School attendance, exclusion and persistent absence

School non-attendance incurs costs: economic, social and psychological, for the children and young people involved, for their communities and for society. Children and young people who are often absent from school are more likely than others to leave with few or no qualifications and are more likely to be out of work, suffer mental health difficulties and become homeless.

According to the Department of Education, 184,000 primary, secondary and special school students missed 20 per cent of lessons in 2011 whilst more than 430,000 missed 15 per cent of lessons a year. As a result, the threshold below which attendance would be judged as unsatisfactory was raised from 80 per cent to 85 per cent. Figures show that 73 per cent of pupils who have over 95 per cent attendance achieve five or more GCSEs with grades A* to C. In contrast, only 3 per cent of students who are persistently absent for 15 per cent of the school year achieve this.
Department for Education\textsuperscript{2} figures, based on schools registers, show that an estimated 7.5 million school days are missed each year through unauthorised absence. In 2013, an Ofsted report \textit{Pupils missing out on education},\textsuperscript{3} reported 1,400 pupils across 15 local authorities as not participating in full-time education. Presuming that this pattern is replicated across all local authorities in England, it would mean that more than 10,000 children were missing full-time education for extended periods. In around half the cases that inspectors followed up, children and young people were receiving each week only five to eight hours of any educational provision.

School non-attendance is closely associated with crime. The Audit Commission\textsuperscript{4} found that a quarter of school-age offenders have significant school non-attendance records and that the majority of school-age offenders progress to become adult offenders.

School non-attendance is also associated with child, adolescent and adult mental health difficulties.\textsuperscript{5}

\begin{quote}
Prevalence of diagnosable mental health difficulties is estimated by YoungMinds (2013) to be 10 per cent; meaning that conditions such as depression, anxiety-disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder affect 1 in 10 children and young people, and that 1 in every 12 to 15 self-harm.
\end{quote}

Finding an alternative school or alternative non-school provision once the relationship between a student and the school has broken down is usually a bureaucratically challenging task – particularly following permanent exclusion. Sequences of exclusions, alternative provision and school placement transfers – including managed moves – are often punctuated with significant episodes of non-attendance and part-time attendance. Why is this so? Whilst the principle of an entitlement to full-time education is adhered to in law and governmental guidance, precise timescales and tolerances of interruptions not caused by formal exclusion are not legally proscribed:

In 2012, the Department for Education\textsuperscript{7} made a series of recommendations particularly emphasising the importance of improving the efficiency of the legal system for imposing fines on parents. However, research examining the efficacy of parental sanctions such as financial penalties\textsuperscript{8,9,10} suggests that financial penalties only work to improve long-term attendance with a small percentage of families who pay the fines and whose value-system is inherently pro-social.

\begin{quote}
“It’s a cheap option but there’s not much evidence they get children back to school.”
\end{quote}

(Professor John Howson, BBC News, 2007)

Persistent school non-attendance is often maintained by parental neglect, collusion or wilfulness; or by under-developed parental skills and understanding. Rather than indicating that a financial penalty will be effective in such cases, struggling families often regard a fine as being a routine nuisance and not a behaviour-changing device. Indeed, it is suggested that many families regard a fine for non-attendance as a surcharge for term-time holidays, the cost of which is offset against

Prepared by Brian Apter on behalf of the Behaviour Change Advisory Group.
the substantially reduced cost of off-peak holidays taken during term-time.

Psychological first principles\textsuperscript{11,12} indicate that punishment is rarely an efficient way of modifying an undesired behaviour, even if they make the person doing the punishing feel better.

The DEMOS report \textit{A generation of disengaged children is waiting in the wings}\textsuperscript{13} identifies a range of behavioural phenomena that are both effects of non-attendance, and exacerbating contributory risk factors of future non-attendance and social exclusion. These include drunkenness, teenage pregnancy, cannabis usage, tobacco usage, under-developed literacy and numeracy, limited familial interactions and structures, limited parental expectations, limited two-way engagement with school culture, cultural impoverishment and economic poverty.

The real cost of a NEET – a young person not in education, employment or training – (public-finance costs plus income-losses) is estimated to have been £34 billion in 2010 with a projected rise of 2 per cent year on year.\textsuperscript{14}
The Challenge

Children and young people at risk of future educational disengagement need to be identified at an early age, and their positive engagement with education effectively promoted and their attendance improved. Schools need to be empowered and resourced to become increasingly responsible for all of their students’ needs – not just academic attainment. Schools – as key stakeholders in the local communities in which they are sited – need to be supported in developing their aspirations to actively contribute to the development and sustainability of their local communities by never letting go of any student.

The Psychology

Any single case of persistent non-attendance might include elements of one or more of the following factor-categories of causation.

1. **Emotionally-based**: where there are mental health issues affecting the student or other family members, for example, where the student is a young carer of a parent with a mental health condition or a drug habit.

2. **Physical health related**: ranging from unusually frequent coughs and colds to chronic conditions such as cystic fibrosis that necessitate episodic in-patient treatment.

3. **Attitudinal/systemic**: absenteeism that becomes significant when it is habitual or too frequently a pragmatic solution, for example term-time family holidays.

4. **School behaviour-related**: for example, exclusion, managed moves, alternative provision and part-time timetables.

Persistent school non-attendance is unique to each individual, complex and intractable because of the complexity of the interrelationship of these four factors. Factor weightings are dynamic and can vary in the degree to which they contribute to the problem from day to day.
What can psychology do?

