



In 2025, this resource was kindly shared by Limerick CYPSC with TUSLA's Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS) team in Cork so that the resource could be adapted to meet the needs of Educators and Practitioners in Cork, ensuring that the voice of young people in Cork was also included in this resource. This work was completed in partnership with TUSLA's PPFS team, Cork CYPSC, TUSLA's Education Support Service (TESS) with input also from the National Child, Youth & Parental Participation Lead. We would like to acknowledge the support of the Cork Area Management Department who allocated funding for this resource under the Child and Youth Participation Seed Funding for 2025.

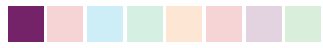
This resource was originally developed and informed by research conducted by Dr. Catriona O'Toole and Tara Ćirić in Maynooth University. It involved many conversations with parents, young people and professionals across multiple services in Limerick city and county. The research was funded by Limerick Children and Young People's Services Committee through the Healthy Ireland Fund, with support from Southill Hub.

The development of this resource was also supported by the School Attendance Project steering group whose membership included Limerick CYPSC, Tusla PPFS, Tusla Education Support Service, HSE CAMHS, NEPS, HSE Primary Care Psychology, HSE Child Disability Network Team, Limerick and Clare ETB Youthreach, Foróige, Limerick Youth Service, Southill Hub, National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals, Barnardos, University of Limerick Research Evidence into Policy Programmes and Practice (REPPP) and An Garda Síochána.

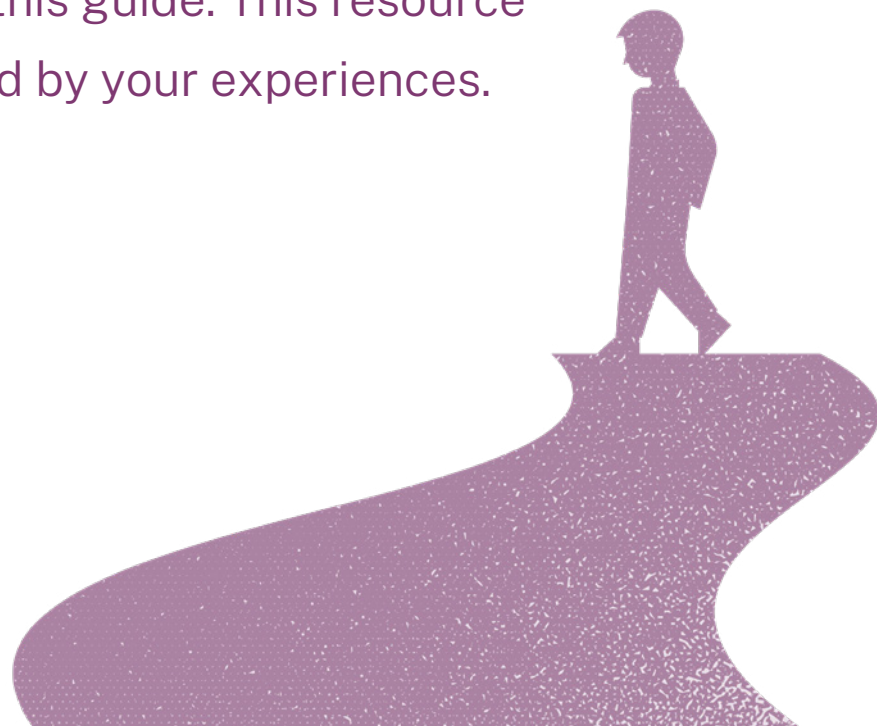
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# Introduction



The guidance in this resource is based on international best practice as well as the findings of research with practitioners, parents, and young people in Limerick. Subsequent engagement in 2025 with practitioners in Cork and with young people in the West Cork Youth CFSN and Bandon FRC youth group has also informed the Cork version of this valuable resource (See Appendix 5: Youth Consultation Summary –Cork). Heartfelt gratitude to all the young people, parents and practitioners who took part in the research that informed this guide. This resource is informed by your experiences.



## Who is this resource for?

This resource is designed for all practitioners working with children and young people in Cork who experience school attendance problems, including:

- **School-based staff (teachers, principals and deputies, guidance counsellors, Year Heads, class tutor etc)**
- **Professionals offering out-of-school education, including Youthreach and iScoil staff and home tutors**
- **Home, School, Community Liaison (HSCL) Coordinators**
- **School Completion Programme staff**
- **Youth Workers**
- **Social Care Workers and Social Workers**
- **Family Support Workers**
- **Community Development Staff**
- **Youth Diversion Staff**
- **Psychologists in mental health, education, disability services and in private practice**
- **Counsellors and psychotherapists**

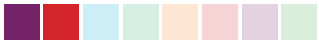
This resource is designed to be applicable to children and young people of all ages. It should be read in conjunction with NEPS Managing Reluctant Attendance and School Avoidance Behaviour Practice guides for [Primary](#) and [Post-Primary](#) Schools. A range of resources and templates within the NEPS practice guides are referenced and linked throughout this document.



This resource is also underpinned by the Department of Education's [Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice \(2018\)](#).



# What do we mean by School Attendance Problems?



School attendance problems may take many forms, such as struggling to arrive on time, frequently leaving early, experiencing anxiety about school while still attending, missing/skipping classes during the school day, or not attending at all. Non-attendance can be sporadic throughout the school year, or continue for days or weeks at a time.

For clarity, it can be helpful to differentiate between different types of school attendance problems.

School attendance problems are sometimes referred to as **school refusal**, and more recently the terms, **school avoidance** or **emotional-based school avoidance**, have been used. These terms usually refer to attendance problems that arise due to a child experiencing intense anxiety or emotional upset at the prospect of having to go to school.

Other types of school attendance problems include **truancy** (where a young person skips school or class without parental knowledge or permission), **school withdrawal** (where parents withdraw their child from school, or do not encourage attendance), and **school exclusion** (which stems from school-based decision-making, such as inappropriate use of suspensions/expulsions or not providing reasonable accommodations for a child's special educational needs). Full definitions for these terms are provided in Box 1.<sup>1</sup>

This resource is designed to be relevant for all types of school attendance problems.



### **Box 1: Definitions of four types of SAPs (Heyne et al., 2019)**

*“School refusal is said to occur when: (1) a young person is reluctant or refuses to attend school, in conjunction with emotional distress that is temporal and indicative of aversion to attendance (e.g., excessive fearfulness, temper tantrums, unhappiness, unexplained physical symptoms) or emotional distress that is chronic and hindering attendance (e.g., depressive affect; sleep problems), usually but not necessarily manifest in absence (e.g., late arrivals; missing whole school days; missing consecutive weeks, months, or years); and (2) the young person does not try to hide associated absence from their parents (e.g., they are at home and the parents are aware of this), and if they previously hid absence then they stopped doing so once the absence was discovered; and (3) the young person does not display severe antisocial behavior, beyond resistance to parental attempts to get them to school; and (4) the parents have made reasonable efforts, currently or at an earlier stage in the history of the problem, to secure attendance at school, and/or the parents express their intention for their child to attend school full-time (Hayne, et al., pgs 22-23).*

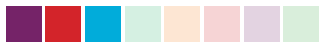
“Truancy is said to occur when: (1) a young person is absent from school for a whole day or part of the day, or they are at school but absent from the proper location (e.g., in the school-yard rather than in class); and (2) the absence occurs without the permission of school authorities; and (3) the young person typically tries to conceal the absence from their parents.” (pg 23).

“School withdrawal is said to occur when a young person’s absence from school (e.g., late arrivals; missing whole school days; missing consecutive weeks, months, or years) is: (1) not concealed from the parent(s); and (2) attributable to parental effort to keep the young person at home, or attributable to there being little or no parental effort to get the young person to school.” (pg 23).

“School exclusion is said to occur when a young person is absent from school or specific school activities, for any period of time, caused by the school: (1) employing disciplinary exclusion in an inappropriate manner (e.g., unlawful expulsion; internal suspension for the school’s convenience); or (2) being unable or unwilling to accommodate the physical, social-emotional, behavioural, or academic needs of the young person (e.g., parents of a student with a mild intellectual disability are told to pick their daughter up two afternoons per week because her teaching aide will not be available); or (3) discouraging a young person from attending, beyond the realm of legally acceptable school policy (e.g., a youth who is struggling academically is asked to spend the day at home on the day that national academic assessments are undertaken). (pg 24).

# Reasons for School Attendance Problems

## (Risk factors)



There are many different reasons why children struggle to attend school. There is no single cause. For each child, there is usually a unique combination of factors within the child, home, school, and community which interact and are exacerbated and maintained by broader social factors. These risk factors are highlighted by NEPS in their practice guides for [primary](#) and [post-primary](#) schools.



The context of a competitive schooling system can create a culture of accountability and high academic expectations can leave some young people feeling that school puts too much pressure on them. Meeting the demands and expectations can become overwhelming. They may fear small infractions, like forgetting their homework, having the wrong textbook,

or getting an answer wrong. They may worry that they will be shamed or shouted at for making a mistake, for not being organized, or other 'misbehaviour'. Others may find lessons boring, confusing or irrelevant.

Social inequalities create **systemic barriers** to attendance for many young people. Working class and ethnic minority students, including Travellers, often tell us that they do not feel welcome in school. Some feel that they have been subtly or overtly "pushed out" before they make the conscious decision to skip classes or leave school altogether.

