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Guidance

# Toolkit for schools: communicating with families to support attendance

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## Applies to England

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This toolkit provides examples to help you communicate with parents and carers about school attendance.

Schools are dedicated to supporting strong attendance for children and young people so that they receive an excellent education. The benefits of being in school are numerous. However, the pandemic disrupted attendance habits, and schools are facing more challenges than ever in supporting children to be in school. Schools are working exceptionally hard in response to this challenge. This includes following the [working together to improve school attendance](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-improve-school-attendance) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-improve-school-attendance>) guidance. We also know that many schools have allocated more of their staff time to improve attendance levels. Different factors are now influencing decision making for some parents, carers and pupils around whether a child or young person attends school. Starting to influence pupil, parent and carer behaviours is one part of tackling this very difficult issue.

We are committed to reducing absence in schools and recognise that this challenge cannot be met by schools alone – government and wider support services action is also needed. To support schools, we have commissioned research to understand changes in parent and carer attitudes to attendance since the pandemic.

We have based these examples on [research](#) from Thinks Insight and Strategy (Thinks).

The research provides insight into the types of school absence and family decision making related to this. You can use the insight to adapt your communications to make them more effective. The research can help schools to set high standards for attendance, ensuring children and young people miss as little school as possible. Consistent and open communication can play an important role in starting to influence behaviours.

You should tailor the examples and suggestions to the needs of your school and parents and carers. Tailoring may take a bit of extra time but will increase impact.

## Ways to communicate with parents and carers about attendance

When reviewing your school attendance communication policies and messages, consider:

- making sure communications on attendance are timely and regular - talk about emerging attendance patterns early
- using the child's name with accurate data specific to them rather than generalising

- framing absences in lessons missed - a key insight from the research was that percentages can be less clear when describing the impact of absence
- that parents said new or surprising information resonated most with them
- using the [school attendance data tool \(https://www.gov.uk/guidance/access-your-school-attendance-data\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/access-your-school-attendance-data) to identify the number of sessions or days a child has missed and any patterns in their absences
- adopting positive, future focused messaging which encourages parents and carers to consider the wider social benefits of school for the overall wellbeing of their child
- highlighting the support benefits of school beyond academic benefits
- naming and providing contact details of specific people in school who can help address attendance barriers
- being careful about generalising when describing children and young people's feelings and experiences
- balancing a firm, factual tone with empathy
- avoiding unevidenced or unrealistic claims
- providing clear reminders of your school's policy relating to absence and guidance such as:
  - [Is my child too ill for school? \(https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/is-my-child-too-ill-for-school/\)](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/is-my-child-too-ill-for-school/)
  - [everything you need to know about school attendance \(https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2022/09/02/back-to-school-week-everything-you-need-to-know-about-school-attendance/\)](https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2022/09/02/back-to-school-week-everything-you-need-to-know-about-school-attendance/)
  - [school attendance and absence \(https://www.gov.uk/school-attendance-absence\)](https://www.gov.uk/school-attendance-absence)
- engaging with other schools in your area or trust to ensure consistent messaging and approaches, particularly where children from the same family attend different schools

You could also consider whether it might be suitable to use different communication channels. For example, a phone call may be better for a parent or carer:

- whose first language isn't English
- who has a disability affecting their ability to engage with written communication

Some parents or carers may feel less prepared to challenge children when thinking about whether they should attend school. Consider messages that encourage parents and carers to explore whether there are any other factors influencing their child's absence.

## Methods of communication

We expect schools to regularly inform parents and carers about their child's attendance and absence levels. [Working together to improve school attendance \(https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-improve-school-attendance\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-improve-school-attendance)

[attendance](#)) includes more information on schools' responsibilities. Most schools already have in place an overall strategy for communicating with parents and carers on attendance. This should include setting expectations early (at the start of each school year), and regularly (during each term).

Sending accurate information about a child or young person's attendance to parents and carers is essential if attendance messages are to have an impact. The [school attendance data tool \(https://www.gov.uk/guidance/access-your-school-attendance-data\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/access-your-school-attendance-data) can help you to identify:

- the number of sessions and days a particular pupil has missed and any overall patterns in their absence days
- families who may need attendance support

An effective whole school culture of high attendance is underpinned by clear expectations. As outlined in [working together to improve school attendance \(https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-improve-school-attendance\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-improve-school-attendance), schools should have a clear, written school attendance policy. Being transparent about school attendance policies, including the trigger points for attendance communication will help ensure a consistent approach with parents and carers. Consider regularly sharing an accessible version of your attendance policy with parents and carers.

