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School absenteeism in 2025 Understanding the challenges and exploring solutions



Foreword

School attendance in England faces an urgent crisis that demands immediate and sustained action. While overall absence rates have begun to ease from their pandemic peaks, they remain stubbornly above pre-COVID levels, with profound implications for an entire generation of young people. Behind these statistics lies a complex web of changing attitudes, evolving family priorities, and genuine barriers that schools and policymakers are still learning to address.

At Bett, we see technology as a tool that can support teachers and keep pupils engaged with their learning, but we recognise that sustainable solutions to absenteeism must be fundamentally human-centred. The data presented in this whitepaper paints a picture of parents who care deeply about their children's wellbeing, sometimes prioritising mental health over perfect attendance records. This shift requires us to think differently about how we approach school engagement.

The challenge is not simply about returning to pre-pandemic norms, but about creating educational environments where all children want to be. Technology can play a supporting role in this endeavour, helping to personalise learning and maintain connections when pupils face barriers to attendance. However, the core solution lies in understanding why families make the choices they do and addressing the underlying needs that drive those decisions.

This research offers valuable insights into both the scale of the challenge and the attitudes driving school absenteeism. By understanding these perspectives, we can work towards solutions that serve children's long-term educational outcomes while respecting the genuine concerns of families navigating increasingly complex circumstances.



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Introduction

School absenteeism in England has undergone significant changes since the COVID-19 pandemic. Government data shows absence rates more than doubled from **4.7%** pre-pandemic to a peak of **7.6%** in 2021/22, before gradually declining to **7.1%** in 2023/24 and **6.9%** in 2024/25. While this trajectory shows improvement, absence rates remain nearly **50%** higher than pre-pandemic levels, with knock-on effects that extend far beyond the classroom.

The Department for Education's research demonstrates stark consequences for pupils who miss school regularly. Recent analysis shows that persistently absent pupils in secondary school could earn £10,000 less at age 28 compared to pupils with near-perfect attendance.

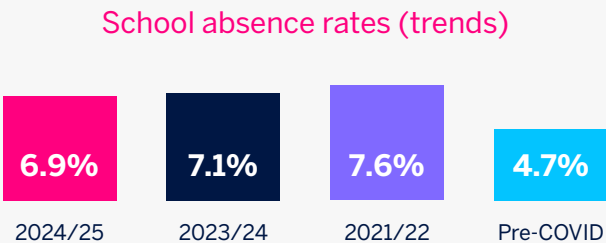
At GCSE level, the impact is stark. Only **35.6%** of persistently absent pupils achieved grades 9-4 in English and Maths, compared with **67.6%** of all pupils. Among severely absent pupils, this figure drops to just **11.3%**. Year 11 pupils with near-perfect attendance are almost twice as likely to achieve grade 5 in English and Maths compared to similar pupils attending school just **90-95%** of the time. Missing just 10 extra days a year halves a student's chances of achieving these grades.

The reality facing schools and families is more nuanced than these statistics suggest. Our research reveals parents who are increasingly prioritising their children's emotional wellbeing, sometimes at the expense of perfect attendance. Understanding this shift is crucial for developing effective strategies to re-engage pupils and families with education.



The current attendance landscape

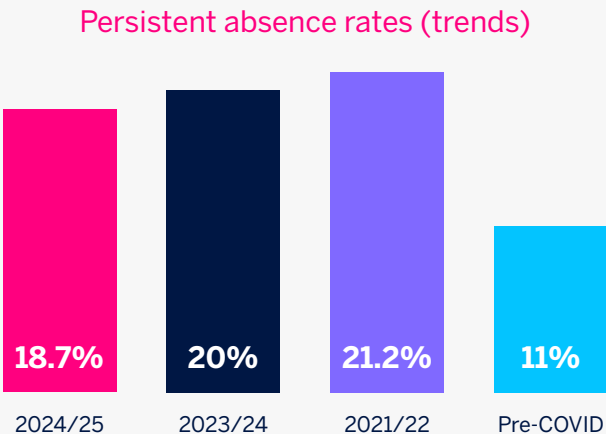
While the trajectory shows consistent improvement from the 2021/22 peak, current absence rates remain significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels. The scale of this challenge becomes clearer when examining persistent absence patterns.