Going through difficult life experiences can make it harder for a child to feel settled at school. Around 80% of children in Ireland experience **trauma and adversity**, like grief, parental separation, incarceration of a family member, parental addiction, domestic or community violence.<sup>2</sup> Because of social inequalities, some families experience poverty, homelessness, and discrimination, which can also be experienced as traumatic. The **Covid-19 pandemic** has added to the pressures on many struggling families.<sup>3,4</sup> Some families and young people face additional adversities like war and have to flee their home and country. These types of traumatic events can make it more challenging for a young person to attend school, engage with lessons, and form healthy relationships with peers and staff.

Many children and young people who have difficulty attending school report experiencing **negative interactions with peers and/or teachers**. Some children and young people have experienced bullying or have been excluded from friendship groups. This can have a huge impact on their self-worth and feeling of psychological and physical safety.

Some children find the school environment overwhelming (loud noises, shouty voices, busy corridors, bright lights, overpowering smells, uncomfortable/scratchy uniforms, abrupt transitions). Managing **sensory overload** can take huge emotional energy for some young people. Other children may miss school because of **illness or disability**. There may be absences due to concerns about picking up infections, or days missed due to medical appointments.

Others may leave school to take up **employment**, to help out at home, such as taking care of family members, or to help with family business or seasonal farm work.

## Warning signs:

The earlier we identify school attendance problems and put appropriate strategies in place, the better. Here are some warning signs:

- **Saying they can't or don't want to attend**
- **Being isolated, having few friends, being bullied**
- **Appearing very negative about school, subjects, or teacher**
- **Disengagement from school activities, events and outings**
- **Appearing withdrawn, sad, quiet**
- **Being angry or upset, or acting out**
- **Worrying a lot about small issues, such as having the right copies, pens, or equipment**
- **Frequently asking to leave class, or go to the bathroom**
- **Frequently asking to ring home, feeling sick, or having stomach aches or headaches**
- **Not completing homework or classwork**
- **Frequently arriving late**
- **Frequently missing classes or full school days**

When you notice any of these signs, it is time to initiate a conversation to figure out what might be going on for a young person. A preventative response is key - it is important not to adopt a 'wait and see' approach. Don't wait to intervene until a student has been absent for 20 days.



### **Box 2: The 20 day myth**

Schools must maintain attendance records for all students and inform TESS if a child is absent for more than 20 days in a school year. The 20 days is commonly viewed as a signifier of a significant attendance issue. However, it should be emphasised that any absenteeism is undesirable if avoidable.

Schools are required to inform TESS if a child is absent for more than 20 days in a school year through School Returns. These are submitted twice a year and should include students who have reached 20 days absence or more from the beginning of term to the end of the reporting period.

School Returns are different to a referral to a local Education Welfare Officer. A referral is a request for assistance by a school that is concerned about a student's attendance and is seeking the support of an Educational Welfare Officer. Other support services can also make a referral to an EWO. A referral can be made before 20 days are missed if a school is concerned about a student's attendance.

Many people think that it is not an issue as long as their child does not reach the 20 day threshold.

**In Primary Schools to miss:**

- -10 days is 5% of the school year
- -15 days is 8% of the school year
- -19 days is 10% of the school year

**In Post-Primary Schools, to miss:**

- -10 days is 6% of the school year
- -15 days is 9% of the school year
- -19 days is 11% of the school year



The Pastoral Care Team/personnel and/or the Student Support Team at post-primary level should consider attendance problems as a potential indication of a young person in need of support.

The TESS National School Attendance Campaign provided a series of webinars (2023-2024) for schools providing a methodology using a three-tiered model, created by Dr. Patricia Graczyk, to assist schools to monitor and track attendance and use the data to inform approaches to improve school attendance rates. The schedule of webinars and a recording of each one is available on the [TESS website](#).



# Figuring out what is going on for a child



Given that the reasons for school attendance problems are varied, it is important to develop an integrative and holistic picture of what's going on for each child. This is typically initiated by a staff member in the school, but can also come from a parent or guardian.

It is best done by working together with young people and their parents/guardians. Other relevant agencies may also be involved, including the school's NEPS psychologist, Educational Welfare Officer (EWO) or a family support worker. Where schools have access to a Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Coordinator it is likely that they will already have engaged with the parent and child around any attendance problems.



## **Who initiates the conversation when there is a concern about school attendance?**

At primary level it is usually the class teacher who would have a clear picture of attendance patterns and developing trends.

At post-primary level, the Year Head and/or Class Tutor may be the first personnel to identify the issue. It should also be noted that in some cases where school attendance is valued in the home, the parent is often the first person to identify an issue in relation to school attendance and approach the school for assistance.



## **Initiating a conversation with a young person and/or parent**

“Trust comes before truth”

Schools are increasingly aware of the need to approach conversations, with children and parents, in a manner that is sensitive to trauma and cultural humility. This need cannot be understated particularly in the post-Covid era and in light of the dramatic increase in young people seeking International Protection in the State.

Be mindful of the stress that school attendance problems can cause for students and their parents. We know that parents can feel very isolated and alone; they can feel blamed and misunderstood by professionals. Some parents may have a long history of involvement with services that might not have been positive; they may feel let down by services or feel that the supports/ resources being offered are not culturally sensitive. For some parents in incredibly difficult and chaotic situations, school attendance might not be their number one priority, mere survival may be taking up all their energy and resources. Similarly, children and young people may feel intense anxiety, fear or disaffection. The prospect of having a conversation with an authority figure about school attendance might feel extremely overwhelming, triggering, or pointless.

It is vital that we create a safe, supportive and non-judgemental space to explore school attendance problems. Parents and young people often feel relieved when professionals listen without prejudice and connect with them in a heartfelt way. Sometimes parents or children might not want to tell us

what's going on for them. Don't take this personally! Build trust over time by checking in regularly, listening, validating, staying curious, following up on promises/commitments. See our Tips for Heartfelt Conversations in Box 2.

It is not helpful to “grill” students/parents or threaten them with consequences; they are already feeling strain. Taking a hardline in pushing for complete attendance may ensure students are physically present but will do nothing to support their sense of safety, belonging or engagement at school.



**Box 2: Tips for having heartfelt conversations with parents & children about school attendance problems.**

**Listen**

- Use active ‘whole body’ listening (make eye contact, use non-verbal cues such as ‘uh-huh’ or nodding, adjusting body language to mirror or match the speaker).
- Reflect back the emotions that you hear or might anticipate (e.g. “I can see that made you feel really angry” or “It sounds like that was very worrying?”).
- Asking open-ended questions to extend understanding (“I wonder how that made you feel?”, “Tell me more about \_\_\_\_”).
- Paraphrase to check you have understood (“I think you are telling me that the teacher was mistaken when they told you off, is that right?”).
- Summarise and prompt the person to think about what they need (“it seems that you really struggle to feel part of the class, I wonder if you have thought about what could change?”).
- Be mindful of diversity – depending on cultural background and neurodiversity, eye contact might be uncomfortable. Some people might like to have something to occupy their hands while they speak (e.g. a cup of tea). Others may prefer to ‘talk and walk’ rather than sit in a room.

**Validate**

- Let the person know their feelings are okay (“it’s really understandable that you’re feeling this way” or “I would find that challenging too”).
- Thank them for trusting you with their information (“Thank you for telling me” or “I’m glad we had this opportunity to talk”).
- Reflect.
- Consider what needs to happen next for the child, link with colleagues for advice.
- Consider if/how your own biases are influencing how you are responding to this child’s situation (e.g., is their ethnicity or socioeconomic background prompting a particular response in you?).

**Act**

- Co-create an action plan with child and parents and implement it.
- Monitor how it’s going.

**Stay curious**

- Check back in with child and parents regularly.
- Keep an eye out for changes in their behaviour and more subtle pleas for help.

**Mind yourself**

- Remember that you don’t have to have all the answers. One of the most important things you can do is be by a person’s side on their journey.
- Tap into your own support network and do things that nurture your own wellbeing.

## Building a holistic picture



A framework to assist holistic picture building and solution focused enquiry is available as part of the [NEPS Managing Reluctant Attendance and School Avoidance Behaviour](#) resources.



Develop a holistic picture by reviewing information you have available to you. This will include information on the child's family situation, any referrals or special educational needs, attendance records, disciplinary referrals, other teachers' observations about strengths, difficulties, friendships etc. The Information Gathering: School & Parent Checklist (Appendix 1) may be a useful tool to gather this information. Post-primary schools may find the NEPS Subject Teacher Survey form (Appendix 4) helpful in collating this information from subject teachers.

Invite parents/guardians to talk about how their child has experienced school over time. Include the child/young person these conversations if they are comfortable attending. Be open and curious. Ask questions which allow you to explore the child's world, both in school and outside of it.

For instance, ask parents/children about their perspective on school attendance; when did they first start having difficulty, how do they cope with the demands/expectations of school; ask about friendships and relationships with teachers, and about the contexts/places/activities that the child feels comfortable and relaxed in. Ask children and parents what they think the school could do to help. Use open-ended questions (I wonder if...Would you be able to tell me more about this...I'd like to understand...).

Sometimes the reasons parents/young people give for attendance difficulties may seem small or insignificant to you, or you may find yourself wondering if this is the 'real reason'. Be patient and non-judgemental. Parents and children may not reveal all the struggles that they are experiencing. It may be that your understanding develops the more you work with them. Stay open and curious and check in regularly to foster trust and build a more complete picture.

