such high levels of attendance can also feel unrealistic and unachievable. Telling them these benefits can make them feel like you do not understand their situation, and therefore alienate them.

# Suggested Messaging

The text below is meant to be an example of messaging that could be used by schools and should be amended to suit the context of each establishment.

## **Suggested messages from schools to parents:**

Children and young people have experienced periods of significant challenge, including a global pandemic and a cost-of-living crisis which is causing difficulty for families across the country. There's no doubt this has had a major impact on schooling. We are committed to supporting young people and their families to work together with their school to take steps to make school a positive experience for all.

If your child is struggling with attending school, you're not alone. There is support and advice for you. Every child is unique, which is why it's so important for you and your child to work together with us to find the support that is right for them. By taking small steps together, we can help your child gradually return to school and create a more positive experience for them. This will not only make their school days more fulfilling but also to help them thrive both now and in the future.

Parent Club also understand how challenging it can be for parents and carers and their website has lots of tips and advice to help too. Whether it's managing their anxiety, coping with stress or understanding how to get the right support.

Parent Club and your school are there for you and your child. Together we can make a difference.

If you are worried about your child's attendance and are looking for help and support, please contact their school / us.