Source: Department for Education

The number of children missing more than 10% of school days has nearly doubled since the pandemic, from around 11% pre-COVID to 18.7% in 2024/25. While this shows improvement from the peak of 21.2% in 2022/23, it still means nearly one in five pupils are chronically absent from their education.

The autumn 2024/25 snapshot shows persistent absence at 17.79%, down from 19.4% in autumn 2023/24. However, severe absence (missing 50% or more of sessions) has more than doubled from 0.8% pre-pandemic to 2.3%, affecting approximately 170,000 pupils. Data published last month (October 2025) covering autumn and spring terms confirms this pattern, with severe absence at 2.26% and persistent absence continuing to fall to 17.63%. This shows that while some pupils are returning to school, those with the most serious attendance problems are becoming more entrenched in their absence patterns.



Source: Department for Education

Inequalities in attendance remain stark and tell a troubling story about educational equity. Persistent absence runs at 33.0% for pupils eligible for free school meals compared to 13.4% for non-FSM pupils - a gap of nearly 20 percentage points. Similarly, SEND pupils experience substantially higher absence rates than their peers without identified special educational needs. Regional variations persist, with the lowest absence rates in London and the highest in the North East.



Source: Department for Education

Understanding the family perspective

Behind these statistics lies a significant shift in parental attitudes towards school attendance. Research conducted for Bett by Perspectus Global in September 2025, surveying 2,025 UK parents with children in primary or secondary schools, reveals the extent of this change. It shows that almost all parents consider their child's mental health to be as important as, if not more important than, academic success. What we're seeing is that the traditional hierarchy that placed academic achievement above all else is being fundamentally challenged by modern parents who take a more holistic view of their children's development.

Parent priorities

● 97%
prioritise mental
health as just
as important as
academic success



When asked if they would let their child stay off school for a day if they weren't enjoying it, over half of parents said they would. This represents a fundamental shift from traditional attitudes where school attendance was considered non-negotiable regardless of a child's emotional state.

Wellbeing vs attendance

Would allow absence if child not enjoying school

56%

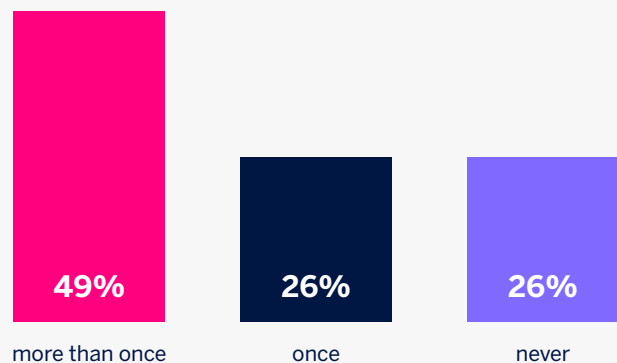


The rise of the “duvet day”

Perhaps most revealing is the emergence of what might be called “emotional absence” - days off granted by parents when children are tired, emotional, or simply don’t feel able to attend school. The research shows that almost half of parents have allowed this “more than once”, while a quarter have done so once.

On average, parents report letting their children take six days off during the past school year because they were tired, emotional, or didn’t feel able to go in. That means that the typical child in our survey loses more than a week of education annually due to emotional wellbeing concerns. The average was remarkably consistent across key stages, with 6.2 days for Key Stages 1 and 2, and 5.9 days for Key Stages 3, 4, and 5.

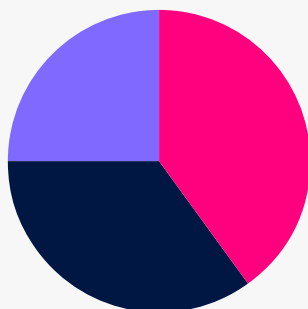
Emotional absence days taken



Three quarters of parents have allowed their child a “duvet day” to stay at home when they simply don’t want to attend school. When asked about their children’s behaviour after such days away from school, 75% of parents reported that their child’s behaviour had improved - suggesting that they view these breaks as effective interventions rather than indulgences.