Some parents and children might find it hard to respond to direct questions, they may find it difficult to articulate what's going on and why. Professionals may find it helpful to use activities, like body mapping, creating a timeline of key life events, self-portraits, to help explore what's going on for a young person or their family.



An excellent resource for students, "[My Views About School](#)", is included in the Managing Reluctant Attendance and School Avoidance Behaviour resources.



Standardised questionnaires and checklists can also be used to assist in building an integrative picture. The School Non-Attendance Checklist (SNACK – see appendix 2) is designed to support practitioners in efficient identification of the type(s) of attendance problem for a given child (i.e., whether the issue is school refusal/avoidance, truancy, school withdrawal, or school exclusion). The SNACK does not point to specific interventions but can be used to support the development of a fuller understanding of the child's school attendance problems.



The School Refusal Assessment Scale-Revised is designed to identify the key factors that maintain a child's absenteeism. This and other school attendance questionnaires and checklists are available, at the [International Network for School Attendance](#).

**Remember: Surveys and questionnaires are useful but should not be used in isolation or in lieu of developing a deep and heartfelt connection with children/young people and families. Ultimately relationships are the key agents and anchors for change.**

When you have built a holistic picture, take time to consider what needs to happen next. There may be preventative and proactive measures (see below) that the school can strengthen. In addition, the child may need more targeted and individualised support (see below). Discuss with colleagues (e.g., school leader, the pastoral care team, and colleagues from other agencies that the family are engaged with). You may wish to contact your Educational Welfare Officer (EWO) and NEPS psychologist for advice at this point.

# Strengthening the Community around the Child

## (Preventative & Proactive Measures)



Prevention approaches use ‘upstream thinking’ to target the community around the child, rather than individual (‘vulnerable’ or ‘at-risk’) children. By adopting prevention approaches we can support **all** children in our communities and help build protective factors and resilience.

The following key prevention and proactive measures can help reduce school attendance problems, and help children feel safer, more connected, and more engaged in school. These correspond to Tier 1 (Preventative and Proactive Approaches) on the NEPS Continuum of Support Model, as shown in Figure 1.



Here are some concrete ways we can build heartfelt relationships:

- **Remember young people's names and pronouns.**
- **Greet the person warmly, with a smile or nod of recognition.**
- **Take a genuine interest, ask people about the things they are interested in and remember what they say (remember small details of students' lives, like a birthday or family event).**
- **Be open, honest, and real – share something about yourself.**
- **Be present – give the person your full attention.**
- **Consider your own and the other person's cultural background. How could factors like race, religion, ethnicity be impacting their experience?**
- **Keep your promises, have integrity.**

In schools, we know that the Check and Connect programme, teacher/student mentoring, peer buddy programmes, breakfast and afterschool clubs, extra-curricular activities, all facilitate relationship building and develop a sense of community and belonging. Strengthening school-family and community partnerships also offers tangible benefits for students.

Rupture and Repair: Relationships are never perfect -when ruptures occur, which they will, it is important that adults work to repair the rupture and restore an emotional connection that feels safe and soothing to the child/ young person. We do this by being warm, compassionate, accepting, curious, and playful. We admit when we fall short and apologise if necessary. We maintain boundaries and model healthy approaches to conflict resolution.

*Remember, it is the ordinary magic of everyday relationships that build resilience, connection and belonging.*

## Create environments of safety and tranquillity

Create conditions where children feel physically, emotionally, and psychologically safe in their school and classrooms. Endeavour to create an environment where students can take off their armour and allow themselves to be seen, just as they are.

Here are some ways we can do this:

- **Model a calm and respectful communication culture (e.g., have a no-shouting policy for school staff, use restorative approaches for conflict resolution).**
- **Normalise mistakes and failures as an inherent part of the learning process, key to growth and development.**
- **Be observant of the peer dynamics in your school or classroom or other setting. Notice the children and young people that have established friendship groups, and those that have not. Be aware of children who may be excluded or picked on by their peers and take appropriate action.**
- **Create time and space for tranquil, calming, and low-demand activities; having access to a sensory room, nurture room, garden, library, prayer/meditation room, therapy animals are some nice examples.**
- **Respect student's privacy and ensure safe handling of student personal information.**

## Offer rhythm, structure, and predictability

Creating rhythm, structure and predictability can strengthen children and young people's sense of safety and security.

At school we can do this by:

- **Creating order, having a structured classroom layout and routine.**
- **Ensuring consistency across all staff (e.g., in approaches to conflict resolution).**
- **Providing clarity about learning goals, assessments, and pedagogical approach so that students know what to expect.**

- **Having a consistent teacher, mentor, or other staff member who checks in regularly and who the student knows to access if and when needed.**
- **Avoid unnecessary uncertainty (e.g., giving a test without prior knowledge) and avoid putting students "on the spot" (e.g., being called upon to read aloud or give a presentation); this helps to remove the risk of a student feeling exposed or vulnerable.**
- **This does not mean the creation of a rigid, rule bound environment; in fact, it requires flexibility and creativity to ensure 'customisation' for individual students' needs.**

## **Create opportunities for children to exercise choice and agency**

When children and young people have opportunity to have a say in everyday school and classroom matters, they are more likely to be engaged and motivated. Encouraging student voice helps develop communication, empathy, and problem-solving skills. It can also foster a sense of belonging and community within the school.

The following are some ways we can encourage student voice and agency:

- **Regularly seek feedback from students through surveys, suggestion boxes, or online platforms. Act on their feedback and communicate the changes made based on their input.**
- **Establish student councils and leadership roles that allow students to participate in meaningful decision-making processes at various levels, from classroom decisions to school policies. Strive to ensure student council is representative of the diversity of the student population.**
- **Foster open dialogues between students, teachers, and administrators. Create opportunities for discussions on important topics and encourage respectful debate.**
- **Support and provide resources for student-led initiatives, clubs, or projects that address issues or interests important to them.**

## Engage in reflective practice

Reflective practice involves thoughtfully examining the tasks, activities, and actions we take as part of our professional roles, including the actions we take to understand, prevent, or respond to school attendance problems.

Reflective practice requires self-awareness and critical thinking (e.g, understanding our own triggers/vulnerabilities, beliefs, values, and biases and how these impact self and others). It also requires us to connect our professional actions with relevant evidence, knowledge, principles, or concepts.

Reflective practice enables professionals to be conscious of their roles, biases, and the broader societal context in which they operate. It helps practitioners become more effective agents of change by fostering a deep understanding of how their actions impact both themselves and the communities they serve.

Here are some ways to strengthen reflective practice:

- **Keep a professional journal: think and write about things like what went well, what didn't go so well, what you have learned, and what you might do differently next time around.**
- **Reflect on and write about your values (what you stand for) and biases (how you are shaped by your own history, culture, religion etc), and how these show up in your professional life.**
- **Discuss with colleagues: Have professional conversations about your activities and actions. Share knowledge and resources. Drawing on and offering collegial support can build our knowledge and understanding whilst also enhancing organisational culture.**
- **Invite feedback from children and families: don't be afraid to ask those we serve, how well they think we are doing.**

## Take care of yourself

Compassion fatigue is common in professionals who work with children and families who are going through challenging times. We are often containers for their difficult feelings. Self-care and stress management are paramount. We must put on our own oxygen mask first.

- **Remember that you don't have to have all the answers. One of the most important things you can do is be by a person's side on their journey.**
- **Tap into your own professional support network (check-in with trusted colleagues, avail of professional supervision if available).**
- **Have a self-care plan and commit to doing something to nurture yourself everyday (exercise, taking time-out in nature or with friends, journalling, meditation, reading, etc).**



# Targeted Responses to School Attendance Problems



Despite universal prevention efforts, some children will struggle to attend school and will require more targeted supports (these correspond to the top two tiers of the Continuum of Support Model shown in Figure 1). The following section provides guidance on identifying additional supports and adjusting educational activities.

## Co-create a support plan with the child, family and school involved in the process.

The [NEPS Problem Solving Framework](#) provides an overview of how to develop a support plan.



Co-creation involves active participation and input from children, parents, and staff who will ultimately use or benefit from the action. The process of co-creation takes time and effort but leads to increased ownership and better outcomes. Using the quality of your relationship with children and parents, explore the additional support strategies that could be put in place to support school attendance.

The specific strategies are contingent upon a thorough understanding of the young person's capacities and potential, as well as the impact on the development and maintenance of their difficulty attending school. Here are some educational adaptations and supports that could be considered:

- **If a child finds arriving to school difficult, consider allowing them to arrive to school/class a few minutes earlier or later than their peers; have a friend or peer buddy, or trusted adult meet them at the gate, young children might wish to bring a transitional object (e.g., a favourite toy from home).**
- **If a child finds peer relationships difficult, consider allowing them sit with a peer they have a good relationship with; give them special tasks or responsibilities during break times, support their involvement with smaller groups of peers in safe spaces.**
- **If a child has sensory difficulties, consider allowing them to wear a hat or headphones to reduce noise; allow adjustments to school uniform if they find it uncomfortable.**
- **If a child finds things confusing, use a visual timetable (or 'now, next, then' cards); provide support with transitioning between classes.**
- **If a child feels overwhelmed in school, consider providing them with an 'exit card' that allows them leave class when things get too much; provide easy access to safe, calming spaces (nurture room, sensory garden etc), allow time with school (therapeutic) dog.**

- **If a child finds schoolwork difficult, differentiate the lesson by adjusting educational tasks (adapt curriculum content, classroom activities, homework, or assessments).**

Appendix 3 in this document provides sample template for a Student Support Plan.

