Promoting good attendance and punctuality

Education and Early Years

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**Contents**

[**1 Introduction 3**](#_Toc434394262)

[**2 Purpose 4**](#_Toc434394263)

[**3 Attendance and punctuality 4**](#_Toc434394264)

[3.1 Why good attendance and punctuality is important 4](#_Toc434394265)

[3.2 Setting the scene early to promote good attendance and punctuality 5](#_Toc434394266)

[3.3 How to ensure your setting has a positive and welcoming approach 5](#_Toc434394267)

[3.4 Guidance for developing your attendance and punctuality policy 6](#_Toc434394268)

[3.5 Recording and monitoring of attendance and punctuality 6](#_Toc434394269)

[**4. Pointers to good practice 7**](#_Toc434394270)

G:\P22\Early Years\Workforce development\Guidance documents

# Introduction

Charlie Taylor in his previous role as the government’s expert adviser on behaviour, identified in his report ‘Improving attendance at schools,’[[1]](#footnote-1) the importance of strong messages being delivered throughout early years saying, “Many schools do not take measures to improve attendance until their pupils reach statutory school age, but for some children this is already too late.

Children with low attendance in the early years are more likely to come from the poorest backgrounds. These children are likely to start school already behind their peers, particularly in their acquisition of language and their social development. They have little chance of catching up their peers if their attendance is bad. If they fail to succeed early on in their school careers they are likely to get further behind, disillusionment with education sets in and they become excluded or begin to truant.”

As professionals working within early years, our aspirations for the children that pass through our early years settings are high. The complex role early years settings have in supporting families, especially our most vulnerable families who may have little faith in the potential of education, cannot be underestimated. Developing aspirations in parents for their children’s future can be a demanding and challenging task, early years’ settings are front line in making a difference for these families.

Helping and supporting those parents who need it develop healthy routines to enable their child to be ready in time each day for nursery is critical at this point in time. Parents often find establishing a regular routine difficult in those early days of parenthood; looking after baby, trying to get siblings ready for nursery or school, feeling exhausted can often result in lack of daily routine and a chaotic lifestyle.

It is clear therefore that a sensitive yet determined approach is required so that children and parents recognise and strive to achieve good attendance habits from an early age in order to prepare their child for success in school and throughout life.

At the point of any engagement with a family, through engagement workers or volunteers at our children’s centres, childminders or other early years setting, it is critical that we send out a strong message that ‘good attendance makes a big difference’. Key messages should include what this means for the family, i.e. positive impact of daily routines, importance of an early and settled bedtime routine so their child sleeps well in preparation for an early start, good breakfast etc.

As well as encouraging good attendance and punctuality, early years settings should ensure that parents are fully aware of the impact and potential consequences of poor or irregular attendance and punctuality.

# Purpose

Many schools and early years settings in Oldham already have good practices and procedures in place for promoting, supporting, recording and monitoring the attendance of children in the early years foundation stage.

However, it is clearly in the best interests of children and families that all early years settings are aware of effective practice. Therefore, this good practice guide has been developed to provide information, advice and guidance as well as helping early years practitioners, leaders and managers, owners, voluntary committees and governing bodies evaluate current practice and approaches to attendance and identify any areas where their systems or day to day practices could be further developed.

It specifically aims to help early years settings to:

* Ensure the safeguarding of children
* Complete comprehensive and evidence-based self-evaluation; and
* Meet Ofsted requirements

# Attendance and punctuality

## Why good attendance and punctuality is important

It is important that all staff understand and promote the need for children to arrive in time for the start of the session so they are able to share with parents the importance of taking the full early education entitlement and the benefits this brings for their child and themselves. In addition parents need to be informed right from the start of the settings expectations of them and the steps which will be taken if poor attendance or punctuality becomes a concern.

Begin by ensuring parents are given information about attendance and punctuality at the point of admission such as:

* Starting good habits - which build in children the idea that getting up and going to nursery is simply what you do
* Children who attend every session develop a feel for the rhythm of the week and gain a sense of security from regular activities or routines
* How children who attend regularly build and sustain relationships with other children and practitioners
* Giving parents an opportunity to get jobs done which reduces stress and ensures the time at home with the child more enjoyable
* Children who regularly miss sessions or who are generally late may experience a sense of having to try a little harder just to understand what is going on
* The routine of regular attendance and being on time helps children to separate from their parents at the start of the day and settle more readily into daily life of their early years setting
* Underachievement is often linked to lower attendance, if this begins in early years it is more likely to continue throughout school
* Practitioners plan activities to support your child’s learning, experiences gained in one session are often developed further in the next session

## Setting the scene early to promote good attendance and punctuality

It can help to consider the reasons behind poor attendance. Many reasons may be addressed early by finding ways to develop positive relationships with vulnerable parents before their child starts with you:

* Parents may have a lack of confidence in approaching a new practitioner, they may be apprehensive about discussing any worries they may have about their child fitting in, especially if they show signs of emotional distress
* Parents may have unhappy memories of being left when they were young
* Parents may be concerned that the setting may judge their parenting skills
* Parents may not be in a position to bring the child in clean clothes every day
* Poor attendance or punctuality of practitioners within the setting may enforce that this behaviour is acceptable within the setting

There will be many other reasons for poor attendance; however the above list will help you to consider sensitive approaches with families and also any additional training or support for staff.