Duvet days away from school

- 40% more than once
- 35% once
- 25% never

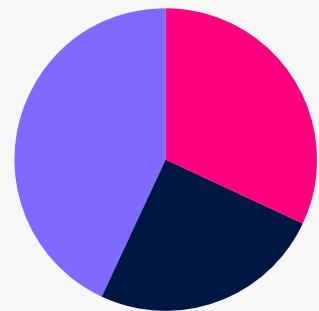


Changing attitudes towards school attendance

Our research reveals a marked shift in parental attitudes since the pandemic. A third of parents say they are more relaxed about their child missing school now compared to five years ago. And parents who have become more permissive about absence outnumber those who have become stricter by 7 percentage points.

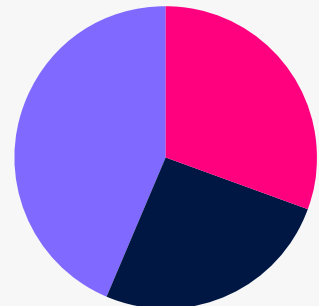
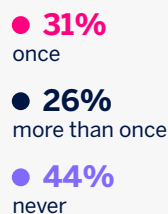
Among those who have become more relaxed, 54% agree that working from home has been a major contributor to this attitude shift. Additionally, 55% of parents say that hybrid working arrangements make it easier to look after their children when they don't attend school. This suggests that pandemic-era flexible working arrangements have fundamentally altered how families view the rigid structure of traditional schooling, with parents now better positioned to accommodate children's needs during working hours.

Attitude towards school attendance vs 5 years ago



This relaxation extends to term-time holidays, with almost three in five parents admitting to taking their children out of school during term time for family holidays. This represents a direct challenge to school policies and government guidance, yet many families appear to prioritise family time over perfect attendance records.

Families taking term-time holidays

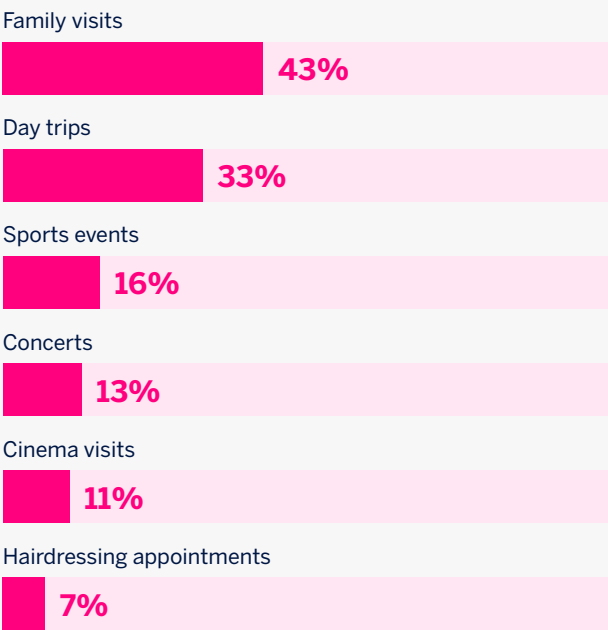


Other reasons for absence

Beyond holidays and emotional wellbeing days, parents cite various other reasons for allowing absence. The most common include visiting family members or friends, going on a day out, attending major sporting events, concerts, or cinema trips. More concerning is that a significant minority (more than **one in 20**) of parents have allowed absence for something as routine as getting a haircut - suggesting that some families view school as optional when it conflicts with any other activity.

These activities reveal how parents are reframing absence from school. When children take mental health days, parents seem to structure them around meaningful experiences: visiting relatives provides social connection, sporting events offer excitement and community engagement, while cultural activities expose children to arts and entertainment. This would suggest that some parents view these absences not as lost education time, but as alternative ways to contribute to their child's broader development.

Reasons for absence



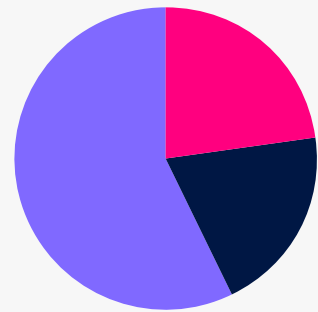
Consequences and awareness gaps

Despite this apparently relaxed approach to attendance, many parents do experience consequences. Two in five admit to being warned by schools about their children's absenteeism. But this has not fundamentally altered their willingness to allow absence when they deem it necessary.