Psychologists characteristically use a wide range of applied psychological assessments and interventions to improve students’ attendance and engagement with education. The following table describes some of the applied psychological interventions used by psychologists, and their theoretical foundations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor-Categories</th>
<th>Psychology</th>
<th>Evidence-based Interventions</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Emotional/mental health-based non-attendance</td>
<td>Social cognitive theory</td>
<td>Psycho-education; solution circles; CBT; consultation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Behavioural theory</td>
<td>behavioural teaching; token economies</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Counselling psychology</td>
<td>Individual client-centred work; consultation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Psychodynamic</td>
<td>support, training and development group-work; individual and family psychotherapy</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Cognitive behavioural</td>
<td>CBT for fearfulness of school; depression and anxiety</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Attachment theory</td>
<td>Parent-training; parent support and development groups; systemic family therapy; consultation groups</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning difficulties</td>
<td>Instructional psychology; assessment through teaching; precision-teaching; self-efficacy training; dynamic and formative assessment; consultation</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Physical health related non attendance</td>
<td>Cognitive behavioural</td>
<td>Health management, pain and discomfort management via mental health and well-being interventions, e.g. CBT for depression, anxiety and improved well-being; team around the child meetings; consultation</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Attitudinal/systemic non-attendance</td>
<td>Positive psychology</td>
<td>Solution-focused family work; systemic family therapy; consultation; motivational interviewing; CBT; mediation meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. School-behaviour related non-attendance and exclusion</td>
<td>Social-cognitive theory</td>
<td>Teacher training (INSET); individual student work; multi-agency work, e.g. working with social workers and parents; CBT/behavioural experiments;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Behavioural theory</td>
<td>behaviour management systems; systematic classroom observation; token economies; mediation meetings; consultation</td>
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CASE STUDY

Psychologists are both qualified and well-positioned to assist and inform therapeutic and educative programmes designed to develop and enhance positive parenting skills:

Molly, a girl in Year 7, began the academic year by transferring to a local secondary school with a cohort of peers from her primary school. She attended for two weeks and then abruptly stopped. When asked by the school, Molly’s mother said that she found it impossible to get Molly out of bed in the morning. After three weeks, an Educational Welfare Officer (EWO) became involved and visited the house. The mother said that she did not want to put pressure on Molly because during the school holidays, Molly had taken an overdose.

After a further three weeks during which Molly attended school for two morning sessions only, the school asked the EWO to consider using the ‘legal route’ and a financial penalty to motivate Molly’s mother to make Molly attend school. The EWO, who was employed by a local authority and worked as a member of a multi-agency team, discussed Molly’s case in a team meeting and the team’s educational psychologist explained that she had been acquainted with Molly previously, in her primary school at the end of Year 6 because of concerns about her emotional well-being, which had been raised by the school. She offered to visit the home to explore what might be causing the problem with Molly’s school attendance.

The psychologist made three visits to the home. The family situation was complex; 12 months earlier her mother discovered that Molly’s father was having an affair. The mother was under the care of a psychiatrist and was being treated for depression. Molly’s ‘overdose’ was a red herring. It had been accidental. Molly had merely taken a double-dose of a medication prescribed because of a long-term medical condition.

Molly’s unhappiness with the argumentative home situation was exacerbated by a lack of parental supervision which allowed her to stay up in to the early hours to watch repeats of her favourite TV series, The Olsen Twins, which was on every night at 3a.m. This meant that she was alone with her worries in the early hours and that she was tired each morning and unable to wake for school.

Not going to school allowed her to avoid unwanted attention from boys, a number of whom found Molly attractive. Molly felt that she was overweight (compared to the Olsen twins) and the attention of the boys exacerbated this distorted thinking – she thought they stared at her because she was ‘fat’. Molly’s mother also exacerbated this distorted thinking by encouraging Molly to be slim so that she could pursue a career as a model – the career her mother would have liked to have had. Molly’s mother felt the reason that her husband had an affair was because she had ‘lost her looks’. A short time after the discovery of the affair, Molly had heard her mother threaten to kill herself. By staying at home, Molly felt able to keep watch over her mother and share with her sister the vicarious satisfaction of watching her father suffer in his social isolation within the home.

The successful intervention devised by the psychologist involved educative therapeutic parenting support both for Molly’s mother and father, sleep hygiene measures, and CBT with Molly that corrected some of her distorted thinking about herself and enabled her to begin a sequence of behavioural experiments that entailed her beginning to attend school again. Molly achieved 95 per cent attendance in Year 8.
Recommendations for effective psychological responses to persistent non-attendance at school

Schools need to:

- Transform into places of learning where all children want to be – whatever their learning difficulties, their family cultures and their socio-economic circumstances
- Improve their psychological competence and local inclusiveness by developing expertise in teaching, nurturing, valuing and understanding their most complex and challenging students – as an integral part of the school-improvement agenda.
- Excite the curiosity of all students with a curriculum that is proved by an evidence-base to be relevant, achievable and exciting, which inspires young people to attend and learn

Schools will achieve this by:

- Involving children and young people in the design of schools and of the curriculum and significant account being taken of their views and standpoint
- Testing and assessing the curriculum rather than the child – in order to ensure that the curriculum is relevant, provocative, evidence-based and interesting for the child
- Overarching applied socio-psychological early evidence-based assessment and formulation of each case of persistent school non-attendance and of the relative strength of contributory factor effect-sizes by psychologists to establish what needs to be addressed and what will work
- Positive celebratory ceremonies during the early years and in Key Stages 1 and 2 employing attributional and self-regulatory devices to establish and develop good habits of attendance and behaviour with children and their families
- Conjoint solution-focussed educative/therapeutic approaches between psychologists, education welfare officers and social workers with families who might otherwise collude with or inadvertently maintain persistent school non-attendance
- Reducing dependence on the legal route and financial penalties – we all need to be reminded that punishment is an ineffective way of improving human behaviour and parent penalties such as fines should only be considered when probable effectiveness has been established, and alternative psychologically-informed solution-focussed approaches have been exhausted.
References