Ensure all relevant parties (teachers, support staff etc.) are informed of the plan. Keep a record and ensure safe handling of children's personal information.

Monitor the progress made and adjust the plan as needed. Agree a date of review.

## **When a student cannot attend at the moment**

Sometimes, despite the best efforts of school and family, children are simply not able to attend. This can be incredibly stressful for parents and child; it can also be incredibly frustrating for staff.

Avoid exerting huge pressure on children or parents/guardians. Do not threaten or bribe because these tactics may make children's anxiety more intense, and even if children do physically go to school, they may be in no position to learn. Instead use the quality of your relationship to show you care and understand what they are going through. Re-affirm your belief in them, and that you will figure this out together. The following considerations are important:

- **Maintain the connection between home and school (e.g., facilitate home visits, allow child visit school in a safer way, such as with parent or favourite teacher; encourage letter writing from peers or staff to the absent child).**
- **Facilitate social contact with peers. Children who are not at school can easily become isolated and withdrawn, which exacerbates their difficulties.**
- **Send relevant educational resources/tasks/activities to the child/parent to engage with at home.**
- **Encourage engagement with online learning, make tasks available online and maintain contact.**
- **Keep a record of the child's absences and the actions the school have taken to address absenteeism.**

## Referral to other agencies and support services

Sometimes, despite the best efforts of parents and school, a return to full attendance does not occur. This may reflect the complexity of the situation, e.g., where there are challenges in the home environment or where the child and/or the parent(s) require additional supports above those available from the school. A timely referral to such supports is essential.

If the child is struggling with anxiety or low mood, sensory or learning difficulties that are affecting their everyday life and interactions, then it is a good idea to seek professional advice and support. The child may be referred to Primary Care Psychology, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), Child Disability Network Team (CDNT) and/or other agencies depending on the specific needs of the child.

Linking with Youth, Family Support or Community organisation to provide out of school supports can be beneficial in supporting your child. Youth Work organisations provide personal and social development programmes that can complement your child's formal education or training.

If your family is going through very challenging and stressful times at present - like experiencing housing insecurity, illness, addiction, violence, break-up, or loss - there are a range of supports that you may be able to access.

See the final section of this resource for an explanation of the different services that may get involved in supporting your child or you as a parent.

## When parents are difficult to reach or are not engaging

Parenting is the most important job in the world. It is also the hardest. Research tells us that parents and carers can often feel isolated and alone when they have a child that struggles to attend school. Parents have told us that they often feel judged, blamed, misunderstood, and frustrated.

As part of the research that informed this resource some parents were perceived at certain time to be difficult to reach by schools and other support services. Sometimes a perceived lack of willingness or ability of a parent to engage with schools is a symptom of a larger problem. It may be linked to shame, cultural context, socio-economic barriers or a poor personal history with the education system. Relationships building with the parent is at the centre of any collaborative response to supporting a child back to school.

For parents who are approached in an empathetic and understanding way and where all avenues of support have been exhausted, yet they are unwilling to work with the school and Education Welfare Service to support their child to attend school, prosecution may be considered as a last resort. This occurs where a parent is 'failing or neglecting to cause their child to attend school'.

## Out-of-school educational provision

There are a small range of alternative or out-of-school educational services that can be availed of in specific circumstances. These are vital options for some young people. It is important to note that while these options are available, they are dependent on a number of factors which can make access difficult.



The Department of Education offers a [Home Tuition](#) scheme. This is designed to address the needs of a small cohort of learners who need home-based support for relatively short periods of time because of special educational or medical need. Under this scheme, the DES provides funding for eligible families to employ a qualified teacher, or teachers, to provide

tuition to their child within their own home. Where approval is received under Home Tuition it can be challenging to find a qualified teacher who is willing to provide tuition.

[iScoil](#) provides an online learning service for young people (13-16 years of age), offering an alternative pathway back to education, learning and qualifications. It provides a tailored programme either in students' homes or in a Blended Learning Centre (BLC) in the community. Referrals to iScoil are made through Education Welfare Offices and must meet specific criteria. It is important to note that iScoil has a limited capacity and not all referrals are accepted. Students must be absent from mainstream education for at least 6 months, significant interventions and supports have not worked and the Junior Cycle not been completed.



The [Youthreach programme](#) provides two years integrated education, training and work experience for young people between 15 and 20 years of age who have disengaged from school and are without formal qualifications or vocational training. The programme is full-time, operates year-round, and is open for application at any time of the year. There are no costs for the programmes and, if you are 16 years of age or more, you will receive a weekly training allowance, a meal allowance and a travel and childcare allowance (if applicable) while attending.



The Education Welfare Officer will be able to provide advice and guidance on these or other educational services.

## Returning to school after an absence

Coming back to school after a period of absence can be a very difficult transition, but there are steps we can take to make it more manageable.

- **Lower the hurdles at the beginning. Set small achievable targets, such as visiting the building, or attending just one lesson.**
- **A reduced timetable might be helpful in this transition period. Follow the Department of Education (DES) guidelines on [The Use of Reduced School Days](#).**
- **Gradually increase the number of days/or hours at school, in line with the child's capacity.**
- **Make a plan to address gaps in knowledge to ensure that your child can make progress and experience mastery and success.**



# Cork School Attendance Problems Pathway



Consultations with students, parents and service informed the development of a local framework to support you in addressing school attendance Problems. This is informed by the [NEPS Problem Solving Framework Used to Address Reluctant Attendance and School Avoidance Behaviour.](#)



## **Step 1: School Attendance Problems identified.**

School attendance problems are identified as a concern by parents/guardians or the school.

## **Step 2: Point of Contact with the School**

The school identifies a staff member to act as the main school contact between everyone involved (child, parent, class teacher, student support team member, principal, etc.).

## **Step 3: Meeting**

The school arranges a meeting with the parent(s). It can be helpful to include the child in these discussions if they feel comfortable coming, so they feel like they have a say in what happens. Parents should be facilitated to bring a support worker or advocate in the meeting if it is requested.

If the child or family is already engaged with a service (for example a Child Disability Network Team, CAMHS or a community service like Jigsaw or Barnardos) it would be useful to make them aware, if that do not already know, of these school attendance problems. If everyone is open to the idea, they can also be invited to this meeting between the school and parent.

The school may also contact the local Education Welfare Office or NEPS over the phone for guidance in advance of the meeting.

At the meeting, the school and parents should go through School and Parental Checklist (Appendix 1) together.

**Be mindful of the stress that school attendance problems can cause for students and their parents. We know that parents can feel very isolated and alone; they can feel blamed and misunderstood by professionals. It is important to create a safe, supportive and non-judgemental space to explore school attendance problems. Parents and young people often feel relieved when professionals listen without prejudice and connect with them in a heartfelt way.**



Depending on what you learn from completing the School and Parental Checklist together, the school may want to contact other services:

- School can consult and receive guidance from the EWO
- School principals may wish to consult and receive guidance from NEPS
- Depending on the need presenting, it may be appropriate to refer in to a service. See final section for more information on these services.



## Step 4: School and Parent agree actions together

The parents and the school agree a plan together:

- **School supports are agreed between school and parents/guardians and student.**
- **A record of supports and their outcomes of these supports should be noted in Student Support file.**
- **All relevant teachers are briefed on the plan.**
- **Some home-based approaches may also be agreed by the parents / guardians.**

The agreed plan in school and at home should be actively implemented over an agreed period of time. A date for a review meeting should also be agreed.

## Step 5: Review Meeting

### Progress Made

If progress is being made (i.e. increased attendance or a graduated return is underway), then no onward referral is needed.

The agreed plan should continue to be implemented.

### No Progress

If no progress is being made (i.e. continued school attendance problems after implementation of the agreed plan), another meeting should be arranged between parents and school to discuss next steps.

- **Schools should continue to communicate with parent/guardians.**
- **Identify additional services for possible referral and involvement (see below).**
- **Continue to engage with NEPS and EWS.**
- **Continue to maintain a record of supports and outcomes in the Student Support Plan.**

# Identifying additional services for possible referral and involvement



Where you and the school have explored all options for the student and they are still not attending school, it can be confusing to know what the next step should be. Below is a breakdown of all the main services that are typically involved if school avoiding behaviour is beyond the capacity of the school and parents to respond.

## Tusla Education Support Service

[Tusla Education Support Service \(TESS\)](#) is responsible for ensuring that a child's right to education is safeguarded. TESS has three strands:



- **Education Welfare Service (EWS)**
- **Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme**
- **School Completion Programme (SCP)**

The Education Welfare Service is available to all schools. The Home School Community Liaison scheme and the School Completion Programme currently support DEIS schools, mainly in urban areas. Since 2022, a small number of non-DEIS schools have access to the HSCL scheme due to the schools' percentage enrolment of students from the Travelling and Roma communities.

In the schools with access to the three TESS strands, they work together with schools, families, and other relevant services to achieve the best educational outcomes for children and young people.

### 1. Education Welfare Service

The Education Welfare Service (EWS) operates under the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000. This law emphasises the importance of:

- **attending school**
- **taking part in school**
- **staying at school.**

Under the EWS Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs) are based throughout the country. They offer advice and guidance to parents who need support in making sure that their child attends schools regularly.

If a school principal is concerned about the attendance of a student, they can refer the student to the Education Welfare Service via the TUSLA referral portal. The referral will be reviewed to decide whether to refer the case to a local EWO. If the referral is accepted the EWO will contact the school principal to get a picture of what's going on and to make sure that the school has tried to help the child.

