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The school is a key site for fostering belonging. However, this requires a sense of intention, purpose and a commitment to connectedness.

Riley, Coates and Allen (2020)

”

Relational Approaches to support School Belonging and Attendance:

A Guide and Toolkit

Kent County Council
April 2025



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Foreword



We are in the midst of significant change in education as we wait for the outcomes of the government's Curriculum and Assessment review, Ofsted reform, Social Care review and greater clarity on expectations on SEND inclusion. However, KCC

remains ambitious for all our children and young people so we do not want to wait to share this really important guidance, which from our research we are confident reflects the government's direction of travel. The guidance draws on the growing, robust evidence base and our collective understanding of the important role of adopting relational-based approaches in school for all pupils, but particularly those who find engaging and attending school challenging and are at the highest risk of suspension and permanent exclusion.

As a local authority, KCC holds children's wellbeing in the heart of all we do, both because it is important in its own right but also as one strand of our approach to help pupils achieve their best. In recent times, this has included investing in and rolling out countywide initiatives. For example, over a third of Kent schools have participated in NurtureUK training, whilst many others have accessed iThrive and Trauma Informed Schools UK training. The Virtual School Kent (VSK)

was the first Virtual school to gain NurtureUK accreditation and has used this to help schools and the wider network in understanding the importance of supporting wider aspects of pupils' development, school values, pastoral approaches, policies and procedures. With over 100 schools already signed up for the VSK membership to the Attachment Research Community, I am excited to see how schools continue to learn from the growing evidence base, one another as well as sharing best practices with schools nationally. I am confident participation in these initiatives will enable relational approaches to become embedded across the county.

Since its conception nearly 20 years ago in 2007, Virtual Schools have always been pioneering in their development and operations, ensuring we all understand and work together to make a difference for the children and young people we serve. VSK continues to remain ambitious, using the latest research, evidence and opportunities to secure better outcomes for our most vulnerable pupils.

This guidance document is a perfect example of how VSK uses its knowledge of what effective work schools are already doing here in Kent, to support our most vulnerable pupils and to spread good practice. I know we are united in our commitment to make sure that all children and young people have the best educational opportunities and life chances.



FOREWORD CONTINUED

Good school attendance is fundamental in enabling children and young people to reach their personal and academic potential and to contribute to the communities within which they live. When children and young people feel safe, are valued as a member of the school community and have a sense of belonging they are much more likely to attend school and maximise their engagement on the wealth of opportunities open to them.

This guidance brings together a wealth of evidence that supports the rationale for schools to take a relational based approach and the beneficial impact of working in that way for children, young people and the adults supporting them.

Through our analysis of attendance, suspension and PEX data we know some children and young people are more at risk than others and so will benefit more from a relational approach being adopted by schools. Clearly VSK's focus is on those pupils who are care-experienced or whose families have had support from social services, but pupils with additional or special needs are also

disproportionately represented in suspension and permanent exclusion data, so this approach will also enable them to achieve their best. Finally, adverse childhood experiences and trauma can and does touch the lives of very many pupils through their school career, resulting in the need for a more supportive environment and culture. Therefore, this guidance, we would argue, will benefit all.

I really hope you find this guidance and toolkit useful in understanding that relational approaches build on the current effective and good practice, as well as being easily relatable. Your commitment can and will make a huge difference to your school community. As the title of the book by Paul Dix says, *"When the adults change, everything changes"* and I truly believe this guidance and tool kit can help to create that positive change for everyone.

Christine McInnes

Christine McInnes
Director of Education and SEN



I think this [relational] approach is often underrated and people look for strategies, tools and ways to 'fix' things, when the most important 'strategy' is ourselves, how we interact with others and showing that we truly care, that we hear the young people and keep them in mind.

Anna Ewen (my-Ed, VLE Wellbeing Editor)



Testimonials



“ [The] toolkit resonates and is very pertinent to our school context [irrespective of the size of the school]...

The fundamentals stay the same and as long as the school builds an ethos and has a vision that stays consistent and inclusive, then there’s always going to be compassion and innovation at the heart of everything we do, particularly for children who need to ‘find their voice’ in school and feel safe.”

*Mr Marson, Head of School,
Monkton C of E Primary School, Kent*



Remember there’s always something you can do but you don’t have to do everything and ‘fix’ young people... it might just be one small thing that can help and show someone that you actually care about them and are there for them.



Member of one of Kent’s Young People’s Councils

Introduction to the guide and toolkit

“Understanding distressing behaviour amongst pupils means a calmer school. More compassionate staff. Better-behaved children. More emotionally stable children. You can see their self-esteem begin to build... Attendance improved and exclusions dropped. Improved behaviour overall. Wellbeing language improved. Children’s confidence and self-esteem improves.”



Scottish Government Trauma-informed practice: Toolkit
[Trauma-informed practice: toolkit - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot \)](http://www.gov.scot)

The structure and background to this Relational Approaches guide and toolkit

This guide and toolkit was initially developed by the Virtual School Kent and the Kent Educational Psychology Service. Its aim is to support schools in their understanding of the importance of promoting relational approaches to create a sense of connection, school belonging and with trauma-informed practices supporting all vulnerable children, particularly those who may struggle to attend school.

“ This [Relational Approaches Guide & Toolkit] summarises the challenges around attendance and also behaviour in a nut shell, and offers so many practical solutions for schools to consider. ”

Simon Smith, Kent PRU & Attendance Service Manager

The guide and toolkit is structured to initially provide information regarding the importance of school attendance, including factors which may affect attendance. Psychological theory and research is also drawn upon to deepen the

understanding of the importance of school belonging. The guide and toolkit is underpinned by relational approaches, which effectively means the importance of responsive, person-centred approaches when working with children and young people to promote their connections with school. Further information, the relational approaches audit and other tools are included in the appendices to support the practical application of the information in this document.

“ I love the audit and it’s definitely something that my school could benefit from having to ensure clear procedures are in place/covered. ”

Mr Chris Marston, Head of School, Monkton C of E Primary School

The development of this guide and toolkit has been aided through support from children in care councils, headteachers, Kent County Council, Kent PRU and Attendance Service (KPAS) and Kent Educational Psychology Service (KEPS) all of whom we are grateful to and are specifically referred to in the ‘Acknowledgements’ section at the end of this document.

INTRODUCTION CONTINUED

School attendance is everybody's responsibility. Even before the pandemic, attendance for some young people was a growing problem. Since the pandemic, we have seen a sharp increase in the numbers of young people whose attendance is falling.

**MOMENTS
MATTER,
ATTENDANCE
COUNTS.**

The Government's Working Together to Improve School Attendance (2024) guidance [Working together to improve school attendance](#)

[-gov.uk](#) has highlighted the importance of working together and many systems are now in place to monitor, support and encourage young people back into school. The Attendance communications toolkit for schools has a wealth of ideas to support school attendance and brings together the government guidance and resources around attendance.

This document is for all senior leaders within education settings who are supporting those at risk of becoming persistently or severely absent. It is designed to work alongside the other support and resources available within Kent. Whilst acknowledging all the support already available for school attendance, this document looks at

the importance of relational approaches as a key asset in creating a positive pull factor for attending school. It is designed to work alongside the other interventions and strategies within the school, local authority and national governmental guidance around attendance.

By creating a relational based, trauma-informed, nurturing environment; schools will become a positive, safe community for young people and school staff alike. School communities that are welcoming and nurturing will no doubt reap the benefits of improved attendance, improved wellbeing and improved attainment.

For those schools who have children who are or are at risk of being persistently or severely absent, it is important to consider what changes can be made to ensure that the school environment and community is as welcoming as possible. This often requires small changes that support the child, but also teaching staff and parents to feel more secure in their efforts to increase attendance.



Introduction to Virtual School Kent (VSK)



Every Local Authority must have a Virtual School to carry out statutory duties relating to young people who are, or who have been in the care of the local authority. The Virtual School does not exist in real terms, or as a building. Children do not attend it - they remain the responsibility of the school at which they are enrolled. VSK is simply an organisation which has been created for the effective co-ordination of educational services at a strategic and operational level.

The Virtual School acts as a local authority champion to promote the progress and educational attainment of children and young people who are or have been supported by social services – Children in the care of the local authority; children who have left care under an Adoption, Special Guardianship or Child Arrangements order; children who are supported through a Child in Need of Child Protection Plan; children who have been supported by social services in the last 6 years and children who are living within formal kinship arrangements (and have not been in care) under a Special Guardianship or Child Arrangements Order.

The Virtual School works strategically to ensure all these children can achieve educational outcomes comparable to their peers.

For Kent looked after children, we have a corporate parenting role. We are their educational advocate and directly support the children to achieve their full academic potential.



For all Previously Looked After Children (those who have left the care of a local authority under an Adoption, Special Guardianship or Child Arrangements Order) and those with formal Kinship Care arrangements (Special Guardianship or Child Arrangement Orders and who have not been looked after by a local authority), we are a source of advice and information to help parents and carers to advocate for them as effectively as possible. We work on a strategic level to ensure all systems and services supporting these children and families are aware of the additional needs of these cohorts.

Virtual Schools also have a strategic role in promoting the education of Children with a Social Worker cohort (Ever6 CWSW) to champion the educational attendance, attainment and progress of children with a social worker. This is achieved by; making visible the disadvantages that children with a social worker can experience, enhancing partnerships between education settings and local authorities, promoting practice that supports children's engagement in education and working together to level up children's outcomes by narrowing the attainment gap, so that every child has the opportunity to reach their potential.

All children and young people in these cohorts, have at some stage in their lives, likely to have experienced trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). It is the VSK's aim to increase everyone's understanding on how to support those who have (or who are currently) experiencing trauma – whether that be education settings, other KCC services (for example, KPAS, STLS, SEN etc) or any other professional working with these young people.







Schools play such an important role in supporting these young people, not only academically but emotionally and socially as well.

INTRODUCTION TO VIRTUAL SCHOOL KENT (VSK) CONTINUED



Virtual School Kent is the first Virtual School in the country to receive the National Nurturing Virtual Schools Programme Award. Achieving the award is an endorsement of the extensive work VSK has undertaken to ensure that the six principles of Nurture are embedded throughout its everyday practice in how young people, partners and staff are supported:

The 6 principles of Nurture

-  **Whatever changes you face we are here to guide you**
-  **No matter what age, everyone is at a different stage**
-  **VSK can help you find your voice**
-  **How you behave tells us how you feel**
-  **VSK can be your safe space**
-  **Nurture helps you feel happy and healthy**



As part of its ongoing work with schools supporting these cohorts, we offer all Kent education provisions free membership of the Attachment Research Community (ARC) and have recently launch a countywide programme for Trauma Informed Schools training, along with other training and support opportunities for schools. It is our aim that every school and service supporting our most vulnerable Kent children are trauma informed. We want to work together to ensure these children achieve their academic potential and achieve their life goals.

