

Supporting School Attendance: A Role for All Healthcare Practitioners

As healthcare practitioners, including nurses and paediatricians, we care for and support babies, children, and young people across a wide range of healthcare settings. Wherever and for whatever reason we see them, children are living a life much wider than those privileged moments where we provide clinical care for them. Understanding the broader context of a child's life, including their education, is central to holistic, child-centred practice and is what makes our work so special.

As the new school year begins, we take a moment to reflect on our role as healthcare professionals in supporting children's school attendance.

Across the United Kingdom (UK), most children start attending school aged 4, with compulsory school age spanning from 5 to 16, though many children continue in secondary education until age 18.¹ They learn in diverse environments: mainstream schools, specialist settings, and through elective home education.

Since the pandemic, school attendance has taken a serious hit across the UK—and the numbers are more than a little worrying. In [England](#), 18.7%, or approximately 1 in 5 pupils, were persistently absent in the 2024/25 school year.² That's nearly 1.5 million children missing at least one day every fortnight. To put it in perspective, that's close to double the rate we saw before COVID-19. In [Wales](#), 26.9% of pupils were persistently absent. In [Scotland](#), in 2023/24 (the latest year for which statistics have been published), the figure was even higher—31.4% of pupils missed 10% or more of school. And in [Northern Ireland](#), where statistics are published by phase, 19.7% of primary pupils and 32.1% of secondary pupils were persistently absent in 2023/24.

"It doesn't matter what condition we are seeing a child for - school attendance is probably our best outcome measure as it is so vital for their wellbeing and future. I always talk with children about school and encourage them to return to school after their appointment with me. I am excited that the NHS is working closely with the Department of Education to improve school attendance and there are many ways in which we practitioners can collaborate to do this and improve child health and wellbeing at the same time. It's a win-win!"

Prof. Simon Kenny, OBE, consultant paediatric and neonatal surgeon at Alder Hey Children's Hospital and National Clinical Director for Children and Young People, NHSE.

¹ In Northern Ireland, compulsory school age can be dependent on a child's birthdate and whether the start of primary school was deferred. Pupils who turn 16 between 2 July and 31 August (inclusive) cannot leave school until 30 June of the following year.

² A pupil is considered persistently absent from school if they miss 10% or more of possible sessions of school i.e. their attendance is 90% or below.

Evidence shows that regular school attendance has a profound impact on a child's health, education, and future life chances. It's not just about being present—it's about thriving in a supportive environment. As healthcare practitioners, we can help influence this trend. We can be curious, supportive, and informative. Asking about school as part of a holistic assessment—regardless of setting—is one way to do this. Every opportunity to highlight the benefits of regular attendance and share information on available support should be used, always with sensitivity and curiosity.

Many children are absent from school for avoidable reasons, minor illnesses for example. Using resources like [Is my child too ill for school?](#) to help parents and young people to know when it's ok to go to school can be a useful tool. Encouraging children and families to focus on the positive aspects of school—like learning and friendships—can help overcome barriers.

However, regular absence may signal wider challenges. Being curious about what's preventing attendance can help uncover the right support. Some children face complex barriers: they may be young carers, experience emotionally based school avoidance or have health needs requiring additional support. Open, supportive conversations can help identify what's needed.

"Nurses are vital healthcare professionals who regularly interact with school-age children and their families. Nurses in primary care—such as Advanced Clinical Practitioners (ACPs), GP Nurses, Health Visitors, and School Nurses—have key touchpoints with children and bring a professional curiosity that prompts questions like, 'Have you been to school today?' or 'How is school going?' These questions support clinical assessments by providing context and also positively reinforce the importance of school attendance."

Carli Whittaker, Head of Nursing Practice CYP, Royal College of Nursing

While there are many drivers of school absence, some are more within our control to address than others: last year in England, over 4 million school days were missed due to medical appointments, and the data shows that when a pupil has a medical appointment on a school day, half of them will miss a full day of school. Where appropriate in our different contexts and for our patients, we can also reflect on how our own appointment practices support children to access education:

1. Can appointments or clinics be delivered directly in education settings where we're supporting multiple children? For example, [asthma clinics](#) in schools.
2. Could an occasional virtual consultation work as effectively as in person?
3. How can we support clustering of appointments to avoid multiple days off for a child to access healthcare?
4. We can endeavour to offer appointments at the start or end of the day where possible. Where this isn't possible, can appointment letters include advice to parents that their child should attend school before and after their visit if they are well enough, and that they can attend the appointment in their school uniform?

School attendance is everyone's business. In our unique roles, as nurses and paediatricians, we are well placed to identify and support children struggling to access education—and help them thrive.

Inspiring Practice: Stockport GP Surgery Tackles School Absence Head On

[Dr Saroja Forester](#), a proactive GP in Stockport spotted a pattern: 80% of children attending acute appointments were seen during school hours, and many had repeated visits for minor illnesses, missing significant classroom time. Digging deeper, they found that 70% of these children were actually fit to attend school—but none were being advised to do so. So, they took action.

Tweaked appointment system:

- Reserved 9:30am slots for same-day appointments for school-aged children.
- This gave parents time to drop off siblings first.
- And also ensured children could still attend most of the school day if well enough.

Consistent messaging across the practice:

- Distributed the [Is my child too ill for school?](#) guidance to all GPs, ensuring all parents received the same advice.

GPs now:

- Explicitly encourage children to return to school if they are well enough.
- Ask questions when children accompany others to appointments —why aren't they in school or nursery?
- Signpost families to support services for issues that may be hindering regular school attendance. A [support sheet](#) for families is now available across Stockport practices and can be texted directly to patients.

This statement is endorsed by the Royal College of Nursing and Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health.