The EWO will then contact the family and meet them. Home visits, or meetings in an alternative setting, are an essential part of an EWO's work. The first meeting with an EWO often opens solutions for a child and family needing support. Once problems have been identified the EWO will work with those involved to improve the situation for the child or young person.

If there is school-avoiding behaviour, the Education Welfare Service can only get involved in a case if they receive a referral. The EWO can offer guidance over the phone to the school without a referral.

You can refer a student to the Education Welfare Service before they have missed 20 school days.

---

### **Who can refer to the Education Welfare Service?**

- **A school principal.**
  - **A professional in other agencies.**
  - **A parent can make a referral by contacting their local Education Welfare Officer (EWO).**
- 

## **2. Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme**

The Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL) has HSCL Coordinators who work to improve educational outcomes for children. They do this by working with the key adults in the child's life.

The Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme aims to promote partnership between:

- **parents**
- **teachers**
- **community family support services.**

## **3. School Completion Programme (SCP)**

The School Completion Programme (SCP) supports primary and post-primary children and young people. It is for those who:

- **have been identified as at risk of leaving school early**
- **are out of school and have not successfully transferred to alternative education or employment.**

## National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

The [NEPS](#) is a psychological service provided by the Department of Education. Psychologists in NEPS work with schools. They are concerned with the wellbeing, learning, behaviour, social and emotional development of children and young people.



Each psychologist is assigned a group of schools. NEPS can work with teachers, parents/guardians and children and young people to help all children and young people develop to their potential.

NEPS offer a range of services, through direct casework with your child (observing/meeting the child/young person and meeting teachers and parents/guardians) and through indirect casework, through consultation with teachers and/or parents/guardians about your children's needs.

### How can parents/families/children/young people access NEPS?

Always discuss your concerns with the teacher and/or school principal first. The teacher will normally be able to reassure you regarding your child's progress. Where the teacher has similar concerns to parents they will discuss and agree a plan called a Student Support Plan to address concerns.

In some cases the teachers and the parents/guardians will agree that it would be helpful to have support from the NEPS psychologist. The school will then discuss the case with the psychologist and agree that their involvement would help. The school will arrange times and dates of any meetings with the psychologist and ensure any paperwork is complete.

A referral to NEPS can only be made through the School Principal.

#### Who can refer to NEPS

- School principals are the only people who can refer to NEPS.



## Primary Care Psychology



The [HSE](#) Child and Family Psychology – Primary Care service provides a psychology service to children and families from birth to 18 years where the child is presenting with mild-to moderate mental health needs, Emotional and Behavioural presentations. It also provides a service to children presenting with non-complex disabilities.

The service is free and non-means tested. There is no requirement for a GMS card etc. Non-nationals and non-English speaking members of the public are accommodated with interpreters in accordance with HSE policy. There is a general policy of inclusion for minority groups.

General reasons people attend primary care psychology include:

- **Mild to moderate mental health difficulties**
- **Emotional/behavioural difficulties,**
- **Adjustment/stress/coping with health issues,**
- **Non-complex disability or developmental issues, or**
- **Would benefit from generalist psychological advice/signposting**

While areas vary, most primary care services will refer people onwards if they are eligible or more suitable for a specialist service in the local community.



### Who can refer to Primary Care Psychology

- Any professional – in or outside of the HSE once they have consent of the parent/guardian of the child being referred.
- Parents can refer their children.

You can refer using this [referral form](#).



## Tusla Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS)

[Tusla](#) funds services in the community that offer a range of early intervention and prevention services.



### Meitheal

Meitheal is a way of working with children and their families to identify and respond to their strengths and needs in a timely way.

Meitheal brings together people and services who want to support a child or parent so that he or she can make the changes to their life that they want and need. The kinds of services that might be involved in Meitheal are schools, youth services, family resource centres and medical services.



#### How to access a Meitheal

- A family can speak with any professional who works with them to discuss the suitability of Meitheal.
- Parents can contact Tusla directly. Tusla funds services in the community that offer a range of early intervention and prevention services.



## Parenting and Family Support Services in Cork

There are a number of community-based parenting and family support services available across Cork city and county that can work with parents and their children where school attendance is an issue.



A comprehensive list of these services have been developed by TUSLA's Prevention, Partnership and Family Support Team and can be accessed via the QR code or go to the [Local Resources](#) section of the Cork CYPSC website.



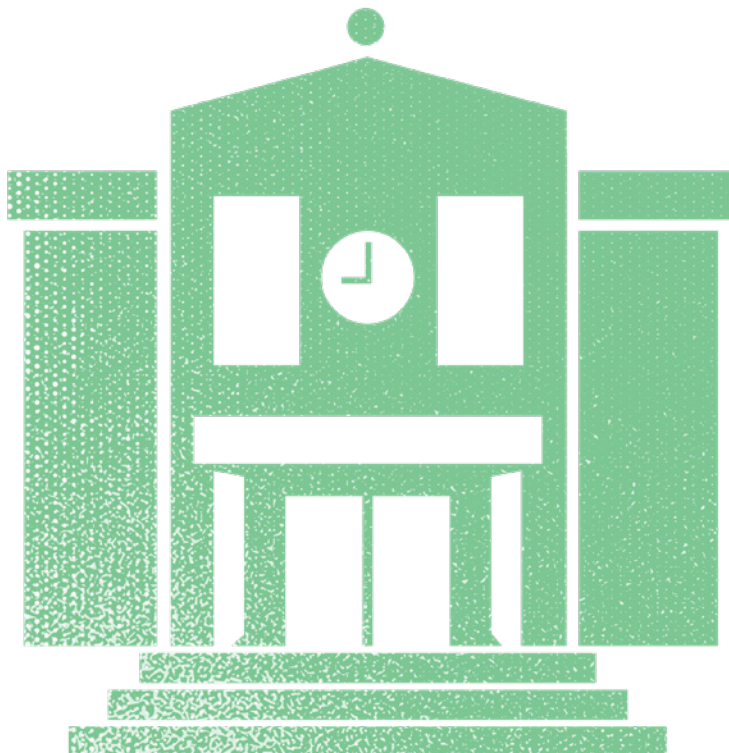
You can also find support at your local Family Resource Centre [Find your nearest Family Resource Centre Tusla - Child and Family Agency](#).

## Youth Work

Youth Work organisations provide personal and social development programmes for young people between 10 –24 year. It offers young people meaningful activities based on their needs and interests.



There are a number of youth clubs and youth work projects across Cork City and County. For youth support and a list of youth work services use the QR code or visit [Our Members - Youth Work Ireland](#) for a list of supports in your area.



## Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)

[Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services](#) (CAMHS) is a specialist service for people under 18 with moderate to severe mental health difficulties. A moderate to severe difficulty is something that has a significant impact on your daily life. It stops you from doing things you want to do and need to do. For example, seeing friends and going to school.

The duration and severity of a child or young persons symptoms are influencing factors as to whether a referral is accepted by CAMHS.

Referrals into CAHMS are only accepted if comprehensive treatment at primary care level has been unsuccessful (for example Jigsaw, Pieta House, Primary Care Psychology), or where primary care support was not appropriate in the first instance.



### Who can refer to CAMHS

- GP is the primary referral agent into CAMHS
- Paediatricians, Consultant Psychiatrists and Emergency Departments can refer
- Referrals are also accepted from senior staff within Tusla, Jigsaw, Community Medical Doctors and NEPS



## Child Disability Network Teams

If your child's needs are complex and they have a significant impact on your child's life, your child will be seen by the [Children's Disability Network Team](#) (CDNT).

If your child's referral to CDNT is accepted, your child may be seen by some or all health professionals from the interdisciplinary Children's Disability Network Team (CDNT) (e.g., a Psychologist and a Speech and Language



Therapist). The Interdisciplinary Team is a team of professionals who work together to meet your child's needs with a joint care and support plan. The CDNT is a family centred service. This means that the team will work with you to set and achieve goals for your child and your family. They will create a support plan called the Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) and will support you to use everyday activities to achieve the identified goals.



### Who can refer to Child Disability Network Teams

- A GP or Public Health Nurse
- Any health or education professional (e.g. a teacher)
- Parents/guardians

All referrals need a signed consent from parents/guardians

You can refer using this [referral form](#).



### Assessment of Need

If your child has a disability or you think they may have a disability, you can apply for an [Assessment of Need](#). Under the Disability Act 2005 all children in Ireland have a right to:

- **An independent assessment of their health needs,**
- **An assessment report,**
- **A statement of the services they will receive,**
- **Make a complaint if they are not happy with any part of the process.**

Parents can apply themselves directly for an Assessment of Need; you do not need to be referred by a medical practitioner. The assessment identifies your child's health needs and what health services are needed to meet your child's needs. You don't have to get an Assessment of Need to access HSE services.



## National Council of Special Education (NCSE)

The [National Council for Special Education](#) (NCSE) was set up to improve the delivery of education services to persons with special educational needs arising from disabilities with particular emphasis on children.



## Special Education Needs Organiser (SENO)

The Special Education Needs Organiser (SENO) supports schools and families with advice around special education needs, transport, assistive technology and supports available in schools. The SENO plans with you for specialised placements in special classes or special schools if required. Each SENO has a caseload of local schools. Please ask your school who the SENO is.



### Who can refer to SENO

Parent/Guardians/Schools can contact their local SENO to discuss their child's special education needs. No report or diagnosis is required. Professionals can contact the SENO on your behalf with your consent.