Visit our website for more information: <https://virtualschool.lea.kent.sch.uk>



INTRODUCTION TO VIRTUAL SCHOOL KENT (VSK) CONTINUED

Virtual Schools and their Attendance Role

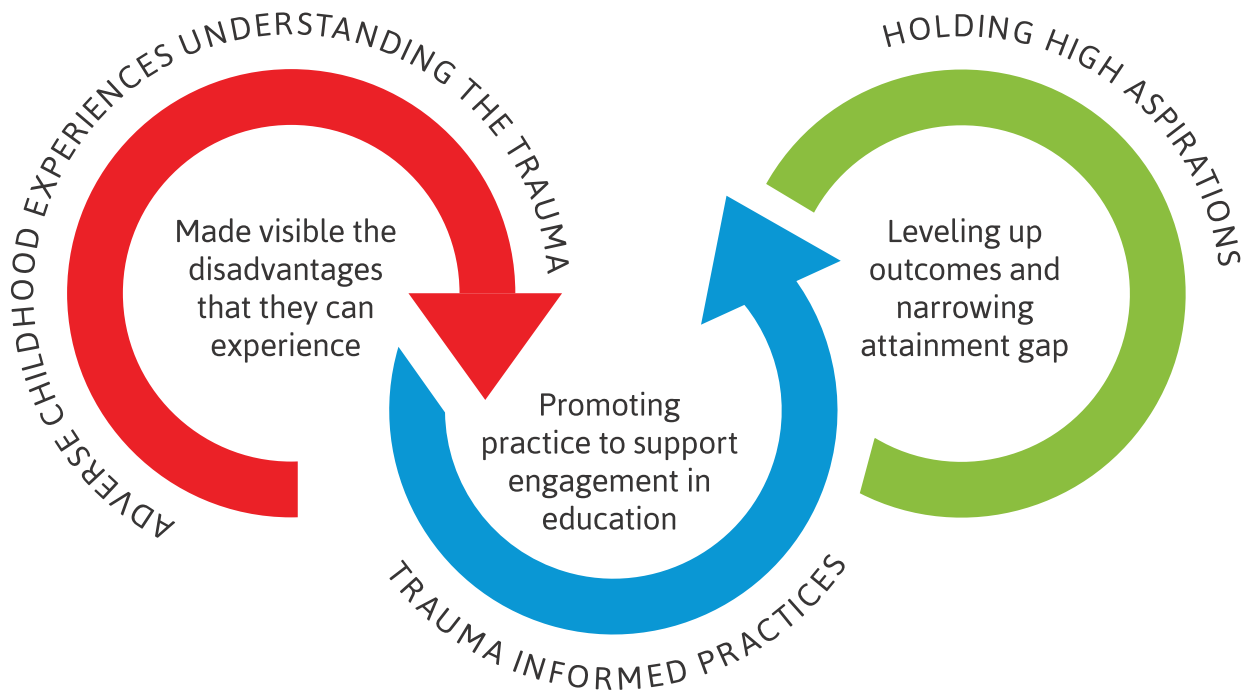


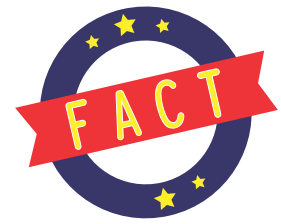
Figure 1. Virtual school role

VSK are working closely with other services within Kent to ensure that attendance is a priority, particularly for those children supported, or who have been supported by social services.

It is important to remember that everyone's goal is for young people to access the education that they are entitled to, whilst holding high aspirations and providing the support to enable them to reach their potential.



The facts – Why attendance is important?



- Pupils with higher attainment at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 had lower level of absence over the key stage compared to those with lower attainment.
- Pupils who did not achieve the expected standard in reading, writing and maths in 2019 had an overall absence rate of 4.7% over the key stage, compared with 3.5% among pupils who achieved the expected standard and 2.7% among those who achieved the higher standard.
- Pupils who did not achieve grade 9 to 4 in English and Maths GCSEs in 2019 had an overall absence rate of 8.8% over the key stage, compared with 5.25 among pupils who achieved a grade 4 and 3.7% among pupils who achieved grade 9 to 5 in both English and Maths. The link between absence and attainment at KS2 and KS4, Academic year 2018/19 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK (explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk)
- Poor attendance often starts at primary school, and children who fall into this pattern are likely to underachieve at secondary school. Pupils who miss between 10 and 20% of school (that's 19 to 38 days per year) stand only a 35% chance of achieving five or more good GCSEs, compared to 73% of those who miss fewer than 5% of school days.
[The parents' guide to school attendance](#)
[TheSchoolRun](#)

Figure 2 shows a simple, yet effective diagram to show the impact that attendance has on the outcomes of young people. Most children should be comfortably within the green sections of this model. Ideally, all children should have between 95-100% attendance.

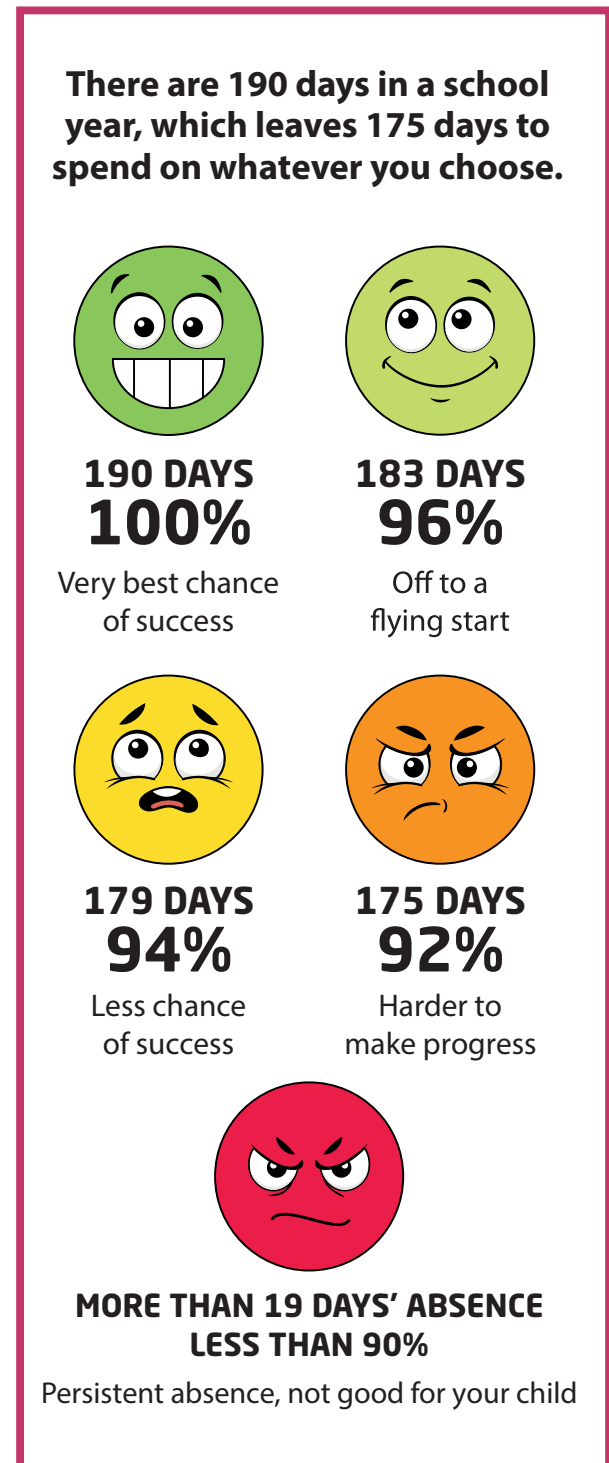


Figure 2. Impact of attendance on outcomes for children and young people (KCC)

THE FACTS - WHY ATTENDANCE IS IMPORTANT? CONTINUED

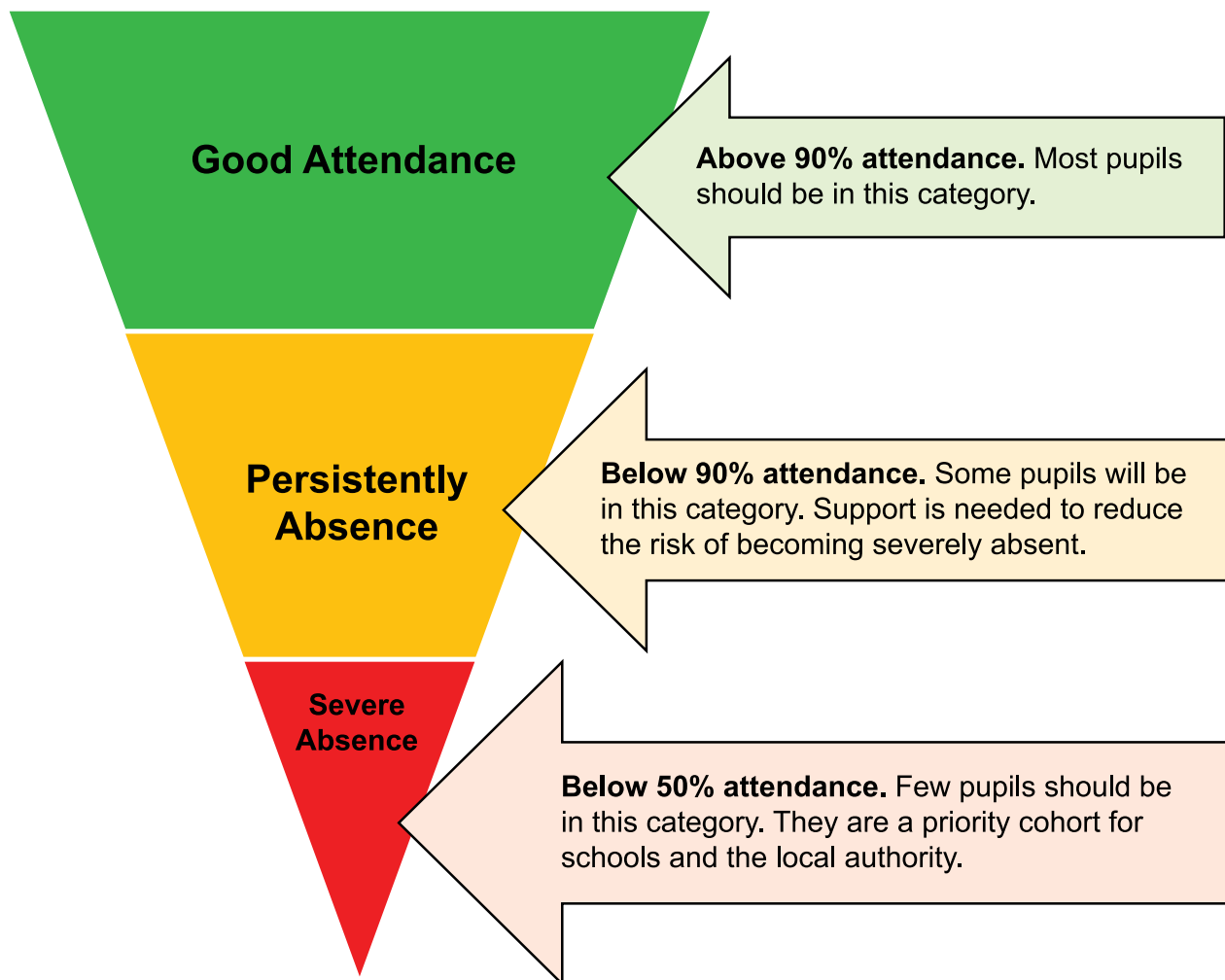


Figure 3. Attendance percentages and related support required (by Lee Kennedy KPAS, 2024)



Why Schools are important for Children with a Social Worker



Attendance and safeguarding are inextricably linked. School should be a protective factor for children. Whatever negative experiences they are having at home or in the community - school should be their constant, safe space.