Messages that are inclusive and non-judgemental are important. Where there are families who are proving difficult to engage, you should consider any additional needs parents and carers could have. Try different methods of engagement to establish the most effective approach. You may achieve successful relationship building with parents and carers using a combination of methods. Make sure you choose the right person to deliver attendance communications. This is crucial to successfully engaging parents and carers.

Thinks' research showed that individualised messages to families often have the most impact. This is because they see the communication as relevant or applicable to them, in a way that general messages might not be.

## Letters and emails

You will already regularly use this format to communicate messages to parents and carers. For example, to communicate important school dates. Good letters can play an important part in influencing parents and carers.

Thinks' research suggests that email is the most convenient and accessible means of communicating less urgent messages, for example more general messages about attendance. Families prefer letters for more serious or important information.

You could also add these messages to your school's website, perhaps as a newsletter. Adding a link to the webpage in messages to parents and carers will enable them to refer to previous messages.

You could also use letters and emails to signpost parents and carers to support services available within their local authority. This will provide them with a sense of wraparound support without it being individually targeted.

Social media may also provide useful and different communication opportunities to some but not all parents and carers.

[Annex A \(https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-improve-school-attendance\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-improve-school-attendance) includes adaptable example attendance letters and emails to parents and carers to save you time.

## Text messages

Regular text messages to parents and carers are an effective communication strategy. A study with Bristol City Council found that messaging parents of children with attendance below 95% increased good attendance rates by 4%.

Thinks' research showed that parents prefer to receive text messages that are unique to their child. This helps them to prioritise reviewing or actioning anything within these messages. However, text messages will not always be the right way to communicate with parents and carers.

Consider checking your existing messages against our examples to strike the right balance in communicating with parents and carers. You can adapt these examples to suit the individual or smaller group issues.

You could consider sending text messages through online customer relationship management (CRM) tools. Willows Academy has [examples of using CRM tools to send messages to parents \(https://www.willowsacademy.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/135/sites/261/2023/06/Examples-of-communication.pdf\)](https://www.willowsacademy.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/135/sites/261/2023/06/Examples-of-communication.pdf). Some CRM tools have pre-set options which allows you to send positive messages which are pupil specific. This form of messaging can help build relationships with families and acknowledge progress.

The Behavioural Insights Team have produced a guide on [how schools can use text messages to clearly communicate pupils' attendance levels to parents \(https://www.bi.team/increasing-attendance-with-parent-messages-supportive-how-to-guide-for-schools/\)](https://www.bi.team/increasing-attendance-with-parent-messages-supportive-how-to-guide-for-schools/). It includes examples of how to structure texts and some example text messages.

## Example messages

“Your child has missed X number of lessons this year. Lessons build on what children already know and missing one may make tomorrow’s lesson more difficult.”

“Your child has missed X number of days of school this year.”

“One day could be as many as seven missed lessons, as well as time spent with friends and doing extracurricular activities.”

“You can support your child’s physical, social and mental wellbeing by ensuring they are in school every day.”

“We know that parents and carers worry about their children’s mental health. Rather than keeping your child off school, let us know about your concerns. We can then work together on supporting your child.”

“It can be difficult to know whether your child is too ill to attend school. NHS guidance is clear that it’s fine to send them in with a minor cough or common cold, provided they don’t have a temperature.”

“School is an enriching environment that can help your child with their social and mental wellbeing.”

“School isn’t just about learning. It’s a warm, supportive environment where your child can get a healthy meal and see their friends.”

“School attendance is important for equipping your child with skills for life.”

“Attending school every day can help your child to achieve their aspirations, and the aspirations you have for them.”

“We are delighted to celebrate that [NAME] achieved 100% attendance last week. We thank you for your continued support to ensure [NAME] attends school every day.”

“We have the same expectations as [neighbouring primary or secondary school]. This means you will hear the same messages for the other children in your family as we work closely on attendance as a local partnership of schools.”