Most parents (78%) acknowledge that being absent from school could have long-term effects on their child's life, with 42% saying "definitely" and 36% saying "a bit". However, 22% believe that being absent from school would have no long-term effects on their child's life. This suggests a significant minority of parents see school absence as inconsequential to their children's future prospects.

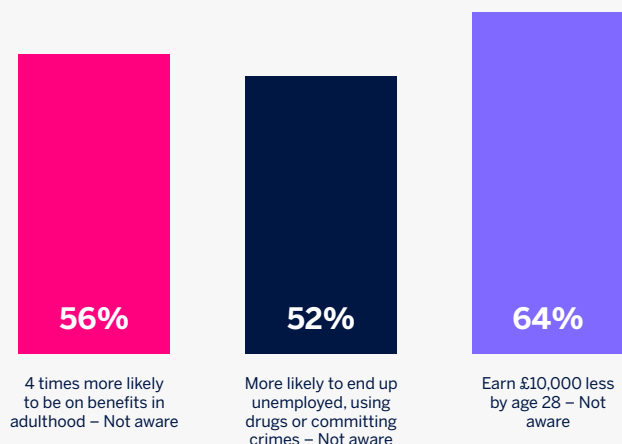
Warnings given to parents

- 23% one warning
- 20% multiple warnings
- 57% no warnings



Awareness of specific research findings remains limited, suggesting that parents understand absence has consequences but may not grasp their severity. More than half of parents weren't aware of the Department for Education research showing that children who skip school regularly are up to four times more likely to be on benefits in adulthood. A similar number didn't know that children who miss school are more likely to end up unemployed, using drugs, or committing crimes. And only a third had heard about research showing that children who are persistently absent from school are estimated to earn £10,000 less by their 28th birthday compared to pupils with near-perfect attendance.

Awareness of DfE research on the consequences of school absence



What parents think would help

When asked what might encourage their children to take fewer days away from school, parents identified several key areas. A more personalised learning experience was the top choice, selected by over half of respondents - suggesting that current one-size-fits-all approaches may be contributing to disengagement. Game-based learning appealed to **46%**, while a third wanted fewer rules and regulations.

Interestingly, **31%** of parents expressed interest in hybrid schooling that combined teaching at home and in school - perhaps reflecting lessons learned during the pandemic about flexible learning approaches. Free school breakfasts attracted support from **29%** of parents, while a quarter believed that not having to wear school uniforms would also help to improve attendance.

Parent solutions to reducing absenteeism

Personalised learning

55%

Game-based learning

46%

Fewer rules

32%

Hybrid schooling

31%

Free breakfast

29%

No uniform

24%



The policy response

The government has responded to rising absence with a combination of support measures and enforcement. Statutory attendance guidance introduced in August 2024 clarified responsibilities across schools, local authorities, and multi-academy trusts while updating attendance codes. Significantly, holidays can no longer be authorised, and a national framework for penalty notices was established.

Under the new framework, the first penalty notice is £160 (reduced to £80 if paid within 21 days), while a second offence within three years results in a flat £160 fine with no reduction. The trigger threshold is 10 or more unauthorised sessions (five school days) in a 10-week period. In 2024, 443,000 penalty notices were issued for unauthorised family holidays - an increase of 87,000 from the previous year.

Daily data sharing became mandatory for schools in 2024/25, enabling near-real-time monitoring through national attendance dashboards.

The government has expanded Behaviour and Attendance Hubs to approximately 90 hubs, led by ambassadors Tom Bennett and Jayne Lowe, sharing effective practice with around 800 schools.

The Attendance Mentors programme - a multi-year DfE initiative led by Etio - provides one-to-one mentoring for persistently absent pupils and is undergoing a national randomised controlled trial with evaluation by the Youth Endowment Fund. These initiatives represent a recognition that sustainable improvements require support as well as sanctions.

Beyond enforcement measures, the government has launched several supportive initiatives. Free breakfast clubs are being introduced in every primary school across England - 30-minute sessions before school to ensure children start the day well-nourished and ready to learn. The Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence (RISE) programme has been launched to spread best practice across the school system, with attendance as one of four key focus areas.

The role of technology in supporting attendance

While technology cannot solve absenteeism alone, it can play a valuable supporting role in keeping pupils engaged with their education. The evidence suggests that EdTech solutions work best when they augment rather than replace the essential human connections that make school meaningful for children.