## Visiting Teacher Service



### Who can refer to Visiting Teacher Service

- HSE Audiology
- HSE Eye Clinic/ Ophthalmology
- GP Parents
- Schools
- National Council for the Blind of Ireland (NCBI)
- Cochlear Implant Unit, Beaumont Hospital
- Chime



The Visiting teachers are qualified teachers with particular skills and knowledge of the development and education of children with varying degrees of hearing loss and/or visual impairment. They offer support to children, their families and schools from the time of referral through to the end of post-primary education. Visiting Teacher visit the home, primary and post primary school and support parents, teachers and the child with teaching and learning.

## Appendix 1: Information Gathering: School & Parent Checklist<sup>5</sup>

A high number of 'yes' responses indicate a greater risk of school avoidance				
Name of Student				
Date				
ATTENDANCE				
	YES	NO	N/A	COMMENTS
Reluctance to leave the house in the morning				
Late for school				
Absent for part of day				
Absent for full day				
ENVIRONMENTAL				
	YES	NO	N/A	COMMENTS
Significant life events, e.g., moving house/school, separation of parents/family members, addiction, additions to the family, death of a pet (please specify)				
Student living in more than one home/temporary accommodation				
Parental involvement with education, e.g., homework, parent-teacher meetings, good communication with school				
Practical/financial challenges in getting to school				
LEARNING NEEDS				
	YES	NO	N/A	COMMENTS
Inability to problem solve				
Organisational difficulties				

	YES	NO	N/A	COMMENTS
Homework not done/ incomplete on a regular basis				
Difficulties working under pressure/processing difficulties				
Specific learning difficulty & general learning difficulty (please specify)				
Avoidance of particular school activities/subjects				

### SOCIAL

	YES	NO	N/A	COMMENTS
Bullying				
Fallen out with friends/ difficulties with peer relationships				
Social/communication difficulties				
Not independent for age				
Struggles during unstructured time				
Lack of active engagement with social and leisure outlets				

### EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

	YES	NO	N/A	COMMENTS
Often appears tired				
Often appears to be lacking in interest/ motivation				
Demonstrates low self- esteem				
Shy, quiet or passive				

EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING				
	YES	NO	N/A	COMMENTS
Appears worried or anxious				
Displays challenging behaviours				
Lack of involvement in school life				

PHYSICAL WELL-BEING				
	YES	NO	N/A	COMMENTS
Has a serious illness or medical condition				
Complains of sickness or headaches				
Had rapid weight gain or weight loss				
Changes in eating habits				
Known use of drugs/ alcohol				
Other				

Completed by:  
Please include school, parent/guardian  
and student's name as appropriate

\_\_\_\_\_  
School Representative

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student

## Appendix 2: SNACK (School Non-Attendance Checklist)







To support the identification of non-attendance type

Over the PAST 4 WEEKS your child missed X whole days and X half days of school. Students miss school for all sorts of reasons. We would like to understand the reason(s) your son/daughter missed school. His/her absences are highlighted in the table shown [here](#) [hyperlink to table, or printed table, showing the last 4 weeks]. There is a list of reasons below the table. For each whole day or half day absent, choose the reason that best explains the absence. For example, if your child was absent on November 7 due to extreme weather conditions you would put a “14” as the reason for absence that day. If the reason your child missed school is not in the list, put “16” at the relevant place in the table and tell us the reason using the space provided. Your calendar or diary/planner may help you remember (e.g., trip to the doctor, religious holiday).

Reason	Examples
<b>My child:</b>	
1. had an appointment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a doctor’s appointment</li> <li>• an appointment with a specialist</li> </ul>
2. was sick	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• had a cold or flu; had asthma</li> <li>• was in hospital</li> </ul>
3. was reluctant or refused	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• he/she said it was hard to go to school or to stay there the whole day</li> <li>• he/she seemed upset/anxious/scared about school</li> </ul>
4. skipped/wagged/truanted	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• he/she headed to school but did not arrive there</li> <li>• he/she left school without permission</li> </ul>
<b>I or my partner:</b>	
5. gave my child a day off	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to give him/her a rest</li> </ul>
6. kept my child home for other reasons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• so he/she could help out at home</li> <li>• because school is not helping him/her</li> </ul>
7. arranged extra holidays	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to take a family holiday during school-time</li> </ul>
<b>Our family:</b>	
8. had an urgent situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a funeral</li> <li>• someone in the family was taken to hospital</li> </ul>
9. had other difficulties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the car broke down</li> <li>• someone in the family had a medical appointment</li> </ul>
10. had a religious holiday or cultural observance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chinese New Year</li> <li>• Jewish holidays</li> </ul>
<b>The school:</b>	
11. was closed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• public holiday / term holidays</li> <li>• curriculum day / teacher training day / teacher strike</li> </ul>
12. sent my child home due to his/her behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• he/she was suspended or expelled from school</li> <li>• he/she was asked to leave school for the remainder of the day</li> </ul>
13. asked that my child stay away from school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• because the school could not take care of my child’s needs</li> <li>• because the school could not keep my child safe at school</li> </ul>
<b>Other:</b>	
14. weather conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• snow, floods</li> <li>• fire</li> </ul>
15. quarantine due to Covid-19	
16. something else (please describe in the space provided)	

From: Heyne, D., Gren Landell, M., Melvin, G., & Gentle-Genitty (2019). Differentiation between school attendance problems: Why and how? *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*, 26, 8-34. Adapted March 8<sup>th</sup> 2021.

# Appendix 3: Sample Student Support Plan<sup>6</sup>

SUPPORT PLAN		
Name:	Date:	Class/Year:
At school these things can make me feel upset:		
		
My key adult(s) in school is/are:		
When I can speak to my key adult(s):		
Where I can speak to my key adult(s):		
My return to school plan includes the following changes to my attendance:		
Days:		
Times:		
Changes to my timetable include:		
(Identify any changes needed and what should happen/where they should go instead)		
		
Any other changes include:		
Identify any other changes to routines (break, lunch times, changes between lessons etc.), classroom expectations (not expected to read aloud, work in pairs etc.) or homework		
		
When I start to get upset, I notice these things about myself:		
		

When I start to get upset, others notice these things about me:



Things I can do to make myself feel better when I'm at school:



Things that other people (staff and peers) can do to help me feel better when I'm at school:



Things that my family can do to support me to attend school:



Places in the school I can go to where I feel safe and supported:



This plan will be reviewed regularly so that it remains helpful.

Review date:

My signature	Key adult's signature	Parent's/Guardian's signature
_____	_____	_____

Other people who have access to the plan are:

(adapted from WSCC Educational Psychology Service EBSA Guidance)

## Appendix 4: Subject Teacher Survey Form<sup>7</sup>

Subject Teacher Survey							
Student	Teacher			Subject			
This section is to record factors that may affect a student's ability to learn. The number circled allow for comparisons over time.							
Area of Concern	Scoring Criteria						Comments
Attitude towards staff	Negative ----- Positive and appropriate						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Co-operation with peers	Unable to share --- Enjoys sharing and working with others						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Motivation	Very little ----- Self-motivated						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Participation and oral response	Withdrawn ----- Keen to take part or shy						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Enthusiasm for written work	Seldom wants ----- Works hard/most pride in work						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Presentation of work	Takes little care in work ----- Always takes pride in work						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Following verbal instructions	Needs further direction ----- Can work alone						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Following written instructions	Unable to work alone ----- Can work alone						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Group size required	Needs constant one-to-one ----- Can function in any group						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Behaviour in class	Disruptive ----- Never disrupts most lessons						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
General progress	No progress ----- Skills/knowledge increasing						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Creativity and innovation	Shows little imagination ----- Creative and innovative						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Aggressive towards staff and peers	Assertive and fair ----- Passive						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Tantrums/Sulks	Copes with failure appropriately ----- Depressed and withdrawn						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	

## Appendix 5: Youth Consultation Summary – Cork

### Introduction

In adapting the Limerick school-based resource for Cork, two youth groups in West Cork were consulted. Eleven young people aged 14–17 contributed their perspectives on school attendance. Guided by the **Lundy Model of Participation**<sup>1</sup> which emphasises *space, voice, audience, and influence* – this consultation ensured that young people’s views were not only heard but considered in shaping the Cork resource. Their insights also reflect the principles of the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)**, particularly Article 12, which affirms every child’s right to express their views freely in matters affecting them.

The young people in these two groups had been given some background information to the existing Limerick resource booklet and were asked if they would like to contribute to our understanding of issues impacting on young people regarding school attendance.

Below is a summary of their views on the resource and themes that they believe discourage/support school attendance.

### Feedback on the Existing Resource

General feedback on the resource was positive; it was seen as a ‘kind’ resource and an important resource for teachers and parents. Some of the young people were not immediately drawn to the front cover, but on further reflection they thought the snakes and ladders visual was a useful way of showing the journey in school, both positives (ladder) and the challenges (snake).

### Key Themes Identified

#### School Environment

- Students reported feeling unsafe and unsupported due to inadequate facilities and weak responses to bullying.
- Diversity initiatives were seen as tokenistic, with LGBTQ+ students calling for year round inclusion.
- Experiences of racism and anti-Traveller discrimination were described as ignored or minimised.
- Anxiety was worsened by rigid school structures; flexible approaches such as later starts, breaks, and counselling were valued.
- Youth Reach was praised for its friendly, flexible, and supportive environment.

