

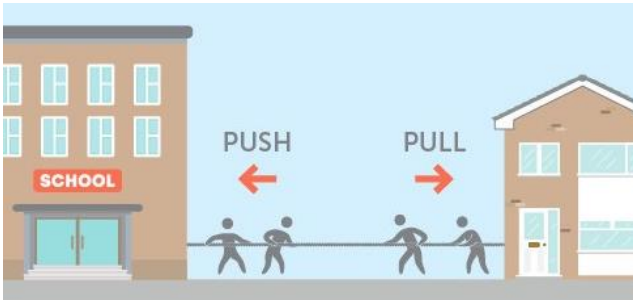
Why might children and young people experience barriers to attending school?

Push and pull factors

The difficulties children and young people may have articulating their thoughts and feelings around school, as well as the challenges adults may have in understanding the child or young person's emotional experiences of school, are often key barriers in identifying and supporting those at risk of not attending school.

Barriers to attending school can become more pronounced for young people who are of secondary school age, due to exam pressures and systemic factors occurring around adolescence. Transitions can also contribute to difficulties, for example, starting school, transitioning to secondary school and transitioning from Key Stage 3 into Key Stage 4.

Barriers to attending school can include feelings of isolation, a lack of belonging, not feeling listened to, a sense of helplessness and lack of control. By not attending school, a child or young person may feel that they are able to protect their 'sense of self' by avoiding conflict, rejection and/or social isolation.



Push and pull factors

The concepts of risk and resilience can also be considered in terms of push and pull factors.

- A 'Push' factor 'pushes' the child or young person towards attending school.
- A 'Pull' factor 'pulls' the child or young person away from attending school

Difficulties attending school are likely to occur when the child or young person's perceived risk factors are greater than their perceived resilience factors. Barriers may become evident when the child or young person's feelings of stress and anxiety exceed feelings of being supported; when the 'pull' factors that promote non-attendance overwhelm the 'push' factors that encourage school attendance.

- *Because I had missed so much I got bullied even more, which affected my mental health more (young person).*
- *"[It is important to] ensure that parents and the young person are aware that supporting adults acknowledge that the low mood is there and that it is acting as the barrier" (multiagency professional).*
- *"So, he kind of feels like school is torture, really, a lot of the time" (parent).*

Home and family factors

Factors associated with the family system may include:

- Separation, divorce or a sense of disharmony within the family dynamics;
- Parental physical and/or mental health challenges;
- The child or young person being a young carer;
- Being the youngest child in the family;
- Experiences of loss or bereavement;
- Elevated levels of stress within the family; and
- Other family members who have also experienced barriers to attendance.

- *"The most difficult cases are where the student keeps saying, I don't know, and the parents don't know, either- that's quite difficult to work with" (school staff).*
- *"I think the divorce definitely affected him without a shadow of a doubt; I'm not sure bailed out of [school] is the right thing to say, I think he felt too much pressure" (parent).*

School factors

Factors associated with the school system may include:

- Bullying and cyber bullying;
- Relationships with peers and/or adults;
- Transitioning from primary to secondary school or moving school;
- Accessing the structure and routine of the school day;
- Learning ability;
- Increased academic demand;
- Exams and tests;
- Travelling to school;
- Unidentified or unmet learning and/or pastoral needs; and
- Size and layout of the school.

- *So my first few years of secondary school, I was bullied like, really, really badly. So that obviously had a really negative impact on my mental health (young person).*
- *An awful lot of comments were made in classes, and teachers heard them and jokes inappropriate comments were made, not even just about me, but about anyone who was different; the teachers heard them but they didn't say anything (young person).*
- *"It's easy to get a very shallow glimpse of what's going on for a young person and come to a snap decision about what's causing the anxiety and non-attendance at school" (multiagency professional).*
- *"A few of [their peers] were like, oh, how you getting away with this? He doesn't feel he's getting away with it, he feels that he can't actually go in" (parent).*
- *He's been able to articulate that, at school, he finds lessons boring because he's academically very bright" (parent).*
- *I never really had trouble attending [primary school] because there was always a reason to go; I really enjoyed it there. Then secondary school kind of hit (young person).*