With 55% of parents wanting more personalised learning, technology platforms could directly address their primary concern about current schooling. Game-based learning tools could also make lessons more engaging for pupils who might otherwise disengage. For the third of parents interested in hybrid schooling, technology is already able to provide continuity of learning when pupils face barriers to physical attendance.



Looking ahead: building sustainable solutions

There are growing calls across the education sector for a refreshed “social contract” between schools, government, and parents - a declaration that sets out clear expectations, the importance of following rules for the collective good, and proper channels for addressing concerns. This approach recognises that the blunt instrument of fines alone is not reversing attendance trends. In 2024, 443,000 penalty notices were issued for unauthorised family holidays, yet our research shows that **57%** of parents continue to take term-time holidays.

Research by Association of School and College Leaders reveals the scale of the challenge facing schools. When asked what reasons they had been given for pupil absence this academic year, **93%** of state school teachers and leaders cited family holidays during term time, **81%** reported pupils attending family events, and **61%** said pupils were kept home because they were tired after an event the night before. These findings align closely with our parent survey data, confirming the gap between official attendance policies and family practices.

Such a social contract, developed and endorsed by all stakeholders, could help bridge this gap between parents’ evolving attitudes and schools’ statutory responsibilities. It would need to address practical barriers - such as the excessive cost of holidays during school breaks - while also rebuilding a shared understanding of why consistent attendance matters for children’s long-term prospects.

Recent research from ImpactEd Group, analysing over 100,000 students across 85 schools, reveals a striking finding. Students with English as an additional language demonstrate **3.1%** higher attendance than their peers. Even more remarkably, disadvantaged EAL students nearly match the attendance of their non-disadvantaged peers. This suggests that cultural attitudes toward education can override socioeconomic barriers. It reinforces that the post-pandemic shift in parental attitudes is not inevitable. It’s a choice that can be influenced.

Schools need practical support to implement early intervention strategies, using daily data to identify pupils missing time in their first week and deploying quick, friendly contact and practical help. The transition to secondary school, where attendance patterns often deteriorate, requires particular attention with structured Year 6-7 transition programmes.

Parent and Teacher Associations can also play a valuable role in building school community and removing practical barriers to attendance. Through events, communication channels, and hardship relief, PTAs can help create the sense of belonging that makes pupils want to attend school.

Most importantly, the sector must recognise that behind every absence statistic is a child and family making decisions they believe serve their child’s best interests. Rather than simply enforcing attendance, schools need to understand why pupils don’t want to attend and address those underlying issues.



Conclusion

School absenteeism reflects deeper questions about what education should look like in the 21st century. Parents increasingly prioritise their children's emotional wellbeing and are willing to allow absence when they believe it serves their child's best interests. This shift challenges traditional assumptions about the non-negotiable nature of school attendance.

The path forward requires acknowledging these changing attitudes while helping families understand the long-term consequences of missing education. Technology can support this effort by making learning more engaging and maintaining connections when pupils face barriers to attendance.

However, the fundamental solution lies in creating educational environments where children genuinely want to be. This means addressing not just the symptoms of poor attendance, but the underlying reasons why pupils and families choose absence over presence.

The data shows that most parents ultimately want their children to succeed and recognise the importance of education. By working with families rather than against them, schools can build the partnerships necessary to ensure all children have access to the education they deserve.



Sources & References

The Bett research included in this report was conducted by Perspectus Global in September 2025 with 2,025 UK parents (40% male, 60% female), with responses evenly divided between primary and secondary school parent. Not all total percentages in this paper will add up to 100 due to rounding.

Additional research sources referenced in this report are:

¹ Department for Education (DfE) blog - "Why school attendance matters, and what we're doing to improve it" (2025)

² DfE: [Pupil attendance in schools](#) - Week 29 2025

³ [Association of School and College Leaders](#) (2025) – survey of 9,127 state school teachers and leaders in England asked about reasons given for pupil absence

⁴ DfE: [Pupil absence in schools in England](#) - Autumn Term (2025)

⁵ DfE: [Pupil absence in schools in England](#) - Autumn and Spring Term (2025)

⁶ ImpactEd Group: [Insights Update: Understanding Attendance](#) (2025)





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