## How to ensure your setting has a positive and welcoming approach

* A friendly telephone manner and a welcoming office will help less confident parents at their first point of contact
* If possible, offer a home visit prior to their child starting in order to give the family a chance to get to know you in their home environment
* Explain what will help their child to settle when they first start e.g. shorter visits where parents stay and join in the fun; a staggered intake; bringing photographs from home, making sure their key person knows everything about their child such as interests, likes and dislikes; asking parents to stay outside the room so that a member of staff can let you know how their child has settled
* Consider how you meet the needs of parents from different cultures and backgrounds
* Use team meetings and include in your induction process to ensure staff are trained, help them to consider their approach with parents in different situations for example; embedding the challenging of absences within practice.
* Use a buddying system for less experienced staff so that initial meetings with parents are supported by someone with experience
* Do not rely on parents reading policies and procedures
* Ensure the team are confident in explaining to parents what to do if their child will not be attending for any reason
* Ensure parents receive consistent messages about the importance of good attendance and punctuality and the difference this makes to children’s outcomes
* Strive to be accommodating where there are genuine reasons for a child arriving late

## Guidance for developing your attendance and punctuality policy

A policy could include:

* Requirements for reporting lateness or sickness i.e. expectation that parents give a reason for lateness or sickness
* The role of the setting in contacting parents if a child has not arrived by a specified time to establish the reason for non-attendance
* Procedures if parents are uncontactable
* The procedure if a child has not attended for three consecutive days without notification
* Fees payable during periods of absence
* The need to notify Oldham Council where children in receipt of 2, 3 and 4 year old Early Education Entitlement are absent for more than two weeks in a term
* The policy around planning holidays during term time

## Recording and monitoring of attendance and punctuality

Keeping accurate attendance records is an Ofsted requirement, although the monitoring of attendance is important for all children it is more so for vulnerable groups.

Having a clear record of dates and times of attendance may provide vital safeguarding information:

* To identify patterns of absences
* To help the setting to tackle underachievement
* To help identify children at risk helping multi-agency teams to understand, assess and support the needs of a child and his or her family

To ensure that attendance records support the work of safeguarding young children and promote their learning and development.

Leaders, managers and staff must ensure the following are in place:

* Full registration details for every child
* Accurate information about parents, carers and others who may accompany the child to and from the early years setting
* Records of who has parental responsibility
* Knowledge of any person that does not have legal access to a child
* Ensuring that clear and accurate entries are recorded on the register
* Consistently investigate all absences for individual children
* Keep records of the explanations for absence provided by parents
* Ensure the routine monitoring of attendance by a designated person or team i.e. owner, governor, committee etc.
* The systematic and rigorous monitoring of the registers by senior leaders to ensure accurate recording, identification of any issues and engagement with parents to address concerns

Records of attendance should be used in conjunction with your assessments of progress i.e. Section E of the Child Assessment of Progress (ChAP) document.

The Common Inspection framework (pages 6 & 7) lists groups of learners that Ofsted inspectors will pay particular attention to at inspection.

Consider the following:

* Do your poor attenders fall into one of these groups?
* Should your poor attenders be one of the ‘other’ vulnerable groups?

How to engage, inform and change parental attitudes to attendance and punctuality can then inform your development/action plan.

4. Pointers to good practice

Careful consideration should be given to the possible reasons for infrequent or late attendance and what may help resolve the problems.

Issues need to be approached sensitively and proportionately:

* A simple text may be effective for some parents
* Be understanding of the issue and offer to meet with parents to find solutions, this could mean involving other agencies, your approach could help parents see this as positive support rather than a criticism or threat
* Your local children’s centre may be able to support by providing a family worker or volunteer to support the family establish effective daily routines and behaviours
* Share your concerns with relevant professionals e.g. family Health Visitor or social worker, contact the family Health Visitor to inform of your concerns or if the child has a social worker make sure they are informed immediately
* If you have evidence which causes you concern and a child is not in attendance then complete an Early Help referral or inform the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub
* Remember it is not the child at fault for being late so sanctions are not appropriate.
* Rewards should be in the form of praise rather than giving prizes or gifts
* Let parents know how their child was able to do a special task because they arrived in time
* A slight change of routine may help a child settle if they are upset on arrival
* Make the start of the day a calm and special time, for instance, by introducing a welcome song

1. <https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/180772/DFE-00036-2012_improving_attendance_at_school.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)