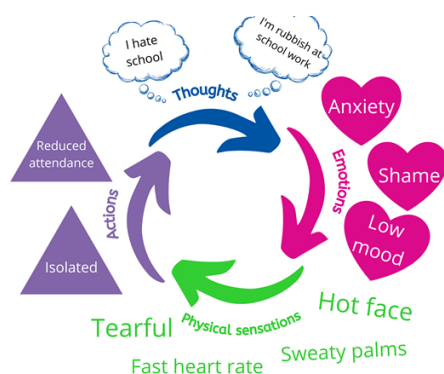
Individual factors

Individual factors may include:

- Relationships with peers and / or adults including difficulties with social interaction and / or establishing and maintaining friendships with peers;
- Fear of failure;
- Low self-esteem and/or confidence;
- Physical illness or medical needs;
- Unidentified or unmet communication needs;
- Difficulties with learning;
- Unidentified or unmet learning needs;
- Unidentified or unmet social, emotional or mental health needs;
- Difficulties separating from parent/s or carer/s;
- Increased academic demand; and
- Managing social demands.
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- *When I was at the end of Year 11, I was more ill and I missed nearly all of my last year of school (young person).*
- *"He can't identify what the problem is; he says it's not the school as he doesn't want to go to any school. He can't identify to anybody what the issue is at all" (school staff).*
- *"I know that encouraging him to get out of bed when he's really tired and getting him into school is probably the best thing long term. But equally that day he'll be destroyed and he'll be on edge" (parent).*
- *They're already struggling with enough: They're going through exams, they're going through a lot of stress. Like young people in general, have got so much to face. They're scared of having to grow up and face so much (young person).*
- *"The school, the way they teach, they go over stuff three or four times, I think to try and reinforce it, but he's not interested by the fourth time. So, he needs something to keep him interested and engaged in the school and in the lessons" (parent).*

Emotional literacy



Emotional literacy is the term used to describe the ability to understand and express feelings. It involves having self-awareness and recognition of feelings and knowing how to manage them.

Some young people may experience heightened levels of uncomfortable emotions which impact on their functioning and school experiences. This can include feelings of anxiety and / or low mood.

See the process in action in the following examples:

The student thinks **"this work is getting too hard"** which leads to the student feeling **worried** which might make their **heart race** and lead to them **avoiding school**

The student thinks **"why am I different to others?"** which leads to the student feeling **confused** which might make them **feel tearful** and lead to them **missing lessons**

- *Then I would get angry and run out because it was the only thing that I felt that I could do. It was very much a fear response it was I need to get out of here (young person).*
- *"We talk about anger, give it a name, and point parents in the right direction" (school staff).*
- *That was quite a challenging response because it made me feel like I was the problem. But only now that I've come somewhere where they're more aware of mental health, I realised I wasn't a problem. I should have been held, not punished, for being like... for having something that I can't control (young person).*
- *"He didn't want to be in trouble with school but he just couldn't go, and so that would be a worry; it's just that vicious circle all the time" (parent).*

Suspensions and exclusions

Children and young people who have been suspended and/or excluded are likely to have complex needs.

Exclusion can abruptly end friendships, trusting relationships with key adults in school and can reinforce a negative self-image. Children and young people who are suspended and/or excluded may experience both short term and long term difficulties with their social, emotional and mental health. They may also struggle to make expected academic progress and therefore, may struggle to gain relevant qualifications in order to access further education, employment or training.

Suspension and exclusion results in disruptions within education and can contribute to difficulties for children and young people reintegrating socially and academically back into educational settings. Children and young people who are suspended from school can be absent for significant longer periods than the parameters of their exclusion. Suspensions, exclusions, accessing alternative provision and changes to school placement are often linked to additional periods of reduced or non-attendance.

- *I got a lot of bullying and I was often the one that was excluded; no one knew it was the other person's fault (young person).*
- *"He actually liked the exclusion. It was a two-day internal exclusion in their annex so it was quiet; he got to do the work he wanted to do. I think that the teachers talked to him a bit more because there were less people in the annex. So he did those, and then he's like, I can't go into the main school, I just can't do it" (parent).*
- *"He doesn't want to be in school. So if they say, well, you're suspended, he'd be like, brilliant" (parent).*

Taken from <https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/education-and-learning/special-educational-needs-and-disability-send/educational-psychology-service-eps/guidance-to-support-children-and-young-people-experiencing-barriers-attending-school/why-might-children-and-young-people-experience-barriers-to-attending-school/>