When pupils are not in school, schools are unable to carry out their safeguarding duties or provide the learning or additional support that the pupil may require.

Schools offer an environment for children and young people to learn. This is not restricted to academic skills alone, encompassing key life skills for future work, family, and community living.

Yes, qualifications are important, but understanding the barriers to learning and how to ensure that each student is ready to learn is a key skill all teachers need. By investing time and effort into ensuring the students feel safe, wanted and part of the school community will no doubt pay dividends in terms of their academic progress.

Children and their families supported by Social Services are normally experiencing high degrees of stress and trauma in one form or another. School is often their safe place (although they may not always show or understand this!) and can offer the stability and routine that is often missing in their lives.

Looking at WHY young people need social worker support:

- Over half of the children in need in 2023 across England, had **ABUSE** or **NEGLECT** identified as their primary need at assessment.
- Absent parenting had the largest rise between 2022 and 2023 (an increase of 14%).
- Factors identified at the end of a Child in Need assessment, are additional factors that social workers record as being relevant in a case. The majority of children have more than one factor recorded for each episode of need. Concerns about parent/carer being the victim of domestic abuse and the mental health of the child's parent/carer remained the most common factors in the year to 31 March 2023, with both factors being identified in just under one third of episodes with assessment factors recorded.
- For Child Protection Plans, **NEGLECT** is the most common initial category of abuse in 2023 – almost half of the children. The next most common category is **EMOTIONAL ABUSE**, accounting for over one-third of children.

Government Characteristic of children in need Reporting Year 2023 ([Children in need, Reporting year 2023 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk)) (explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk)



WHY SCHOOLS ARE IMPORTANT FOR CHILDREN WITH A SOCIAL WORKER CONTINUED

If children are in school, they are being safeguarded. If they are not in school then the risks, particularly for children with a social worker, increases. However, it is important to think about the long-term impact of attendance, not just on their academic outcomes. Children and young people, particularly those who are experiencing emotional abuse or neglect who attend school will benefit from the nurturing environment that a school can offer. They can benefit from the routines, the social interaction and begin to see a different way of managing conflict, change and emotions that they may not experience at home. They will begin to build trusted and positive relationships.

Paul Dix talks about the importance of consistency to support behaviour in his book 'When the Adults Change, everything Changes' (Dix, 2017). He talks candidly about supporting children who have suffered trauma, *"Clearly, if you have suffered trauma, neglect or abuse as a child it is likely that an adult caused it, often an adult who the child once trusted implicitly. . . . Is it any wonder that forming new relationships with new adults is something that children in this situation resist with determination?..."* (Dix, 2017, p151)

These children, whose experiences have led them not to trust adults, are less likely to want to attend a school that does not offer a consistent, safe environment with consistent and safe adults.

"When the Adults Change, Everything Changes"
Paul Dix upends the debate on behaviour management in schools and offers effective strategies that serve to end the search for change in children and turn the focus back on adults.

Paul Dix is a behavioural specialist, author, education reformer and advisor. He's work is based around transformational relational behaviour practice which sits neatly within trauma informed practices supporting school belonging.

Safe adults in a safe environment

Being a safe adult in school, means that you are enabling students to learn how to trust adults. When they are not feeling safe; you are able to recognise this, reassure them and redefine the situation. This in turn supports their ability to recognise their own emotions and seek out co-regulation with you, as a safe adult. They are able to take ownership of their behaviour in a safe way and be motivated and positively challenged to meet the high expectations you have for their long term academic and life outcomes. However interesting and important the lesson maybe, if a pupil feels unsafe, they will not be ready to learn.

Being a trauma informed school creates an environment that every child and adult will feel safe in, want to be part of and enjoy experiencing.

Outcomes for children with a Social Worker

In her article, published in the March 2023 SecEd Vulnerable children supplement, Elizabeth Rose looks at why tackling absence for vulnerable students is so important. For more information and to download this supplement, please visit [Vulnerable learners: Attendance & poverty school avoidance Pupil Premium cost of living crisis free school meals Academy 21](#)

“ While there is no single cause for the poor educational outcomes for children with a social worker, experiences of adversity and trauma can create barriers to good outcomes... . Their experiences can affect children’s attendance, learning, behaviour and wellbeing and, if children cannot access support, they may struggle to reach their full potential. Even after a child no longer has a social worker, poor educational outcomes can persist. ”

DfE Promoting the education of children with a social worker. June 2021

WHY SCHOOLS ARE IMPORTANT FOR CHILDREN WITH A SOCIAL WORKER CONTINUED

Children on a child protection plan and in each of the CIN social care groups at 31st March 2023 were half as likely to achieve the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics (combined) at Key Stage 2 compared to the overall population. Children in the key social care groups perform less well than their peers across all Key Stage 4 measures. Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England, Reporting year 2023 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK (explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk)

“ They are around 3 times more likely to be persistently absent from school and between 2 to 4 times more likely to be permanently excluded from school than their peers. This group are also over ten times more likely to attend state-funded alternative provision settings than all other pupils. ”

DfE Promoting the education of children with a social worker. June 2021

Attendance of Kent children with a Social Worker

“ ...Often young people don't know what's going to happen next. When I was at college, I moved lots of times... my focus dropped a bit... I had a lot going on, I was living in a new area I didn't know, it was so unsettling, and college took a back seat. ”

Member of one of Kent's Young People's Councils

Improving attendance for all children is a priority in Kent. But even more so for those being supported by a social worker. Whilst there have been some improvements for all pupils in the last academic year, the opposite is true for children with a social worker:

- Of the pupils with a social worker in Reception Year (Year R) to Year 11 in the academic year 2022-2023¹, 51.9% were persistently absent from school, which is more than twice the rate of the 20.5% for all KCC pupils and 1.9% higher than the previous academic year.

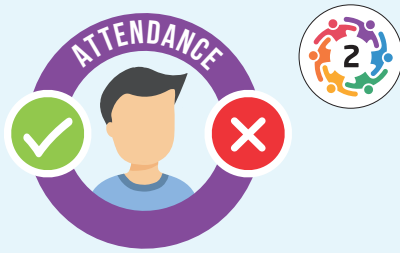
- 10% of pupils with a social worker were severely absent from school, which is over 7 times the rate of 1.5% for all KCC pupils and 2% higher than the previous academic year.
- Looking at exclusions, 11.4% of pupils with a social worker were suspended from school on at least one occasion in the academic year 2022-2023, which is three and a half times the rate of all KCC pupils suspended from school and 2.3% higher than the previous academic year.
- 28.1% of all permanently excluded pupils during the academic year 2021-2022, were pupils with a social worker, this is an increase from 16.3% recorded in 2021-2022.

“ It (behaviour) could be a cry for help, everyone has different ways of communicating. ”

“ My behaviour might be caused by things I am going through. I feel so excluded and different already, don't make it worse for me. ”

By Members of Kent's Young People's Councils

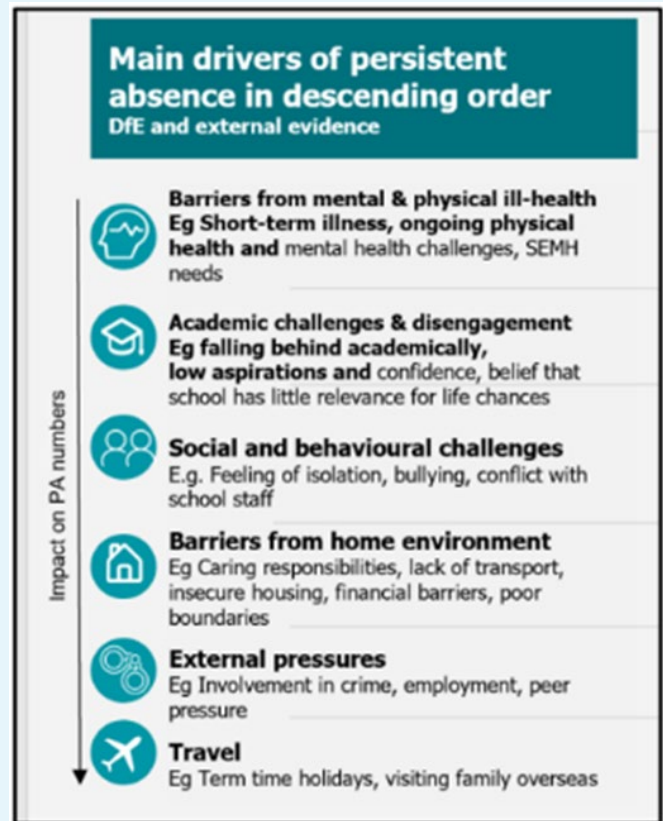
¹Kent Analytics: Analysis of pupils with a social worker. August 2024



Factors which can affect attendance

There are many reasons why young people do not attend school. Although these existed before the pandemic, since then, these issues have become more widespread and are now affecting large proportions of pupils and their families.

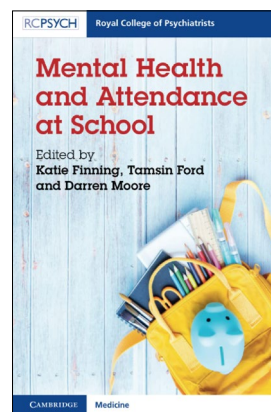
Figure 4. Luke & Palmer (2003). Working together to improve school Attendance. DoE



Mental Health Issues

Mental Health issues across the population have increased dramatically over recent years. As this Guardian article writes, in evidence to MPs investigating school absence, councils said they believed increased anxiety and lack of mental health support were driving a steep rise in pupils missing school, with some children struggling to leave home at all. Children are missing lessons while they await assessment and treatment. At school, meanwhile, cuts to pastoral support mean there is less help available for the many pupils who are struggling but not yet in crisis. [From Covid to poverty: why pupil absence in England is rising | School attendance and absence | The Guardian](#)

The Royal College of Psychiatrists book *Mental Health and Attendance at School* is a practical guide to mental health and attendance at school and draws on the importance of multi-disciplinary teams working together to support young people who are experiencing problems in relation to emotional, behavioural, and neurodevelopmental disorders,



special educational needs, school factors and influences and attendance of vulnerable children. It reflects on how mental health can impact on school attendance (including suspensions, permanent exclusions and part time timetables) and how school attendance can impact on mental health.

