

Reconnecting.

SUPPORTING A KEY STAGE 4 LEARNER WITH SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

A practical, trauma-informed conversation guide for foster carers

Core message

The aim is not to win an argument. It is to help the young person feel safe enough to explain what is getting in the way, while keeping education and their future firmly in view.

Connection before correction • Support before sanction • One small step at a time

1. Before you start the conversation

- Choose a calm time, rather than beginning the discussion during a pressured school morning.
- Use a quiet, private space. Sitting side by side, walking, driving, or doing an activity together may feel less intense than direct eye contact.
- Regulate yourself first: speak slowly, keep your voice low, and avoid showing frustration.
- Be curious about the barrier. Attendance difficulties may relate to anxiety, bullying, friendships, learning, sensory needs, tiredness, transitions, feeling unsafe or not belonging.
- Have warm but clear expectations that education matters and that adults will help make attendance achievable.
- Keep your body language relaxed.

Helpful mindset

Ask “What is making school hard?” rather than “Why are you being difficult?”

2. Main conversation starter

“I have noticed that getting to school has been really hard for you lately. You are not in trouble, and I’m not going to tell you off. I want to understand what it is like for you.”

“Can you tell me what goes through your mind when it is time to get ready for school?”

“Is there something happening at school that is making it difficult, or is it more about how you are feeling?”

“Sometimes young people are worried about lessons, friendships, bullying, feeling different, being tired, feeling anxious or not seeing the point. Does any of that fit for you, or is it something else?”

Pause and listen

Allow silence. Do not rush to correct, reassure, or solve. Reflect what you hear: “It sounds as if lunchtimes feel unsafe” or “You are worried you will be behind in class.”

3. If the young person begins to explain

- “Thank you for telling me. That sounds really hard.”
- “I’m glad you told me because we can work on it together. You do not have to sort this out on your own.”
- “If we could change one thing about school to make it a little easier, what would it be?”
- “Who is the adult at school you trust most?”
- “What would make tomorrow 10% easier?”

4. If they say, “I don’t know.”

- “That’s okay. You do not have to have all the answers.”
- “What is the best part of the school day, and what is the worst part?”
- “Does school make you emotional? do you feel worried, excited, angry, calm, bored, challenged, unsafe, embarrassed, or tired? What needs to happen to increase the score?”
- Offer another way to communicate: text, write, draw, use one word, or give school a score out of ten.

5. Responses to anger or refusal

Young person: “I’m not going.”

Foster carer:

- “I can hear that you feel very strongly about that right now.”
- “I’m not going to argue with you. I want to understand what is making school feel overwhelming today.”
- “What is the smallest step that feels manageable?”

Young person: “School is rubbish.”

Foster carer:

- “It sounds as though something about school is not working for you.”
- “Is the hardest part: the people, the work, the environment, how you feel, or something else?”

Young person: “Leave me alone.”

Foster carer:

- “Okay. I will give you some space.”
- “I care about you, and I am here when you are ready.”
- “I will check in again later, without pressuring you.”

Young person: “You don’t understand!”

Foster carer:

- “You are right that I may not fully understand yet.”
- “That is why I am trying to listen. Help me see it from your point of view.”

Young person: “Stop telling me what to do!”

Foster carer:

- “It sounds as if you are feeling pressured.”
- “I am not trying to control you. I care about you and your future.”
- “Let’s work out together what is making this so difficult.”

Young person: “Nobody cares anyway.”

Foster carer:

- “I care about you.”
- “You matter, and I want to understand what you need from me right now.”

Young person: “I’m not talking about it.”

Foster carer:

- “You do not have to talk right now.”
- “You could text me, write it down, use one word or give it a number out of ten.”
- “I will still be here when you are ready.”