“We know your child has special educational needs and this can lead to them sometimes not finding school straightforward or as easy as they would like. We understand this and want to work with your child, and with you, on helping your child feel confident to explain any concerns. We can then work together to help provide reassurance and support.”

## Phone calls

Thinks’ research showed that parents prefer phone calls for personal conversations about their child. In-depth conversations to discuss and support parents and carers in their individual circumstances can help to safeguard pupils and families. They provide the opportunity to signpost parents and carers to local authority support services.

Selecting the most appropriate member of staff to make calls to parents and carers is important. If calls are of a personal nature, the member of staff should know the child or young person well and ideally have a relationship with the family.

Phone calls can give parents and carers the opportunity to share more personal details about their circumstances. They can help them feel more supported by the school. This can help to ensure honest communication between a parent or carer and the school for the benefit of the child involved.

You can also use phone calls to highlight actions you can take. For example, fixed penalty notices for absence and enforcement action. Having these conversations over the phone can help parents and carers to understand the severity of potential next steps. They also provide the opportunity to offer more support from the school.

You may want to consider training or support for staff making these calls. It is possible some calls will be challenging. As staff will need to use consistent and sensitive messaging during these calls, training could help to achieve a positive outcome.

## Face-to-face meetings

Many schools already use this format to communicate messages to parents or carers. This includes when there are sensitive or serious issues to discuss and understand.

You may also want to consider a face-to-face meeting when you see a pattern in your school's attendance data.

Consider using video calls where parents or carers may be unable to attend in person at short notice. This may help to:

- develop your relationship with parents and carers
- tackle attendance concerns early

Phone calls, video calls and face-to-face meetings all offer the opportunity for direct and personalised conversations with families. This is vital when establishing and removing barriers to attendance.

Sometimes it is also beneficial to include the child or young person in these conversations. This may help them to:

- understand the importance of school attendance
- build their confidence to engage with teachers when they are experiencing difficulties with attendance

## About the research

Thinks recruited 47 parents of children aged 4 to 16 to take part in this research. This included parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) or on free school meals.

The research aimed to:



- understand their views on school attendance and absences
- understand their interpretation, understanding and engagement with proposed messages
- identify attendance messages that:
  - resonate best for each type of absences (for example, low level illness, holidays)
  - are most effective in changing attitudes and motivating families to avoid unnecessary absences
  - most resonate with key parent or carer audiences (for example, parents of children with SEND, parents from disadvantage backgrounds)

## Key findings about attendance communication

Parents expected to hear attendance messages from their child's school, ideally via email and school apps and portals.

Messages that do not consider specific circumstances have less impact on parents' attitudes or actions. Positive communication encouraging attendance may be more motivating and trustworthy.

Parents value clear guidance on mild illness to help them make decisions. The research indicated that some parents were not aware of NHS guidance such as [Is my child too ill for school? \(https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/is-my-child-too-ill-for-school/\)](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/is-my-child-too-ill-for-school/). Consistency of schools' behaviour in following this guidance is important to parents.

## Key findings about parental values and judgements

The research showed that the participating parents:

- did not see themselves as the type of parents who let their children miss school for unacceptable or frivolous reasons
- felt that the values and information they use to make judgements about attendance have changed post pandemic

This means that your attendance messages may need to evolve. Consider how you can adapt your messages to reflect these changes.

## Perceived ability to catch up on missed education

Parents report that they think their children are able to catch up on missed education effectively. This means they may consider small periods of absence from school manageable, without realising the possible wider negative impact.

## Increased illness

Parents report that they worry that illness levels are higher. Parents also say that the pandemic has made them more wary about spreading illnesses. They are less likely to send their child to school when they are ill. It now feels less socially acceptable to do so.

Some parents feel confident that they know when their child is well enough to be in school. Others feel less confident since the pandemic.

Parents feel that schools have become more cautious about keeping a child in school. They perceive that a school is more likely to send a child home if they fall ill.

### **A more holistic view of children's wellbeing**

Since the pandemic, parents are placing greater emphasis on their child's mental wellbeing. They have a greater awareness about the need to support children with these issues.

Some parents felt their children are still catching up on important life experiences they missed during the pandemic. For some parents, the pandemic helped to demonstrate the importance of achieving a balance between school and home life. It encouraged them to think about the importance of enriching activities such as time with family more than they might have done previously.

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