Cost of living

The UK is currently living through, what is commonly termed a 'Cost of living crisis'. In the Autumn Term of 2022/2023 overall absence rate for young people eligible for Free School Meals was 11% (compared to 6.3% of non-eligible pupils) and a jump of 3.4% from 2019/2020 (4.3% for non-eligible pupils). Over a third of the pupils (37.4%) eligible for free school meals are now persistently absent from schools, compared to 19.4% of those not eligible.

FACTORS WHICH CAN AFFECT ATTENDANCE CONTINUED

Cost of living - Continued. In the article 'From Covid to poverty' The Guardian also looks at Housing as a barrier to school attendance, citing emergency accommodation after eviction, moving to refuges due to domestic violence often putting long distances between the family and the school, making journeys expensive and unachievable. Children in unsuitable accommodation have nowhere to do their homework, leaving them unable to engage in their studies, or getting into trouble for not completing homework or attending lessons regularly.

[From Covid to poverty: why pupil absence in England is rising | School attendance and absence | The Guardian.](#)

The increase in numbers of pupils (an increase of 73,800 pupils in 2023/2023) and the slight decrease in the number of schools across the country has limited the opportunity for some families to access new schools quickly, as well as additional transport costs adding to the barriers for school attendance.

Illness

The lack of social mixing during the pandemic has resulted in an increase in pupils susceptible to catching short term illnesses such as colds and coughs. Although this is considered authorised absence, it is important to consider the wider implications of this in terms of missed learning over the course of the year, anxiety around catching up with work and how this may impact on mental health, wellbeing and attainment.



Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

The Autumn and Spring Term 2023 Pupil Absence in schools in England Department of Education data Pupil absence in schools in England, Autumn and Spring term 2022/23 – [Explore our statistics and data - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#) shows those children with special educational needs have seen an increase in overall absence

rates (including those with EHCPs and those with SEN support. Schools are under increasing financial pressure, often finding it hard to recruit specialist and support staff to support the increased numbers of children with special educational needs who access mainstream and specialist provisions.



“Young people with Neurodevelopmental Disorders are likely to have many of the risk factors for poor school attendance...”

“School absence in young people with Neurodevelopmental Disorders (NDD) is complex: for example, a physical health or anxiety reason that would affect any young person may be exacerbated by issues related to NDD... Day to Day absence is also common in NDD when school becomes an unpredictable environment, for example at the end of term, cross-curricular days or exam periods... Young people with NDD who show increasing problems with academic performance may be at risk of absence due to refusal.”

(Finning, Ford & Moore, 2022, Mental Health and Attendance at School. Royal College of Psychiatrists, p86)

FACTORS WHICH CAN AFFECT ATTENDANCE CONTINUED

Changes to family routines

Children are seeing the flexibility with their parents' working patterns, particularly as a lasting change since Covid, and this can have an impact on their willingness to attend school daily. With the increase in home working, parents can support their children, if ill or unwilling to go to school,

"With Covid and national lockdowns, there is a theory that families and children lost the routine of going to school. After years of unquestioningly following a regimented timetable of getting up and off to school every morning, some families facing other challenges lost the habit and the capacity... Getting back to those old routines have been hard for some pupils". [From Covid to poverty: why pupil absence in England is rising | School attendance and absence | The Guardian.](#)

Impact of exclusions

Whilst it is acknowledged that schools' systems, and the young people within them, require boundaries and incentives, being excluded from school for a day or more can have detrimental effects on a child's wellbeing. This particularly impacts upon their sense of belonging to school, feeling rejected and feeling that they are not fitting in. We advocate for a move from a 'behavioural policy' to a 'relational policy' which considers the emotional and social interactions needs of children and young people, as well as ensuring consistency, routines and boundaries which offer reassurance and emotional containment for all children.

In cases where exclusions are deemed necessary by the school, it is essential that a return from exclusion meeting is held to provide a restorative space to reflect, learn and consider a plan of support for the young person to welcome them back and support their return to school.

Bullying and Peer Victimization

Bullying and peer victimisation has evolved into more environments since the invention of social media, mobile phones and associated communication.

Whilst there is no legal definition of bullying, the government refers to it as behaviour that is repeated, intended to hurt someone either physically or emotionally, often aimed at certain groups, e.g. because of race, religion, gender or sexual orientation. It takes many forms, including physical assault, teasing, making threats, name calling, cyberbullying.

[Bullying at school: Bullying - a definition - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

“Social media is an issue...it's used to spread rumours and lies, it's so bad other pupils are horrible.”

Member of one of Kent's Young People's Councils

Looking at this in line with the increase in suspensions and reasons for suspensions, it is easy how this plays a role in school attendance.

The latest figures from the government on suspensions indicate that 48% of suspensions were due to persistent disruptive behaviour, followed by verbal abuse or threatening behaviour against an adult (16% of suspensions) and physical assault against a pupil (13% of suspensions). Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England, Academic year 2022/23 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK (explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk)

The reasons behind the behaviour leading to suspension can often overlap with government's definition of behaviour listed above.



FACTORS WHICH CAN AFFECT ATTENDANCE CONTINUED

Bullying and Peer Victimisation- Continued.

From a young person's point of view, whether they are a victim or witness, bullying and peer victimisation creates an unwelcoming environment. An unwelcoming, unpredictable environment is not an environment where children can learn, indeed it becomes an environment that people would rather avoid than become part of.

"Bullying and peer conflict are associated with higher rates of school absence, presumably as a result of feeling unsafe in school and attempting to avoid the bullying behaviour. Bullying can also be harmful to self-esteem and is associated with an increased risk of self-harm, which may contribute to a negative self-reinforcing spiral of increasingly poor emotional health and reduced attendance in school".

(Finning, Ford & Moore, 2022, Mental Health and Attendance at School, p49).

“ There is lots of bullying...teachers can't necessarily prevent it, but they can do more...I know lots of people who no longer go to school because of bullying or threats which is school is not willing to deal with effectively. ”

“ (Bullying) makes you feel very vulnerable, you've always got your guard up, always on the look out... Bullying and other young people being unkind...not feeling like you fit in is a big issue. ”

By Members of Kent's Young People's Councils

Emotional Based School Avoidance (EBSA)

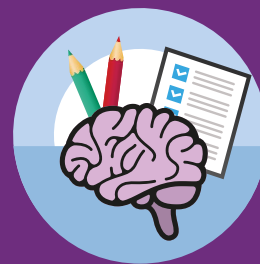
'Emotionally-based School Avoidance' (EBSA) is a term referring to reduced or non-attendance at school by a child or young person due to their emotional needs. Rather than the term 'school refusal', the term EBSA recognises that this avoidance has its root in emotional, mental health or wellbeing issues. EBSA should not be thought of as a deliberate act of defiance, but instead as a complex issue inextricably linked with mental health and wellbeing." (see Anna Freud Centre link further information: [addressing-emotionally-based-school-avoidance-rebrand.pdf](https://www.annafreud.org/addressing-emotionally-based-school-avoidance-rebrand.pdf) (annafreud.org)).

Whilst it is recognised that some of the young people we work with in the Virtual School may be vulnerable to/experiencing EBSA, this document aims to think more broadly and preventatively about school belonging and connectedness. However, if EBSA is a need, then there is a plethora of resources and information available to support young people who may be experiencing with EBSA. Please contact your Virtual School contact or attendance team for information on the recommended training and resources available.

Kent support for those experiencing EBSA

- Kent Educational Psychology Service (for EBSA support, including school and parent training, and intervention work with young people): [Emotionally Based School Avoidance \(EBSA\) - KELSI](#)
- Kent Resilience Hub (wellbeing, resilience, including anxiety): [Kent Resilience Hub - Kent Resilience Hub](#)
- Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND): [Special educational needs and disabilities \(SEND\) - Kent County Council](#)
- Minded (Resources to support young people with their mental health): www.minded.org.uk
- Autism Education Trust (AET) (Autism support, advice, training, including related to Autism and anxiety): www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk
- Kent Educational Psychology Service – anxiety webinar for parents/carers: Anxiety Webinar - Parents and Carers - [YouTube](#)
- Kent Educational Psychology Service – anxiety webinar for school staff: Anxiety Webinar - School Staff - [YouTube](#)

Psychological understanding: the importance of relational approaches to support school belonging



"I have massive anxiety about school. It's quite intimidating and there's too much pressure. We have constant assemblies about how we have to be, how well we are expected to do, how we have to get the best grades...but we don't get any help doing it!"



"They push you to be perfect, it's so stressful!"

Members of one of Kent's Young People's Councils

Psychological understanding regarding the importance of relational approaches to promote a sense of school belonging underpins this document and builds towards the practical 'Relational Approaches Audit' (see Toolkit 1). Central relational related theories are outlined below by means of background understanding to promoting school belonging.

As Rebecca Brooks (2019) writes about in her book 'The Trauma and Attachment Aware Classroom' relationships are key:

"Paying attention to promoting positive and nurturing relationships in school does not detract from academic achievement; it actually supports and encourages it. Regardless of their background, children with higher levels of emotional and social wellbeing achieve better academically and are more engaged in school." (Brooks, 2019, p42)

The importance of relationships to support behaviour is also strongly prioritised by Paul Dix,

"The idea that behaviour management is simply about learning a set of techniques that emerge from a teacher's 'toolkit' is a dangerous one. Outstanding

management of behaviour and relationships is simply not skills led. Neither is it imported with 'magic' behaviour systems, bought with data tracking software or instantly achieved by calling a school an academy. In behaviour management, culture eats strategy for breakfast. Getting the culture right is pivotal. With the right culture the strategies that are used become less important. This culture is set by the way that the adults behave'. (Dix, 2017, p2).

"If I'm going through a tough time be understanding and give me a week's grace for example. If I'm really worried about something, I can do anything! Some teachers seem to think I should suck it up and deal with it or that it's excuses...they should show they understand AND want you to get good grades."

Member of one of Kent's Young People's Councils

PSYCHOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING: THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONAL APPROACHES TO SUPPORT SCHOOL BELONGING CONTINUED

Relational approaches

“ I am a massive advocate for relational-based approaches, as I feel they work for all rather than behaviourist approaches that only work for some. ”

Tony Doran, Headteacher, Virtual School Kent

This approach views interactions through relationships as being vital to the learning and development of children. This includes learning to feel safe, connected to others, belonging and learning about relationships with others. Relational approaches seek to understand what is communicated in behaviour through understanding the psychological, emotional and relationship factors impacting on an individual (and so do not take a behaviourist approach).

“ Relational approaches to learning and understanding behaviour genuinely benefit everyone in education settings – children, young people and staff. ”

ARC The Attachment Research Community, Members Welcome Pack Page 9

The Children and Young People's Mental Health Taskforce (September 2014) produced the 'Future in Mind – promoting, protecting and improving our children and young people's mental health and well-being', which was then published in March 2015. This recognises that attachment relationships affect children's capacity to succeed in school. It emphasises that relationships and a sense of

belonging, are key to good mental health for all, but are essential for children who have experienced multiple relational losses and trauma.