## Teacher–Student Relationships

- Negative interactions, lack of respect, and inconsistent behaviour from teachers undermined trust and creates a lack of psychological safety.
- Fear of punitive responses to incomplete homework created stress.
- Conversely, teachers who were kind, supportive, and attentive were described as making “a massive difference.”

## Individuality and Expression

- Uniforms were seen as costly, uncomfortable, and restrictive of self-expression.
- Students felt discouraged from voicing opinions, often feeling “misunderstood, unheard, and undervalued.”

## Transport Barriers

- Rural isolation and unreliable transport limited access to school.
- Bullying on school buses contributed to feelings of unsafety.

## The Voice of the Child

Young people expressed frustration at not being listened to: “*We are not being listened to. Not feeling safe. No consequences.*” They also highlighted the importance of recognition: “*We want ways to show our individuality.*” These voices underline the need for schools to create genuine spaces where children’s perspectives shape decisions that affect them.

## Conclusion

This consultation demonstrates the importance of embedding the **voice of the child** in educational planning. By applying the **Lundy Model**<sup>1</sup> and upholding the **UNCRC**, professionals can ensure that young people’s experiences directly inform practice. The issues raised – safety, respect, inclusion, individuality, and access – represent not only barriers to attendance but also opportunities for schools to foster environments where every child feels valued, supported, and heard.

This resource highlights the complex issues contributing to school reluctance among young people while also offering practical supports and clear signposting to services. By recognising and responding to the individual needs of each student as they arise, it provides a framework that not only addresses barriers to attendance but also promotes inclusion, wellbeing, and meaningful engagement in education.

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1 Laura, Lundy (2007) “‘Voice’ is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child”, *British Educational Research Journal*, 33:6, 927-942, available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033>

## Appendix 6: Resources for working with Parents to Support School Attendance

# How young people might express their worries about attending school

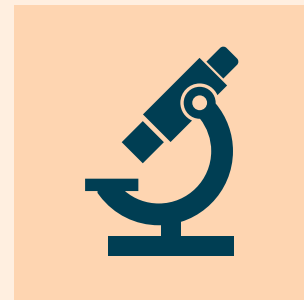
Children show us they are struggling in different ways.



**Not wanting to get up and get ready.**



**Saying they can't go.**

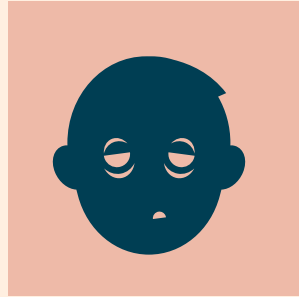


**Worrying a lot about small issues** such as having the right copies, pens, equipment.



**Feeling sick.**

Having stomach aches, headaches.



**Not sleeping well.**



**Not doing homework.**

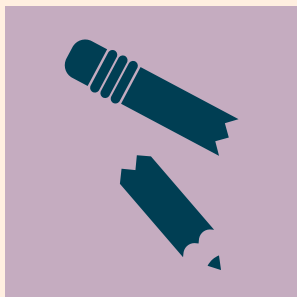


**Not wanting to take part in school outings or events.**



**Being angry or upset.**

Acting out at school, on the way to school and/or at home.



**Disengaging from learning at school.**



**Withdrawing**

having low mood, being quiet or sad

# You are not alone

Research tells us that parents and carers can feel isolated and alone when they have a child that struggles to attend school. Parents have told us that they often feel:

- **judged**
- **blamed**
- **misunderstood**
- **frustrated.**

You do not deserve to feel any of these feelings.

Going through issues around school-avoiding behaviour with your child is full of challenges and tensions. As a parent it is very challenging to have your child's needs and well-being as your main concern, while at the same time experiencing pressures to get your child back into school.

You may find yourself struggling with how to strike the right balance between how much:

- **your child is capable of**
- **you should challenge or push them.**

You may feel that the school is judging you and that the wider system is monitoring you. You may feel that your child is a problem to be managed rather than a person who needs care, love and understanding.

You might find yourself feeling frustrated or angry at your child for not going to school. It might have an effect on your relationship with them or others in your family. It can be overwhelming juggling all this along with work and other family commitments.

Know that if your child is avoiding school, it is not your fault. You are not alone in this.

There is an African proverb that says, '**It takes a village to raise a child**'. The message in this phrase is that it takes many people (an entire village) to provide a safe, healthy environment for children. The village allows the child to:

- **get the security they need to develop and flourish**
- **be able to realise their hopes and dreams.**

These people (the 'villagers') include:

- **parents**
- **siblings (brothers and sisters)**
- **extended family members**
- **neighbours**
- **teachers**
- **professionals**
- **community members**
- **policy makers.**

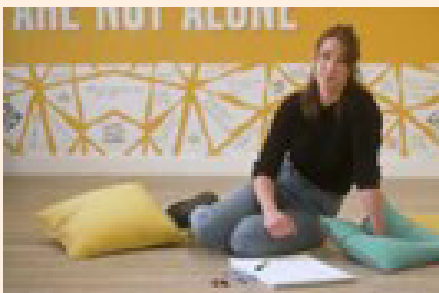
This proverb reminds us that we all need to work together to help children thrive. Parents and carers are the most influential people in children's lives, but children (and their families) need a network of support around them to help them flourish. It is OK to ask for help. It doesn't mean that you've failed or that you're a bad parent or carer.

# Figuring out what is going on for your child

It is helpful to encourage your child to express what they are feeling about school. However, children can often find it hard to respond to direct questions about what's going on. They may not be able to identify exactly what their feelings are and why they are feeling them.

Using simple activities like the 'iceberg activity' can help open a conversation in a more relaxed way. See also video link on this page. The video is 4 minutes long.

The iceberg activity can help you and your child explore reasons for school-related worries.



**Figure 1.**  
Video Explaining  
[The Iceberg Activity](#)

## Start by drawing an iceberg, with the tip above the surface of the water

Write down or draw the behaviours that can be seen above the surface – the things that your child does when thinking about or preparing for school, for example:

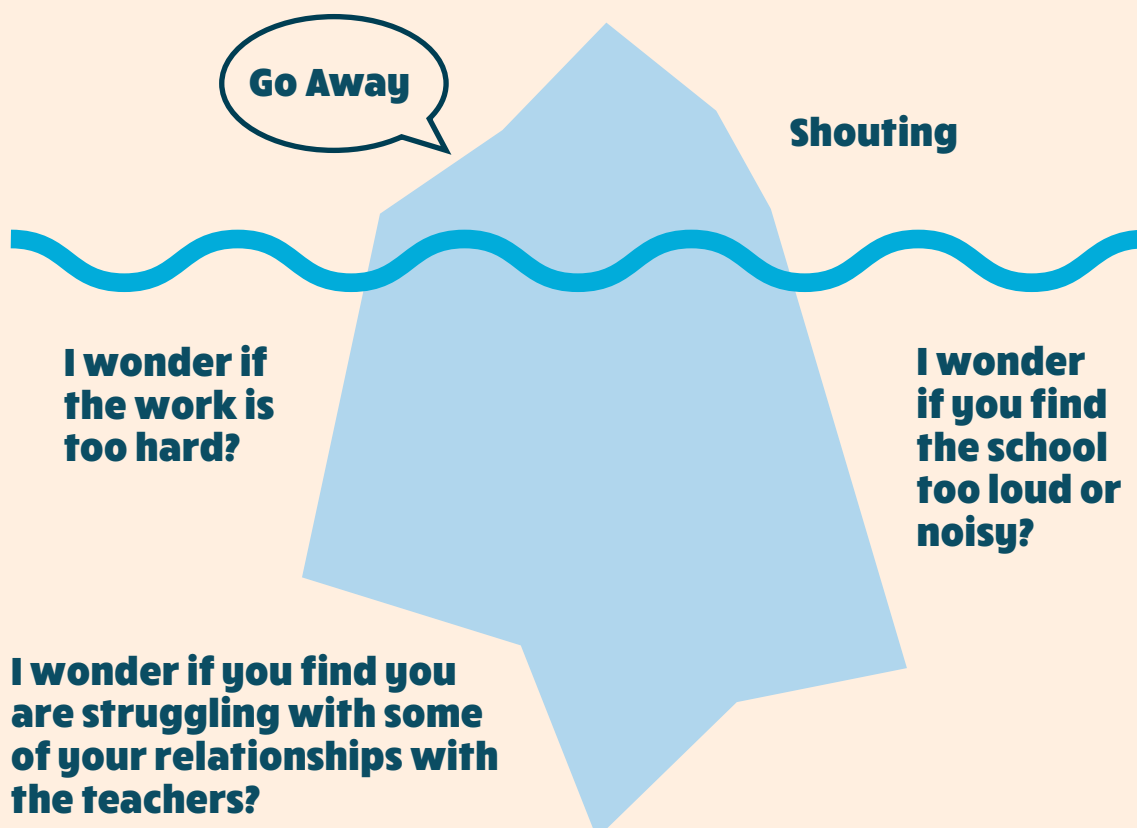
- **crying**
- **shouting**
- **telling you to go away.**

Explore what's going on beneath the surface. What is it that your child is feeling? Use open, non-judgemental statements, like:

- **"I wonder if the work is too hard."**
- **"I wonder if you find school too loud and noisy".**

It can also be helpful to offer up your own experiences, if any, around what you found difficult at school like:

"I know I always avoided maths. On days when I knew I had maths, I would feel like I wouldn't want to go".