6. How to de-escalate in the moment

- Lower your voice and reduce the number of words you use.
- Acknowledge the feeling without agreeing to unsafe or disrespectful behaviour.
- Avoid repeated demands, threats, lectures, sarcasm, and comparisons with other young people.
- Offer limited, genuine choices: “Would you rather talk now or after breakfast?”
- If emotions are rising, pause: “We are both getting stressed. Let’s take ten minutes and come back to this.” Try to remain calm and maybe try some deep breathing exercises.
- Remain calm and let your body language appear relaxed.

Safety first

If there is an immediate risk of harm, threat, missing behaviour or a safeguarding concern, follow the child’s safety plan and contact the appropriate professionals or emergency services.

7. Moving from conversation to a small plan

- Agree one achievable next step, such as getting dressed, travelling to the school gate, meeting a trusted adult, or attending one agreed lesson.
- Ask the school to identify a key adult who can greet the young person and provide check-ins.
- Consider a safe space, supported arrival, movement breaks, curriculum adjustments or a carefully planned, time-limited phased return where appropriate.
- Keep mornings predictable: prepare clothes and equipment, agree transport arrangements, and reduce unnecessary decisions.
- Notice and praise effort, honesty, and each step towards attendance, not only a full day.
- Review what helped and what did not. Adjust the plan with the young person rather than doing it to them.

8. Example closing conversation

“Thank you for being honest with me. I know talking about school is not easy. Education matters because you matter and your future matters. We do not have to solve everything today. Let’s agree one small step for

tomorrow, and I will do my part to help.”

9.

Helpful phrases to keep nearby.

Try saying	Avoid saying
Help me understand what is making this hard.	You are just being lazy.
What would make this feel a little safer?	There is nothing to worry about.
We will work on this together.	You are going; end of discussion.
Let's focus on one small step.	You have ruined the whole week.
I care about you, even when we disagree.	Why can't you be like other young people?
What has school been feeling like for you recently?	Why don't you go to school?
Can you help me understand what makes it difficult to attend some days?	What's your excuse for not going in?
When do you notice things feel hardest, before school, during school, or after school?	What is it about school that you can't cope with?
What do you think adults at school might not understand about your situation?	Have you told school what's wrong yet?
Are there particular people, places, or situations in school that make things feel difficult?	Who's causing the problem?
What happens in your body or thoughts when it's time to get ready for school?	Why do you get so worked up about school?
What helps you feel safe and calm on difficult mornings?	Why can't you just get ready like everyone else?
Have there been days when attending felt a little easier? What was different?	Why can't you be consistent?
What support would make school feel more manageable right now?	What do you expect school to do about it?

What worries you most about attending school?	What's so bad about school?
How can I support you without making things harder?	What do you want me to do about it?
What strengths have helped you get through difficult days in the past?	Why aren't you trying harder?
How do you feel adults respond when you struggle with attendance?	Don't you realise adults are trying to help you?
What would a successful school day look like for you at the moment?	When are you going to start attending properly?
If attending every lesson feels too much right now, what feels achievable?	You need to be in all day. Why can't you do that?
What helps you feel connected to school, even on difficult days?	Why are you so disengaged from school?
What would you like me to tell school about how you are feeling?	What should I tell school this time?
What are you worried might happen if you attend?	What do you think is going to happen?
What would help you feel more confident about trying again tomorrow?	Are you going to school tomorrow or not?

10. When to involve other professionals

- Contact the school promptly and ask what support is already in place.
- Share the young person's views and agree who will coordinate the attendance plan.
- Involve the social worker and Virtual School if the young person is in care.
- Seek appropriate health, mental health, SEND or safeguarding advice when the barrier suggests this is needed.
- Record patterns and triggers, including particular days, lessons, people, transitions, or physical symptoms.

Final reminder

Stay connected, stay curious, and keep expectations calm and consistent. The foster carer does not need to solve the whole problem in one conversation.

Consider further research,

Toolkit 1- The Emotional Impact of School Non-Attendance. [Training Toolkit | Virtual School](#)