Relational approaches build on a number of renowned psychological theories which consider the impact and repairing opportunities relationships can offer. For the purpose of this document, underpinning relational-based psychological theories are summarised in figure 5.

The essence of relational approaches is to understand behaviours compassionately and as a response to relationships. In order to further develop understanding of positive relationships, these relationships need to be re-experienced positively and it is therefore the responsibility of adults to provide positive, attuned and containing relationships for children and young people affected by challenging relationship experiences.

“ If the teacher gets all riled up, the child's going to get cross back. ”

“ When they get really harsh, I feel scared to go back into class, it puts you off lessons. ”

Member of one of Kent's Children in Care Councils



PSYCHOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING: THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONAL APPROACHES TO SUPPORT SCHOOL BELONGING CONTINUED



Figure 5. Relational approaches umbrella: Weathering and thriving in the storm

PSYCHOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING: THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONAL APPROACHES TO SUPPORT SCHOOL BELONGING CONTINUED

Adult-adult relationships

Relational approaches start with our core beliefs about how we see and interact with others. This includes positive and attuned interactions with the adults, including the families and carers we work with. Through our interactions we communicate our beliefs about a person and interactions in themselves can be a positive 'intervention', which provides support and containment in order to meet someone where they are and work collaboratively and non-judgementally together.

“ We have no idea what the parent is going through so to sit them down on occasions and just making the cup of tea is something that could give them reassurance and support they are needing. ”

Mr Chris Marston, Head of School, Monkton C of E Primary School

School belonging

“School belonging, at both a school and university level, has been well documented as a predictor of academic and psychosocial success.” (Slatern et al, 2016, p1).

ImpactEd Evaluation report (2024), based on drivers of pupil absence from over 30,000 young people in England, found that a sense of school belonging is a key driver of attendance across all context. The research concludes, “This would seem to indicate that the barrier is not awareness of sanctions as much as more fundamental questions about pupils feeling part of their school”.

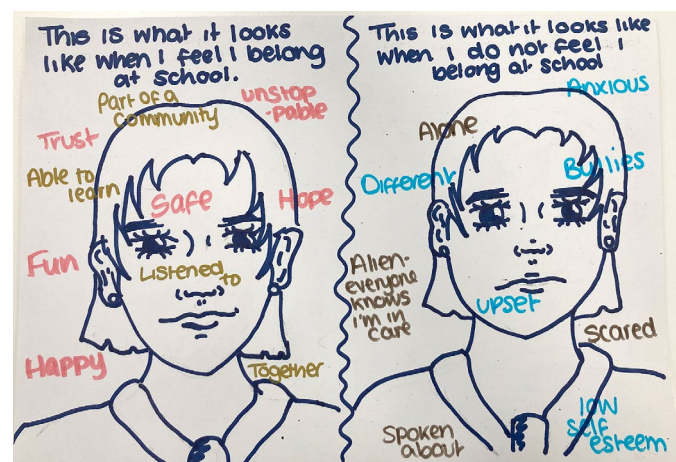
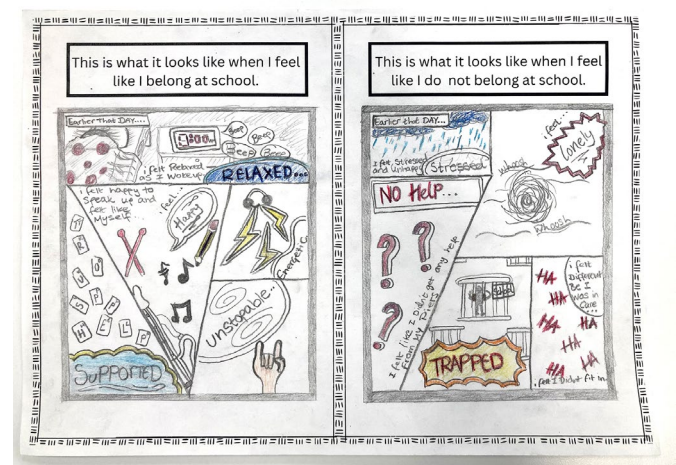
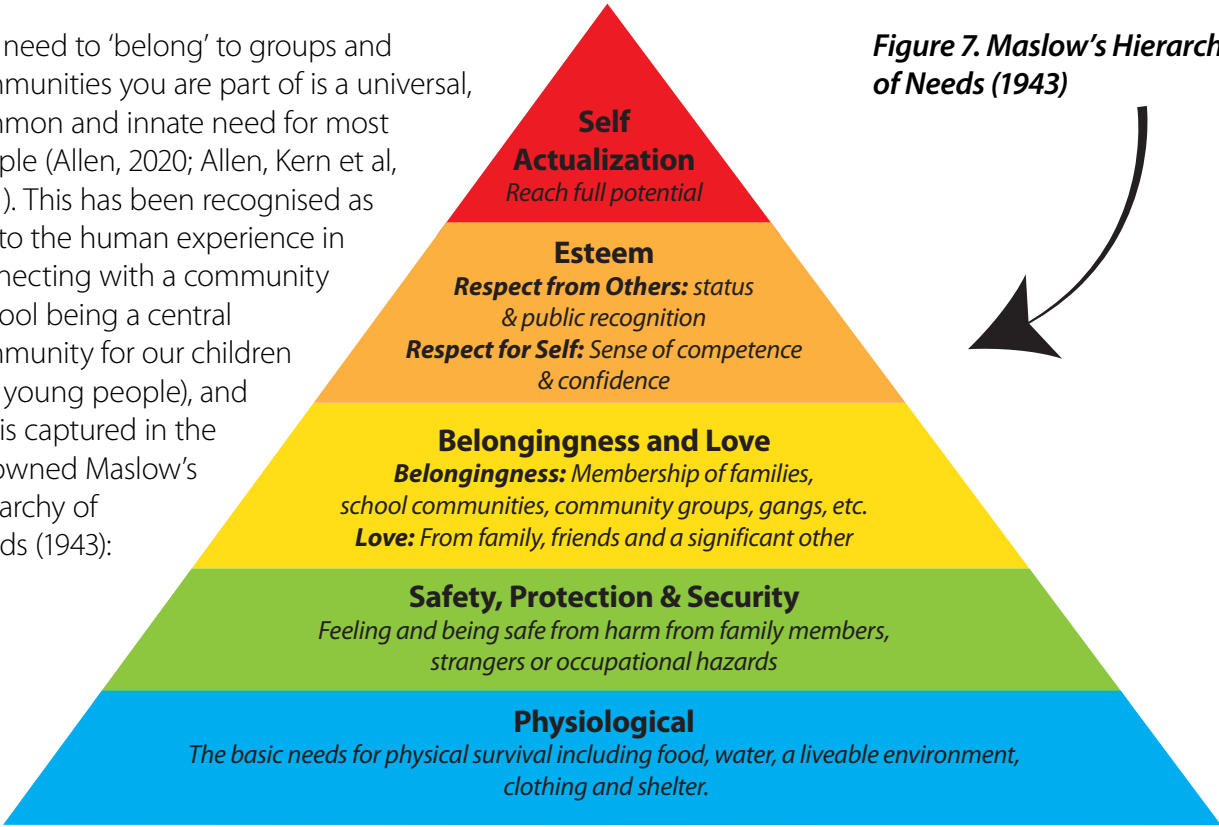


Figure 6. Members of one of Kent's Young People's Councils shared their views on school belonging

PSYCHOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING: THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONAL APPROACHES TO SUPPORT SCHOOL BELONGING CONTINUED

School belonging - continued

The need to ‘belong’ to groups and communities you are part of is a universal, common and innate need for most people (Allen, 2020; Allen, Kern et al, 2021). This has been recognised as key to the human experience in connecting with a community (school being a central community for our children and young people), and this is captured in the renowned Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1943):



There are varying definitions of ‘belonging’ and ‘school belonging’ in literature and research. The most frequently used, and the one accepted here in this document, is ‘[school belonging is] the extent to which students feel personally accepted, included and supported by others in the school environment’ (Goodenow and Grady, 1993, p60). Four core areas of school belonging are used in this document to promote school belonging using the mnemonic ‘SECC’:

Table 1. SECC – psychological theory to understand school belonging

Psychological Theory		Description
S	Social Identity (Tajfel, 1972)	The importance of social groups in shaping one’s identity and connection with groups in their community and society.
E	Engagement (Finn, 1993)	Participation in the community and environment, such as a specific role
C	Community (Osterman, 2000)	Sense of community
C	Communication and interaction (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005; Kennedy, 2011)	Positive communication and attuned interactions from and with others where each person is positively received, including being given space to be heard, and being an active party in the communication.

PSYCHOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING: THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONAL APPROACHES TO SUPPORT SCHOOL BELONGING CONTINUED

School belonging - continued

Whilst there are a number of measures of school belongingness from a child or young person's perspective, we have not found there to be a school audit of school belonging. Therefore, this document has informed the creation of a 'Audit for School Belonging', which can be found in Appendix 1.

Examples of measures of school belongingness from children and young people's CYPs' perspectives

- The School Belongingness Scale (SBS) assesses the school belonging of children and adolescents (Arslan & Duru, 2017).
- School Connectedness Scale (SCS) for adolescents includes questions such as "My teachers give me extra help when I need it" (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011).

Trauma Informed Practices

It is recognised that promoting a sense of nurture and belonging in a school for those who have experienced trauma can support them to feel a sense of connectedness and belonging to a school. Therefore, it is relevant to draw on trauma-informed practices in seeking to promote school connectedness and belonging. In November 2022, the government announced their working definition of trauma-informed practice,

"Trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as harmful or life threatening. While unique to the individual, generally the experience of trauma can cause lasting adverse effects, limiting the ability to function and achieve mental, physical, social, emotional or spiritual wellbeing... Trauma –informed practice is an approach to health and care interventions which is grounded in the understanding that trauma exposure can impact an individual's neurological, biological, psychological and social development".

[Working definition of trauma-informed practice - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/trauma-informed-practice)

Trauma-informed practice has at its core a relational aspect that necessitates the adults supporting the child to embody and communicate care, compassion and kindness in their interactions with children and young people, as communicated by a member of one of Kent's Young People's Councils.



Figure 8. Qualities young people feel teachers should have (embodiment of relational approaches) by Members of Kent's Young People's Councils

PSYCHOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING: THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONAL APPROACHES TO SUPPORT SCHOOL BELONGING CONTINUED

Trauma Informed Practices - continued

A trauma-informed school includes embedding trauma-informed practices through all levels within the school community as illustrated in Figure 9:

To promote a connection to school, one first needs to feel emotionally understood, held and connected. Therefore, it is pertinent to draw on relationship (relational) approaches to working with children and young people who have experienced trauma and/or are feeling a sense of disconnection from school. Some of the key theories and related practical guidance for trauma-informed practice are outlined below, followed by signposting to more detailed information, further reading and training which covers this fundamental area of child development and related school belongingness in more detail beyond the scope of this document.

