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Behaviour Change:

School attendance, exclusion and persistent absence

Persistent absence from school – defined in 2015 as less than 90 per cent attendance¹ – incurs costs: Economic, social and psychological, for the children and young people involved, for their communities and for society.

It is also claimed that children and young people who are absent from school to any extent are more likely to leave school with few or no qualifications and are more likely to be out of work, suffer mental health difficulties and become homeless. However, research has tended to be by questionnaire and analyses tend to be associative rather than causal². The conclusion that a student cannot afford to miss even a few days at school without a significantly detrimental effect appears to be based on the unsubstantiated beliefs of teachers, parents and politicians rather than on quantitative longitudinal studies that isolate effects measurably caused by school absence.



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It is more firmly established that *persistent* absence is correlated with crime. The Audit Commission³ found that a quarter of school-age offenders have persistent non-attendance records. The majority of school-age offenders progress to become adult offenders. It is probable however that a significant contextual factor is that the opportunity for school-age crime is increased by fixed term or permanent exclusion from school.

It is also reported that persistent school non-attendance is associated with child, adolescent and adult mental health difficulties. Prevalence of diagnosable mental health difficulties is estimated by *Young Minds*⁴ 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. Whilst there is little convincing evidence that school absenteeism directly causes mental health difficulties, the converse is likely to be true.

Most children have some occasional absences from school, mostly for illness, but a few have a more substantial amount of days off for longer term illnesses or holidays. According to the Department for Education⁵, the overall percentage of pupils who were 'persistent absentees', fell from 11.0 per cent in 2014/15 to 10.5 per cent in 2015/16 for state-funded primary schools, state-funded secondary schools and special schools (in England only). Special schools had the highest rate of persistent absence rate: 26.9 per cent but this was a slight decrease from 27.5 per cent in 2014/15.

Down marginally from 4.4 per cent of pupils in 2014/15, 4.3 per cent of pupils had more than 25 days of absence in 2015/16 and 8.3 per cent of pupil enrolments had no absence during 2015/16. The overall amount of absence for persistent absentees across all schools was 17.6 per cent of sessions missed, nearly four times higher than the rate for all pupils. This is a slight increase from 2014/15, when the overall absence rate for persistent absentees was 17.3 per cent.

Persistent absentees account for almost a third, 30.9 per cent, of all authorised absence and more than half, 53.8 per cent of all unauthorised absence. The rate of illness absences is almost four times higher for persistent absentees compared to other pupils, at 7.9 per cent and 2.0 per cent respectively⁶.

This data relates to only children of compulsory school age who are 'registered pupils' but missing substantial parts of their education. In addition, in 2013, an Ofsted report⁷: *Pupils missing out on education*, reported 1,400 pupils across 15 local authorities as not participating in full-time education i.e. not on a school roll at all and not known to be properly educated 'otherwise than at school'. Presuming that this pattern is replicated across all local authorities in England, it would mean more than 12,000 children were missing from any kind of formal education for extended periods. In around half the cases that inspectors followed up, children and young people were receiving each week only 5 to 8 hours of any educational provision.

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' (expediently planned school transfers), 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 prescribed.

In 2012, the Department for Education⁸ made a series of recommendations particularly emphasising the importance of improving the efficiency of the legal system for imposing fines on parents. This has led to the widespread use of fines by way of Penalty Notices (and, in some cases, subsequent prosecutions if the parent chooses not to pay), but mostly based on far lower levels of absence than used to be the case. This response is unlikely to be effective in cases where unauthorised absence is frequently repeated, rather than, for example, a one-off family holiday when the child is otherwise a good attender. Research examining the efficacy of parental sanctions such as financial penalties^{9a,9b,10,11} suggests that they only work to improve long-term attendance with a small percentage of the families concerned whose value-system is inherently 'pro-social'.

*'It's a cheap option but there's not much evidence they get [financial penalties] children back to school.'*¹⁰

*'Almost 150,000 families were hit with penalties for their taking children out of school without permission during the last school year, with councils raking in a total of almost £9m in fines, exclusive figures reveal.'*¹²

In contrast to occasional or brief periodic absences for holidays or illness, *persistent* absence is 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 and those well-accustomed to courts for other reasons often regard a fine as being a routine nuisance, which they may well negotiate down to easy payment arrangements. Whilst fining these parents might financially impede the care-giving and facility to put food on the table for their children, the fine does not act as a behaviour-changing device.

Psychological first principles^{13,14} indicate that punishment is rarely an efficient way of modifying an undesired behaviour, even if they make the agent or agency doing the punishing feel that they have done something useful.

The DEMOS report: *'A generation of disengaged children is waiting in the wings...'*¹⁵ identifies a range of behavioural phenomena that are both effects of persistent 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 NEET (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 year¹⁶.

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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 psycho-socially responsible for *all* of their students. Schools – as key stake-holders in the local communities in which they are sited – need to be supported in developing their aspirations to become impartial successful investors in the socio-economic collateral of their local communities by never letting go of any student.

The psychology of persistent non-attendance at school

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, e.g. 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 that necessitate episodic in-patient treatment such as cystic fibrosis.
3. **Attitudinal/systemic:** absenteeism that becomes significant when it is habitual or too frequently a pragmatic solution, e.g. where the value of 100 per cent school attendance is not supported by the value system of a student, their family or the student's peer culture. This category includes pragmatic / episodic absenteeism, e.g. family holidays, which become a concern where the holiday is of extended duration in term-time and annually repeated.
4. **School behaviour-related:** e.g. exclusion, managed moves, alternative provision and part-time timetables.

Persistent absence is individuated, complex and intractable because of the complexity of the interrelationship of these four categories of 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 and their theoretical foundations.

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

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 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 wellbeing, 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 absence from school

Schools need to:

- To be transformed into inclusive non-selective places of learning where all children want to be – whatever their learning difficulties, their family cultures and their socio-economic circumstances
- To excite the curiosity and joy in learning 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
- To 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.

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, curiosity-provoking, evidence-based and joyful for the child
- Early socio-psychological 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 in order to establish what needs to be addressed and what will work
- Positive celebratory ceremonies during the early years and in Key Stage 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
- Reduced 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.

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