

Is Attendance a Safeguarding Issue?

A child missing from education is not in itself a child protection matter. There may be an innocent explanation. However, unexplained non-attendance can be an early sign of problems and vulnerability.

Settings should view and address this issue in three ways:

1. Preventing poor attendance and truancy.
2. Acting promptly to ensure children's safety and facilitate their return to school.
3. Taking action to locate children whose whereabouts are unknown.

Keeping Children Safe in Education describes children missing education - and attendance issues - as an area of safeguarding concern.

So having a clear and effective attendance policy is crucial.

Regular attendance helps identify safeguarding concerns, including the risks of exploitation and grooming. It also allows children to communicate with staff and receive support for pastoral and safeguarding issues. Consistent attendance is vital for academic progress.

KEY POINTS ON SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AND SAFEGUARDING

There are a number of key elements in a school's attendance policy that are especially important from a safeguarding point of view:

Staff role: Emphasize the importance of accurate attendance registers for safeguarding. Individual lesson absences can signal potential safeguarding issues beyond academic concerns.

Emergency contacts: Maintain at least two emergency contact numbers for each student. This ensures that there are options to reach responsible adults if a child is absent and identified as a welfare or safeguarding concern.

Parental involvement: Ensure parents/guardians, especially new ones, understand and support the attendance policy. Encourage advance communication for planned absences, including overnight stays, and request contact information for the responsible caregiver.

Escalating attendance issues: Clearly outline the actions the school will take if attendance problems worsen. Communicate this policy effectively to parents. Emphasize that concerns are raised consistently as part of standard procedure.

- Define the threshold for contacting parents regarding attendance concerns, even if there's a valid reason, eg illness. Additional evidence, such as doctors' notes, can support explanations for low attendance.

- Specify the level of attendance concern that triggers contact with the local authority. Provide clarity to parents on why/how the school will escalate a case. Assure them that objective criteria will always be followed.

It's also important to consider home visits for children whose attendance is a concern; as well as children whose parents are hard to reach. This will give the school more of an idea of the home environment for the child. This can be discussed and agreed with the DSL team.