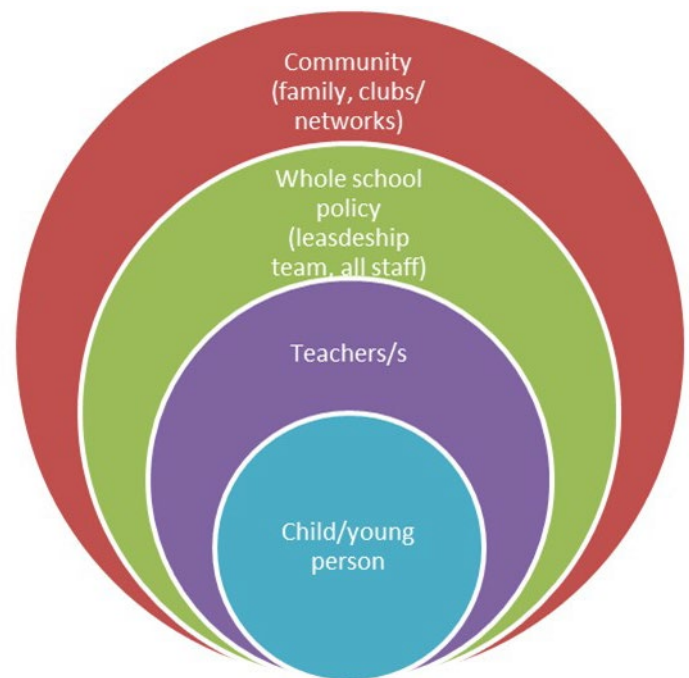


Figure 9. Example of trauma-informed practices embedded in multiple levels in the school Community

Regulate-Relate-Reason

When we are in a state of high anxiety, such as trauma, we enter into the biological state of 'fight-flight-freeze' to protect ourselves or prepare for action. At this point we are no longer able to regulate our own feelings, and some may find it hard to manage their behaviour and interactions. Therefore, this is a fundamental time when adults around the child need to support them to:

“ When I am having a bad time, I can talk to Miss ***. There's a lot of trust and it makes me feel safe knowing she's there and that she knows a lot about me. It's especially important when I have a lot going on at home. ”

Member of one of Kent's Young People's Councils

1. Regulate - This may include giving them time, space, helping with calming strategies (such as 'finger breathing', counting, deep breaths, getting a drink, etc). During this state it is difficult to hear, receive or rationally plan, and therefore the focus needs to be on support to regarding emotional regulation and reduced the stress response.

2. Relate – as part of the 'regulate' phase, children will need to be received by a person who is in-tune ('attuned') and happy to emotionally contain them. This may include sitting with them, repeating back what they are hearing and seeing in a calm way, showing that they have understood what is being communicated (which may include that the situation is difficult for the person, but without judgement)

3. Reason – once the child's stress response (flight-freeze-fight) has reduced, and they are feeling heard, and received, they may be ready for reasoning. This should be from a strengths-based approach, perhaps drawing on times when they have managed in the past, looking for exceptions to more challenging responses, offering guidance if needed.

Final summary

This document sets out the importance of relational approaches to promote children and young people's wellbeing, school attendance and attainment. Theory, research, literature and best practice examples are drawn upon to highlight the importance of relational approaches for young people to feel connected to their school and community. Most importantly the voice of children and young people is drawn upon throughout this

document and we are forever grateful to them for sharing their time and views with us, which so clearly relates to relational approaches. Together we hope this document will guide fellow professionals in the continued prioritisation and promotion of relationships for all children and young people, especially those who require more of what works from us.



It made me feel happier to have people to talk to, it made me feel welcomed and wanted and less out of place.

Member of one of Kent's Young People's Councils

AND FINALLY



Remember there's always something you can do, but you don't have to do everything and 'fix' young people... it might just be one small thing that can help and show someone that you actually care about them and are there for them.



Member of one of Kent's Young People's Councils



Relational Approaches Toolkit

Introduction to the Relational Approaches Toolkit

The following documents and resources are provided for readers to use to support practice as needed; are collectively make-up the 'Relational Approaches Toolkit'. They are underpinned by the psychological theory, research, literature, statistics and best practice outlined in the previous sections of this document.

Toolkit 1 - Relational Approaches Audit



Virtual School Kent & Kent Educational Psychology Service

This Relational Approaches Audit is designed to help schools consider what they are already doing to support school belonging and possible next steps. It is based on the psychological understanding regarding the importance of all children and young people to feel a sense of belonging and connection with the school community.

Guidance notes: Schools are invited to use the audit as a self-assessment via recording their 'RAG' rating as follows:

- Red (R) – No evidence for this area
- Amber (A) – Some evidence of this area
- Green (G) – Strong evidence for this area

Notes on evidence to support the rating and/or to develop the next step can also be recorded at the bottom of each section.



1. FEELING SAFE IN SCHOOL

Whole School values and ethos	RED	AMBER	GREEN
<p>1 The School leadership team (SLT) are committed to promoting school belonging, examples of which from Ma (2018) and O’Keefe (2013) include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is an appreciation that some children will achieve only when the learning environment is safe and supportive, and work hard to create a school environment that is both physically and psychologically safe • SLT ensure time and/or flexibility in the school day for teachers to establish positive relationships with their students • They organize professional development so that staff know the importance of this and how to do it • They encourage teachers to provide pastoral support to students • They ensure that time is allocated to get to know and understand their students and show that this is a valued part of their role in the school 			
2 Commitment to hearing the voice of young people, their families and the adults working in the school			
3 We have shared belief that families and carers are doing the best they can at the time, working in the best interests of the child. We are open and non-judgemental			
4 Open communication from all staff in the school			
5 Commitment to action – when an adult or child raises concerns about safety, these are acted upon (‘You said, we did’)			
6 Clear policies to promote safety – Safeguarding, antibullying, crisis support, online safety, etc			
7 Support for staff – systems are in place to support staff to feel emotionally contained in order to support vulnerable students			
8 Accessed membership (via VSK) to the Attachment Research Community (ARC) and actively incorporate the ARC Audit, Matrix and Pathway as part of the School Development Plan			

Notes: Evidence and/or notes on area we’d like to develop further and here are our ideas

1	
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Whole School practice	RED	AMBER	GREEN
1 Regular opportunities for staff, students and families for give their views on the school's ethos regarding safety- such as a survey, consultation, council, etc			
2 We provide support to parents and carers to feel safe in our school community knowing this will also support the child to feel safe and to know they are all part of our school community			
3 Active use of the ARC Matrix to support development of trauma informed practices and development			
4 Staff training and commitment to promote physical and emotional safety in schools which is identified in the School Development Plan, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safeguarding children • Trauma training • Domestic abuse • Emotional Based School Avoidance • Emotional Coaching 			
5 'You said. We did' system is active in school with senior manager oversight			
6 Staff supervision – peer, formal and informal opportunities			
7 Nurture principles and learning are embedded across the school and not isolated within the Nurture Provision or for individual pupils			

Notes: Evidence and/or notes on area we'd like to develop further and here are our ideas

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Personalised support for individual children and young people	RED	AMBER	GREEN
1 There are a variety of resources available for capturing the young person's voice around school belonging and attendance			
2 Reasonable adjustments are made to promote individual children and young people's physical and emotional safety in line with the Kent Mainstream Core Standards, This is planned and reviewed regularly (termly – every 6-weeks)			
3 Refer to Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) resources and support from KCC services			
4 Familiar with appropriate resources and community based local support to address and promote positive relationships			

Notes: Evidence and/or notes on area we'd like to develop further and here are our ideas

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Additional notes:

2. PERSONALISED APPROACH

Whole School values and ethos	RED	AMBER	GREEN
1 All children have access to a key person (their teacher, tutor, pastoral staff, etc)			
2 There is a whole-school approach or assessment for wellbeing			

Notes: Evidence and/or notes on area we'd like to develop further and here are our ideas

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Whole School practice	RED	AMBER	GREEN
1 There is a robust system in place to monitor all vulnerable cohorts – including those who have had a social worker in the past 6 years and children living in kinship families			
2 Do you know the children who struggle to get into school in the morning?			
3 We are clear on the 'early warnings' for those who may begin to show attendance difficulties and there is a clear support plan in place			
4 Staff 'who need to know' are aware of children's individual needs and we adapt our approach accordingly. This includes all staff (teaching and on-teaching across the school)			
5 Differentiation of the curriculum for taking account of the child's emotional needs, as well as learning needs. Consider the topic content through a trauma-informed lens			
6 A network of supportive adults is identified around the child (including key school staff, community professionals and family/carer network)			

Notes: Evidence and/or notes on area we'd like to develop further and here are our ideas

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Personalised support for individual children and young people	RED	AMBER	GREEN
1 We monitor the wellbeing of ALL children in our school and have a system for sharing what works and concerns			
2 ALL children and young people who need support with their wellbeing and sense of connectedness to school are known AND a personalised plan is put in place			

Notes: Evidence and/or notes on area we'd like to develop further and here are our ideas

1

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Additional notes:

3. Positive Relationships and Interactions

Whole School values and ethos	RED	AMBER	GREEN
1 All staff in the school are committed to 'relationships first' (connection before correction)			
2 We are connected to our community			
3 We understand the wider community in which our school is based, including issues related to socio demography, culture, religion, diversity and we promote anti-discriminatory practice.			

Notes: Evidence and/or notes on area we'd like to develop further and here are our ideas

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Whole School practice	RED	AMBER	GREEN
1 We greet staff and children positively when we see one another			
2 We engage in problem-free talk to connect with one another?			
3 We celebrate school and outside of school achievements			
4 We describe behaviour without labels			
5 We provide opportunity for all children to have a role in our school community			
6 The importance of the teacher-student relationship is understood and underpins all work with children in the school, such as the following examples from Pedlar (2018): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • prioritise high-quality teacher-student relationships • Create a supportive and caring learning environment • Offer emotional support to students • Be sensitive to students' needs and emotions • Show interest in students • Try to understand students' point of view • Be respectful and provide fair treatment • Foster positive peer relationships and mutual respect among classmates to establish a sense of community • Engage in positive classroom management 			

Notes: Evidence and/or notes on area we'd like to develop further and here are our ideas

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2	

Notes: Evidence and/or notes on area we'd like to develop further and here are our ideas

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Personalised support for individual children and young people	RED	AMBER	GREEN
1 We understand children developmentally and within a context in which they are/have grown-up. They have personalised plans when needed which reflect this			
2 We are culturally responsive to the individual child's needs			
3 Personalised plans include opportunities for contributing to the school community, such as a class responsibility, helping the management teams, an office-based duty, helping other children, etc			
4 We seek opportunities to think about individual children and in particular what works well when interacting with them			
5 We have personalised way to communicate to children that they are kept in mind when we are not with them, such as longer school holidays, when a member of staff is away for the day or longer, etc.			
6 Personalised plans including social interaction with peers – such as buddy systems, peer support, supporting younger children, social skills and friendship groups, etc			

Notes: Evidence and/or notes on area we'd like to develop further and here are our ideas

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Toolkit 2: Tips to increase attendance through relational approaches



The framework developed by Dr. Pooky Knightsmith (May 2023 in the Headteacher Update [Ten ideas for attendance: What does a safe school look like? vulnerable learners emotionally based school avoidance](#) Dr Pooky Knightsmith has been used as a basis for this section of the guidance. Dr. Knightsmith's article is also part of the March 2023 Vulnerable Learners supplication published by SecEd. The free 18-page download focusses on boosting attendance for vulnerable students as well as tackling the impact of poverty and other issues. We would recommend this to all schools.

