

Quick read

The role of paediatricians in supporting children's school attendance: Position statement



Purpose

1. Detail how paediatricians can support children and families with school attendance.
2. Outline the importance of education and the impact of persistent school absence.

Introduction

Education is a defining part of a child's life, supporting the holistic development of children and young people and empowering them to reach their full potential. For many children, this is experienced through attending school from the ages of 5-16.

Beyond the numerous educational opportunities, school can provide children and young people with a chance for social and emotional development, nutritious meals, physical activity and extra curriculum opportunities. The school environment also has a pivotal role in identifying vulnerable children, providing the setting for children to access health surveillance, vaccinations, support and advice, as well as individual and group therapeutic programmes where available.

The long-lasting benefits of school attendance on an individual's physical and emotional wellbeing, as well as employability and future participation in society, have been well documented. Equally, studies have detailed the negative impacts of school absence on both short-term school attainment and long-term educational and labour market outcomes.

UK legislation dictates that children must receive an education between the ages of 5-16. The majority of children across the UK will attend maintained/state-funded education, with a smaller number attending specialist settings, private schools or elective home education.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic an increasing number of children and young people have been reported as missing school. This has given rise to persistent (chronic) school absence, defined as children missing more than 10% of sessions a year.

The increase in persistent school absence is driven by a complex interplay of factors drawn from social, economic, and health-related influences. In recent months paediatricians, governments and children alike have approached RCPCH for guidance and support on how to mitigate the health-related influences on persistent school absence and support children in education more widely.

This statement seeks to start that conversation.

Summary

Role of paediatricians

Supporting children to get the best out of life is everyone's responsibility. As paediatricians, we have a role to play in supporting children's health and wellbeing, achieving Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and in doing so ensuring we are not inadvertently competing against any other right, including the right to education (Article 28).

There are many drivers of school absence, some are more within our control to address than others. We are encouraging paediatricians to be curious as to how they can support a child's education through the following actions:

- **Smart scheduling:** Missing school is sometimes unavoidable, but before scheduling appointments, consider if this will impact a child's school attendance and if this could be avoided.
- **Use attendance as a wellbeing indicator:** Paediatricians should help their patients set their own attendance target, support them to achieve this and use attendance as a wellbeing indicator on consecutive appointments, when appropriate.
- **Advocate for change:** There are factors that can be addressed by paediatricians on an individual level, but others require local influencing or whole system change. As a trusted voice paediatricians can play a vital role in informing these discussions and advocating for change.

Role of policymakers

Education and health are devolved matters with the direction being set by governments in Scotland, England and Wales and the Northern Ireland Executive. Education provision is predominately delivered by Local Authorities, but structures differ between nations. We are calling on the governments, executive and education providers to:

- **Adopt a support first approach to school attendance:** Children should be supported to attend school with the knowledge and confidence that the environment is suitable for them and their right to education upheld.
- **Support enhanced data collection:** enable coding that allows for a child's physical or mental health to be recorded as an authorised school absence and establish mechanisms for this to be recorded on a national level to identify patterns and trends.
- **Address the wider determinants of persistent school absence:** Attending school and receiving an education should be the easiest option. To make this the case for all children wider support is needed to mitigate the impact of poverty and ensure adequate additional learning need provision is available.
- **Improve communication between health and education:** Co-develop initiatives, resources, interventions and strategies with schools, health services and local authorities with the child's long-term health and wellbeing at the centre.

Role of RCPCH

- We will advocate for improved communication between health, education and social services.
- We will continue to call on all UK governments to follow Scotland's lead and embed the UNCRC in legislation to support children's right to a happy, healthy and safe life.
- We will maintain awareness, and in collaboration with children and their families, identify how RCPCH can support the workforce in championing inclusive education.
- We will continue to campaign for action to reduce waiting lists and advocate for measures to be put in place to mitigate the impact on children, young people and their families.