When helping your child explore their thoughts and feelings about school:

- **try to create a relaxed atmosphere**
- **listen carefully**
- **recognise that your child's feelings are valid.**

Even if they may feel like small things to you, or not a reason why you yourself wouldn't go to school, they may feel big to your child. Let your child know you:

- **believe in them**
- **are there for them**
- **will figure this out together.**

You will feel your own stress as well as the distress of watching your child going through a time of difficulty. As best you can, try not to allow your normal and natural concerns for your child's future to take over the present situation. Try to stay calm and reassure your child, even though you might be feeling stressed.

Remember: Your child's experience is an understandable reaction to a stressful time or environment. Try to remind yourself, and help your child to know, that the experiences you are going through now will pass. They won't last forever.

Perhaps you can describe the experiences to your child as a key learning opportunity where you and your child might learn important life lessons, like:

- **how to manage stress**
- **how to take care of emotional and physical well-being**
- **who to get support from when needed.**

# How you can help your child

## Invest in your relationship

First and most important, you help by investing in your relationships with your child. Parenting is the most important, but also the hardest, job you will ever have. We know from research that by far the most protective and influential factor in a child's life is a safe, caring and supportive parent-child relationship.

Within this safe, loving relationship, you can help your child develop the skills needed to adapt to the challenges life can bring. So, prioritise spending quality time together doing things that you both enjoy. Laugh and have fun together, show an interest in your child's hobbies, and be available to listen, support and empathise.

## Trust in yourself

As a parent or carer, you have a unique insight into your child's history, relationships, behaviours and emotions. Don't be afraid to advocate for what you believe your child needs.

Your child's school has a duty to respond to your concerns. Don't be afraid to speak up for yourself. If you need help, or guidance, there are supports available for parents. If you need help working through this or other documents, ask someone you trust to go through them with you.

Make sure to look after yourself. School-avoiding behaviour can be incredibly stressful and exhausting. Reach out to trusted family and friends and say "Yes" to any offers of help.

## Strategies you could try at home

### Establish routines

Establish a bedtime and a morning routine. The night before prepare by doing things like:

- **packing school bag**
- **laying out uniform.**

Encourage good sleep habits (good 'sleep hygiene'). For example, encourage your child to avoid looking at any screens like, phone, TV or computers for an hour before bedtime.

Have a morning routine for:

- **getting up**
- **getting dressed**
- **having breakfast**
- **leaving the house.**

### Plan how to manage worries

Think together about how to manage worries. Younger children might find it helpful to bring a favourite toy to school with them. Older children or teens might find it helpful to create a 'self-soothing box' to use when they are at home– this is a box that contains things that helps to soothe or ground them.

This could include:

- **tactile (things to touch) like Play-Doh or pebbles**
- **favourite music**
- **positive memories, such as award certificates, letters or cards, ticket stubs from concerts or sporting events**
- **precious photographs**
- **meaningful poetry or quotes**
- **favourite smells – scented candles, room sprays, essential oils.**

## Create space to unwind

Children may need time to unwind after the school day. They may like to:

- **listen to music**
- **play with toys**
- **take a bath**
- **watch a video**
- **bake**
- **play sport**
- **talk with friends.**

Spending time in nature is also a great way to relax and bring a sense of inner peace.

## Celebrate small achievements

Notice small successes, like:

- **getting out the door on time**
- **having things organised the night before.**

Let your child know you are proud of them.

Help your child manage screen time if they need support with this.

Children use their screens and devices for a range of creative, learning or social activities. However, sometimes screen time can come at the cost of other important activities like quality family time, exercise or sleeping well.

You may find this [Digital Parenting Guide](#) from Cybersafe Kids useful. It can also help to have 'no phone time' for you and your child at the same time. This would show them that you are in this together.

## Good sleeping habits (sleep hygiene)

Lack of sleep is a huge issue and often reported by schools as a strong factor for avoiding school.

Sleep hygiene is a term used to describe healthy sleep habits and behaviours. It deals with things in our home that you can adjust to help your child have a good night's sleep. For example, dimming lights.

<b>Encourage calming drinks before bed</b>	Encourage your child to have drinks before bed that have a calming effect on the body and help sleep.  For example, warm milk for younger children or decaffeinated or herbal tea for older children. Have them avoid drinks that contain caffeine or a lot of sugar.
<b>Eat sleep-friendly foods</b>	Eat foods that promote sleep if your child feels hungry before bed, like bananas and even tomatoes!
<b>Prioritise exercise</b>	Prioritise time during the day for your child to exercise or move their body. This can release tension and energy and bring your child's body into a restful state for sleep.
<b>Reduce screen time before bed</b>	Screens can make it harder to fall asleep because they slow down the production of the sleep hormone, melatonin. We produce melatonin when it is dark.  Your child could still use their phone or device to listen to music, a podcast, or a guided meditation to help get to sleep. However, they should limit their time looking at screens before bed.
<b>Use a sleep diary</b>	Create and use a sleep diary where you can write down how long and how well your child's sleep was. For younger children, you can help you child make the diary entry. The diary will help you and your child to get a more realistic idea about the type of sleep they get. You can then help them plan how to get better quality sleep.
<b>Wind down before bed</b>	Create a wind-down routine in the hour before bed. During this time, limit screen time, homework, or physical activity. Instead, encourage things that work for them to calm their mind. For example, reading, listening to relaxing music, or writing a diary.

## Support a positive sleeping environment at home

Not all of these suggestions might be possible depending on your living situation.

Pick out the things you and your child can do to help their sleep.

<b>Dim the light in living and sleeping spaces at night time</b>	Keep living and sleeping spaces as dimmed as possible at night time. This will also help your child's body to release the hormone melatonin. Melatonin relaxes the body and prepares it for sleep. We produce melatonin when it is dark. Blackout curtains or even eye masks may also help your child to sleep.
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<b>Keep school work out of the bedroom</b>	If possible, encourage your child or young person to do school work somewhere other than their bed. Try to keep their bed just for sleeping. Encourage your child to think about their bedroom in 'zones' and keep a space dedicated to sleeping.
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<b>Lead by example</b>	Follow these sleep tips yourself and be a good role model for your child.
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<b>Avoid overheating and clutter</b>	Try to keep the temperature of the bedroom cool and the space clutter free. This creates a calming environment for sleeping.
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<b>Avoid noise</b>	A quiet space promotes good sleep. This may not always be possible to achieve when sharing bedrooms or living with family members with different sleep patterns. However, you could encourage the use of earplugs or noise-dampening curtains in the bedroom to help.
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<b>Be realistic, patient and understanding</b>	There is a lot going on for children and young people including very real, biological changes to their circadian rhythms, or 'body clocks', that can impact their sleep.
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Work with your child to find positive ways to promote good sleep that work for them as individuals and that benefit their mental health and wellbeing.

# If your child cannot go to school at the moment

Sometimes, despite the efforts of parents and school, children are simply not able to attend. This can be incredibly stressful for both you and your child.

## Your employment

If necessary, speak to your employer, explore possibilities for flexible working arrangements or parental leave entitlements.

## Avoid force

Avoid forcing your child to attend. Don't shout, threaten or bribe because these tactics may make your child's anxiety more intense. Even if your child does physically go to school, they may be in no position to learn.

## Show you understand

Instead, show your child you understand what they are going through, remind them that you believe in them, and that you will figure this out together.

## Keep a record

Keep a record of your child's absences from school and what you and the school did to address absenteeism. This may help if the situation continues and you need to ask for more support or seek out-of-school educational support.

## Set up home-learning

Try to establish a home-learning routine. Just like your child was going to school, encourage them to:

- **get up at a particular time**
- **have study time**
- **breaks**
- **lunch time.**

The school may be able to provide tasks or activities suitable for your child. Alternatively, you may find [Scoilnet](#) useful. It is the Department of Education's official site for Irish education resources.

If you need access to a computer for your child at home, your child's school may be able to help.

## Encourage your child to meet other children

Encourage and help your child to have social time with their friends. Young people can easily become isolated when they do not go to school. Hanging out with friends, attending sports or clubs can stop that from happening and help your child to develop a sense of belonging to their school and community.

## Endnotes

- 1 Heyne, D., Gren-Landell, M., Melvin, G., & Gentle-Genitty, C. (2019). Differentiation Between School Avoidance Problems: Why and How? *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*, 26(1) 8-34 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cbpra.2018.03.006>
- 2 Healy C, Eaton A, Cotter I, Carter E, Dhondt N, Cannon M. Mediators of the longitudinal relationship between childhood adversity and late adolescent psychopathology. *Psychological Medicine*. 2022;52(15):3689-3697.
- 3 Chu, K. A., Schwartz, C., Towner, E., Kasparian, N. A., & Callaghan, B. (2021). Parenting under pressure: A mixed-methods investigation of the impact of COVID-19 on family life. *Journal of Affective Disorders Reports*, 5, 100161.
- 4 Maguire, L., McCarthy, N., Stynes, H., Hickey, G., & Greene, S. (2022). Responding to parents' well-being needs throughout the COVID-19 pandemic—a critical reflection on the experiences of vulnerable parents and frontline service providers. *Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies*, 22(1), 6.
- 5 Taken from Back on Track: Fingal Schools Toolkit for Supporting Students who Avoid School.
- 6 Taken from Back on Track: Fingal Schools Toolkit for Supporting Students who Avoid School.
- 7 Taken from Back on Track: Fingal Schools Toolkit for Supporting Students who Avoid School.



**This project was delivered in Cork by  
a group working in partnership from:**