Knowing your relationships:

Can you identify 'early warnings' for attendance difficulties? For example:

- Do you know the children who struggle to get into school in the morning? Do they struggle more on a Monday morning, or at the beginning of a term?
- Are all early morning staff members (Breakfast club, office staff, crossing patrols etc, trauma informed and know the key relational approaches in line with your school ethos/priorities? What do they notice about all the children they support?
- Do all staff 'positively notice' children and their families?
- Whose parents have to overly encourage them into school or through the classroom door?

A positive start

The first interactions of the day can make such a difference. It is everyone's responsibility to positively welcome pupils and their families. From the moment children walk through the gates and the classroom, every interaction counts.

For some young people, the fact that they have got that far is a huge achievement, so welcome them

with open arms! No matter what happened the day before, or even that morning—they are part of your community and acknowledge that you are glad they are with you.

By showing that unconditional positive regard for all students (and parents) as they arrive will set the day off on a positive note. This is especially true for those who are late or have attendance issues as you will reduce their anxiety and reinforce the message that they are welcome.

Never underestimate the importance of the reception staff, caretaker, road crossing patrol staff. Remember, smiling is contagious!

If you have pupils who are clearly struggling to enter the school site, do all staff know how best to support them? Do they understand the need for the pupil to be in school, however late they may turn up? Do they know how to assist a parent who may be struggling to coregulate with their child?

Does your school access the National School Breakfast Programme? Having a nurturing space in which you promote attendance, increase relational approaches and create a positive start to the day can really create a readiness to learn. Headteacher Daniel Andrews said "Having the bagels in the morning at Greenfields has been a huge success. We have linked this with reading to have 'bagel and a book' sessions which the children have really enjoyed. The parents have given positive feedback and think the initiative is an excellent idea.. "Bagel and a book is here to stay!". Forest Academy's Principal said "Each day we have had more students attend than the day before, and the reception from the parents and the school community has been very positive..."

[We speak to schools on the National School Breakfast Programme to find out their experience so far - Family Action \(family-action.org.uk\)](#)

TOOLKIT 2: TIPS TO INCREASE ATTENDANCE THROUGH RELATIONAL APPROACHES CONTINUED

Pick your battles, keep smiling!

See the positives in the situation, rather than the negatives. A young person has arrived at school—your priority is to support attendance not what is in your behaviour policy. What is more important - that they are at school, or that they are late, not done their homework or have forgotten their school tie?

Attendance is everybody's responsibility. All teaching and non-teaching staff should consider attendance above other priorities. By taking a relational approach, students will feel positive about having made it into school or class.

“Ask how are you? Say good morning with a nice smile... it makes you feel more comfortable.”

Member of one of Kent's Young People's Councils

What is the welcome like as a young person or parent enters the school? Often, the first interaction with school can be with the Office or Reception staff. If a parent is late getting their child to school and knows that the reception staff will still smile, be welcoming and happy to see their child; there is less of a barrier and more motivation to get their child to school than if they are met with stern faces or unwelcoming comments about being late.

Are there opportunities to support the parents after the child has got into the classroom? Knowing that Office Staff will calm parents down after a difficult morning getting their child to school can motivate parents to try again the next day.

Plan for success

If you are aware that a young person has attendance issues, have you considered:

- Key Person check-ins, at the beginning and end of the day. Work with the young person as to how they would like this to look. Those who have suffered trauma can often have executive functioning difficulties, so by supporting them with their equipment, timetable for the day, homework etc can help to support them. Have a spare set of things in case they have forgotten to bring anything in.
- Ensure that the staff members have a consistent positive message for the young people. “Hi John, nice to see you. When would you like me to speak to you about anything from yesterday's learning...” will have a greater impact than “John, see me at breaktime about the work you missed yesterday”.
- Use the resources available through the KCC EBSA pathway. Work with the individual and give them control on what they feel they can achieve.

“If the teacher gets all riled up, the child's going to get cross back.”

Member of one of Kent's Young People's Councils



TOOLKIT 2: TIPS TO INCREASE ATTENDANCE THROUGH RELATIONAL APPROACHES CONTINUED

The power of routine



Routines enable us to feel safe. They are predictable.

School days are predictable (when home life often isn't), whatever has happened the day before or even that morning at home—the routine of school will remain the same. The staff will always welcome students in the same, friendly and nurturing way. This will ensure that the students feel safe, wanted and part of your community. The human desire to feel safe will enable them to come into a safe environment and be ready to learn.

Speak to the students, to find out what a good routine for their arrival might look like to them. What makes them feel safe/ready to learn? If there has been a day or session absence, how can you make them know that you are there to help them to catch up, that you have high aspirations for them and that you are pleased that they have come back to school—acknowledging that at times, this may be hard for them.

Don't create stress

Being randomly picked on to speak up in front of the class can be really daunting for some children. Worrying that this may happen can stop children truly listening and learning or even trigger their fight/flight response. This in turn can increase the likelihood of not attending school, and the anxiety around being asked to speak in the class after missing a lesson can further exacerbate the situation.

By working with the students, identify ways to engage with the lesson and their learning, in a way that they feel comfortable with.

Praise

Whilst many children love being praised, for others they can find praise very hard to manage. For some young people praise is just something they are not used to, or they feel ashamed of. Think of other ways to show that you have noticed their effort and hard work:

- Praise the effort and work, not the individual quietly, rather than in front of peers/the whole class.
- Smile—to let them know that you have noticed their work and effort.
- Write the praise down on a note, or within their textbooks, being mindful if this praise should be centred around them, their effort or work etc.

Togetherness

As a trusted adult and member of your community, it is your duty to show children that it is OK to make mistakes and in your school community everyone supports each other:

- Learn together—admit when you are not sure of something, that you have learnt something new and how you asked for help or problem-solved.
- If you are late into class, say sorry and explain why you were late. Tell them why it is important that you are here and that their presence/smiling faces have reassured you that being here is important!
- When you make a mistake—own it! Share with the students and reinforce to them that you will learn from this.
- Praise those who have unsuccessful first attempts rather than those who have successful outcomes. Share the importance of perseverance, determination, and resilience.

“ It made me happier to have people to talk to, it made me feel welcomed and wanted and less out of place. ”

Member of one of Kent's Young People's Councils

TOOLKIT 2: TIPS TO INCREASE ATTENDANCE THROUGH RELATIONAL APPROACHES CONTINUED

Beyond the classroom

Unstructured times can be particularly challenging for students, particularly those with sensory issues, neurodiverse or trauma experienced young people. Small changes can make a big difference to attendance for the whole school day, behaviour and readiness to learn.

DOs...

Support the young people to transition to and from unstructured times according to their sensory needs. Include whole class sensory activities to ensure readiness for learning.

Provide safe areas/clubs/activities supported by adults who can help to develop a sense of belonging and the reassurance of clear rules of engagement.

Ensure the young person has access to their Key Person should they need them for support.

Provide a quiet area for those who find noise overwhelming, have social anxiety or who have eating difficulties. The area should have clear rules and be open to anyone (who are willing to accept the rules).

DON'Ts...

Don't use the time as a sanction opportunity (ie. Lunch time detentions).

Don't take lunch or breaktime away and use the time for the student to catch up missed learning.

Don't stop a child from going out into the play area if they haven't finished their food. Agree with parents/carers or the young person what is an acceptable amount of food/time.



I know where to find her...she has a room with comfy chairs and lets me come to her about anything around my lessons if I need it. She always prioritises me and makes me feel safe...she gives me security.



Member of one of Kent's Young People's Councils

Positive Noticing

Always end each day (and for some young people, this may need to be broken down further to every session or lesson). What is the one thing that they are proud of? What is the one thing you noticed that they were proud of? Often these will be very different, so by arming them with two positives to go home with will support them with their decision to return tomorrow or not.

Work with parents/carers and the young person to determine how best this can be shared between school and home (e.g. email, phone call, the child telling their parents). So often, parents/carers' only communication with school is when something negative has happened. This can cause further negativity at home and can lead to school avoidance by the child. Parents/carers will have conflicting feelings about school –knowing their child needs to be in school but feeling that it will be a negative experience for their child can hamper attempts to improve school attendance.

Sharing positives can help develop relationships with parents and carers, even the 'hard to reach' ones who have their own lived negative experiences of school life.

Always make sure that any negatives have been dealt with and that everyone has the same expectations that tomorrow will be a good day. "Start a fresh".

Toolkit 3: Professional Curiosity and other skills to support attendance planning



Professional Curiosity is a term used to describe the skill to explore and understand what is happening, rather than making assumptions or accepting things at face value. It is a key skill for safeguarding young people and their families.

By thinking outside the box and beyond the data, a school can begin to understand the complexities around attendance issues for individuals and their families.

Early Intervention

Whilst it is important to concentrate on supporting those pupils who are severely absent (i.e. who have missed more than 50% of school days) from school, it is just as important to prevent other pupils increasing their absenteeism. By proactively monitoring the wellbeing and engagement of pupils, it is easier and quicker to identify potential issues impacting on future attendance and therefore attainment and progress of the pupils.

“Early intervention of school attendance problems, both broadly and in the context of emotional disorder, has been identified as a key step to enable timely intervention and to prevent the problem from escalating... . In terms of school absence, waiting until the problem is severe means that the pattern of non-attendance is more ingrained, more difficult to treat and may require a level of support far greater than would be required if identified at an early stage...”

...Schools that adopt a whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing are likely to benefit the emotional health of all pupils, while also encouraging regular attendance and engagement with school. Creating a positive school culture and ensuring that school is a safe and affirming place for young people to be will have the potential to positively influence emotional health at a whole-school level, as well as encouraging pupils’ readiness to learn and engage

with school. Schools that provide opportunities for positive peer relationships, and which cultivate a sense of belonging and connectedness for all pupils and staff, will positively influence pupils’ mental health and wellbeing and will help to ensure that school is a positive and rewarding environment.”

(Royal College of Psychiatrists [2022].

Mental Health and Attendance at School, p49-50)

Senior leaders who acknowledge that attendance is everyone’s responsibility, will regularly bring together the expertise and knowledge of school staff, enabling effective facilitation of the identification and support plans for individuals and groups of pupils.

All these key members of a school staff have different knowledge and understanding of the impact on attendance and by working together will be able to identify the most effective support plan for those with attendance issues:

- Designated Safeguarding Leads
- Family Liaison Officers
- Designated Teachers
- Designated Mental Health Leads
- SENCos
- Pastoral Leads
- Teachers and Heads of Year
- Office and Reception Staff

TOOLKIT 3 - PROFESSIONAL CURIOSITY AND OTHER SKILLS TO SUPPORT ATTENDANCE PLANNING CONTINUED

Look for patterns

By being professionally curious and ensuring the young person's voice is central to this, schools can begin to have a fuller understanding of any patterns of attendance that may be emerging. Using a solution focused approach within this can create positive next steps, for example:

- Rather than assuming that a student missing the same subject lessons could be due to their dislike of the subject, look at the lessons that they do 'like' – is it because of the subject or perhaps the relationship they have with the teacher, where they sit in the classroom, the other pupils within those lessons etc. What best practice can be shared amongst the staff that support this individual? Can teachers observe each other to identify similarities and differences in teaching styles?
- Rather than assuming that a student is absent from morning sessions because of a lack of routine at home or perhaps removes themselves from afternoon sessions – look beyond the behaviour to understand what it is communicating. Does this individual need more time to regulate their emotions at certain times of the day, what are the individual's sensory needs and how can the school proactively support these during a school day?
- Does the child know that the school/class teacher still wants them to be part of a lesson if they have not had a chance to do their homework, or if they did not have a successful lesson the day before? How can the school ensure that the student is not feeling rejected?
- What have the school office or reception staff noticed about the child's anxiety/wellbeing if they are regularly late for school? How does their behaviour change if they are late in, how do they separate from their parents? How do parents react to this? What does this tell us in terms of potential school absence?

Young Person's Voice

The young person's voice is key to the success of any support plan to increase attendance and engagement. By giving them control, they can determine what next steps feel achievable to them. This can be achieved, without impacting on the high aspirations you have for the young person if done in a solution focused, nurturing way.

By allowing them to be heard, ensures that they are feeling valued. If children feel valued, they are more likely to respond in a positive way. They are more likely to seek out environments where they feel valued, which will help to increase attendance.

Solution Focused Approaches

Young people who have suffered trauma in their lives can often display challenging behaviour or withdraw themselves from situations or environments that make them feel unsafe. This can impact on school absence, either through behaviour resulting in suspensions or permanent exclusions; or through Emotional Based School Avoidance, non-engagement with lessons or refusing to attend etc.

Trauma informed practice tells us, this is because young people are communicating something, that perhaps a more resilient young person would be able to seek support for.

Unfortunately, those with adverse childhood experiences can often display behaviours that are not acceptable within the constraints of a school's behaviour or attendance policy; or they may not feel safe or confident enough to seek help either at home or school which can lead to additional mental health issues, withdrawal or non-engagement with learning.

By using a solution focused approach with the pupil and their family the discussions become strength based, rather than problem based. Changing everyone's mindset builds a common direction, builds relationships and creates a clear and positive context for change.

Toolkit 4: Proactive Partnership Working



Where a family or young person is being supported by a social worker or early help worker, schools should ensure that these professionals, (as well as any other professionals supporting the child) are part of any planning around attendance and that support plans are integrated within any statutory meetings. Attendance is everybody's responsibility, and a multi-agency approach is key to its success. Consider:

- Sharing and supporting each other with EBSA (Emotional Based School Avoidance/ Anxiety Based School Avoidance) resources that are recommended and used throughout KCC.
- Contacting Kent Virtual School for further advice on trauma informed practices and training that may support the young people within your school.
- Ensuring that the young person's voice is central to any planning around attendance. Allow them to decide on their next steps and goals within a given time frame – what is it that they feel they can achieve? However small a step this is, follow their lead and allow them to review their own achievements. Ensure that the same message is being communicated at home with the parents and social worker and that the young person knows that the network of adults are working together to support them back in school in a timely manner.

- Ensuring that there is a consistent message given by parents, social workers and school around the expectations and reasons why young people need to be in school – that everyone has high aspirations for the young person and would like them to reach their full potential.
- Develop support plans to increase attendance which are robust with all parties agreeing next steps, as well as individual responsibilities and success criteria. It is everybody's dream that a young person achieves 100% attendance, but if they are currently only on 20% attendance, what is the realistic attendance rate going to be by next term or statutory meeting? What support is going to be in place to achieve this? Does everyone agree to be responsible in ensuring that this outcome is achieved?
- Breakthrough meetings are an excellent, solution focused way to bring together plans which can be reviewed or used as evidence for next steps. Please see the KCC KPAS School Resource page [Resources for Schools - KELS](#) for more information.



TOOLKIT 4 - PROACTIVE PARTNERSHIP WORKING CONTINUED


Keeping in contact

Keeping in contact with the young person, their social worker and family is not only important for safeguarding reasons, but also to reinforce the young person's belonging. Reminding the young person that the school community, it's teachers and staff would like them in school – not because they need to be in school, but because the school wants them to be there as an individual; is a more nurturing approach than simply stating that they must be in school.

Discuss with the family, young person and social worker how best to do this. A daily phone call or text to the family and young person from their trusted adult in school or a combined approach involving the social worker texting the young person as well?

Remember to 'positively notice' – for example, although they have not made it into school that day, they have got out of bed, wanted to come to school, packed their bag etc. By noticing their efforts, however successful, will no doubt encourage their motivation the following day.

The social worker may have a different understanding of any contextual safeguarding within the community and knowing when a young person is not in school can help them to understand patterns emerging with other young people or associates within the community not related to your school. Although this is shared within safeguarding protocols, having real time information can be vital within the social work team in the district or area. Discuss with the social worker the best method of keeping them up to date.

A woman with dark curly hair and purple-rimmed glasses is shown from the chest up, wearing a pink sweater. She is holding a black smartphone to her ear with her right hand and appears to be in a conversation. The background is slightly blurred, showing what might be a gym or a modern office space with large windows.

Daily contact with the family and young person can reinforce a young person's belonging...

TOOLKIT 4 - PROACTIVE PARTNERSHIP WORKING CONTINUED

Key Questions to support Proactive Partnership Working

Overview Questions:

- What is the young person's current attendance and what does this mean in terms of missed learning (rather than just a percentage)? Can the school provide information on how many English/Maths lessons have been missed as this could support the parents or social worker in discussions around future career aspirations for the young person?
- What patterns are there in attendance and why?
- When the child is in school, are they able to fully engage with their learning? Is there a risk of suspensions? What is their wellbeing like when they are in school?
- Is the child's voice central to all decisions and plans to increase attendance?

Support Network Questions:

- How good is the relationship between school and parents and how is this impacting on support plans to increase attendance?
- Who is the support network for the child and their family? As well as professionals involved in supporting the family, what social connections do the family or young person have that may be able to help? These can include friends, family, youth workers, religious connections etc.
- What are the Push/Pull factors for attending school – how can others support the family with these?
- What is the child and their family's relationship with education? How is this impacting attendance and how can professionals and others support with changing this perception?
- If the child and family have a Social Worker or Early Help Worker, have they set them up with a KCC's Virtual Learning Platform 'my-Ed' account for the child and how are they supporting the child and family to engage with this? Can the school support with signposting areas of the curriculum or wellbeing sections that may boost the child's learning, engagement and self-esteem?
- How can others help the school to gain the pupil's voice in planning support around attendance? How can they be part of any EBSA support plan that the school are planning on putting in place?

School based questions:

- Is the child on track for age related expectations? If not, are they eligible for pupil premium funding, additional support and interventions and how effective are these? What is the support plan to ensure that they make expected progress?
- Are there any SEN or SEMH needs that the school feels may be impacting attendance? What support is in place for these needs and how often are they reviewed? (The Graduated Approach).
- What support plans have been in place in the past to increase attendance and what has worked well?
- Who is the young person's key trusted adult within school? How often and when do they have access to this person?
- Is there opportunity for their trusted adult (rather than the attendance officer) to check in with the young person?
- Is there a pastoral support plan in place which is regularly reviewed and how effective is this?
- Are there daily check-ins in the morning/ afternoon to support with transition to and from school, when the young person is in school?
- For older children, what support can be put in place (with home, school and others) around career aspirations and plans for the future? How can the network support the young person to increase attendance to ensure the necessary outcomes for the chosen Post 16 provision or training?

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Young people who couldn't attend these meetings, but wanted to contribute, met with the Virtual School Kent Participation Team individually or in sibling groups both in person and virtually. Three of the team's care experienced apprentices also contributed to the feedback.



Further Information

Kent support services and information

- Virtual School Kent (VSK)
- Contact VSK Advisory Team to request advice [here](#)
- General Enquiries, please email VSK@kent.gov.uk or VSKAdvisoryTeam@kent.gov.uk
- Kent Educational Psychology Service (KEPS) [Kent Educational Psychology Service - KELSI](#)
- Kent PRU, Attendance Service (KPAS) [Kent PRU and Attendance Service \(KPAS\) - KELSI](#)
- Kent KPAS (2023), Working together to Improve School Attendance. School Attendance Handbook. A guide for schools, governing bodies, academy trustees and local authority practitioners in Kent. [Resources for Schools - KELSI](#)
- KELSI (for Kent based guidance, information and training) [Home - KELSI](#)
- Kent SEND Information Hub [Special educational needs and disabilities \(SEND\) - Kent County Council](#)



FURTHER INFORMATION CONTINUED

Further relational approaches and trauma-informed reading and sources of information

Area	Reference	Overview
Relational approaches	Dr Bruce Perry https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3is_3XHKKs	Relational-relate-reason
The Attachment Research Community	Attachment & Trauma Aware approaches in education ARC	The Attachment Research Community (ARC) is a charitable organisation set up in 2017. The ARC's purpose is to support all schools and education settings to be attachment and trauma aware in their practices for the benefit of all of the learning community and particularly the most vulnerable, by bringing together, sharing and celebrating best practices.
Attuned interaction	Association of Video Interaction Guidance (AVIGuk) - AVIGuk Video Interaction Guidance	Importance of attuned interactions, including development in early years, and strengths-based method for promoting positive interactions and connections
Trauma Informed Schools	What is a Trauma Informed School? traumainformedschools.co.uk	Training to empower and enable key staff to be able to respond to mild to moderate mental health problems.
Practical Tips for trauma-informed schools that also build wellbeing	Practical tips for trauma-informed schools that also build wellbeing worthit.org.uk	Article showing the importance of being trauma informed and supporting the wellbeing of pupils and staff.
Nurture UK	Helping every child become able to learn: nurtureuk home	A national charity organisation offering training, resources and support for schools. Nurture is a tried and tested way of relating to children that helps them develop vital social skills, confidence and self-esteem, and become ready to learn.
IThrive	The Thrive Approach to social and emotional wellbeing The Thrive Approach	Thrive offers a trauma-informed, whole school or setting approach to improving the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.
Dr Pooky Knightsmith	KEYNOTE Supporting Children Struggling to Attend School - Dr Pooky Knightsmith	Website, resources and keynote speaker drawing on her own lived experience of Autism, mental health and offering advice on EBSA.

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VSK contact details



Virtual School Kent

General Enquiries

Phone: 03000 412777 or email: VSK@kent.gov.uk

Virtual School Kent Advisory Team (VSKAT)

email: VSKadvisoryteam@kent.gov.uk or complete an [Initial Contact Form](#)

