



EHCP SUPPORT SERIES

Chapter 9

EHCPs, School Attendance and Children Struggling to Attend

A practical guide to looking beyond the attendance figure, identifying barriers and considering whether needs, provision or placement require review.

The key idea

Attendance difficulty can have many causes. When a child with SEND is struggling to attend, the useful question is not only how to increase attendance, but what is making attendance difficult and what support may need to change.



Look Beyond the Attendance Percentage

Absence is information, but it does not explain the barrier.

A child may struggle to attend for overlapping reasons: health, anxiety or distress, sensory demands, communication difficulties, bullying, unmet learning needs, exhaustion, transitions or a placement that is no longer working well.

Patterns worth noticing

- Is attendance harder on particular days, lessons or transitions?
- What happens before school, during attendance and after returning home?
- Does the child manage to attend but need significant recovery afterwards?
- Are there particular environments, demands or relationships linked to distress?
- Has attendance changed alongside a change in support, staffing, timetable or need?

Parent/Carer Note

Recording patterns can help shift the conversation from 'attendance' as a single problem towards the barriers underneath it. Include what the child communicates directly and what you observe before and after school.



Attendance and the EHCP

Ask whether the current plan still reflects what the child needs.

For a child with an EHC plan, persistent difficulty attending can be relevant to whether needs are accurately described and whether the specified provision or placement remains appropriate.

Key Fact

Where an EHC plan is maintained, the local authority must secure the special educational provision specified in Section F, subject to limited statutory exceptions (Great Britain, 2014, s.42; Department for Education and Department of Health, 2015).

Read across the plan

- B** — Does Section B describe the needs that appear to be contributing to attendance difficulty?
- F** — Does Section F specify support that addresses those needs, and is that support actually being provided?
- I** — Is the named placement still able to meet the child or young person's needs with the provision in the plan?

Study Note

The SEND Code says that if a child or young person's SEN change, the local authority should review the EHC plan as soon as possible to ensure the specified provision remains appropriate.



Support Before Attendance Escalates

Attendance work should include understanding and removing barriers.

Current statutory attendance guidance expects schools and local authorities to work with pupils and families to understand barriers to attendance and provide support. SEND and health needs should be considered as part of that picture (Department for Education, 2026).

Possible areas for discussion

- Reasonable adjustments and accessibility.
- A predictable arrival, transition or regulation plan.
- Changes to demands, environment or communication.
- Whether specified EHCP provision is being delivered consistently.
- Whether additional assessment or an early EHC plan review is needed.

In Practice

A support plan should be individual. A strategy that increases physical attendance but leaves the underlying barrier unchanged may not tell you whether the child can access education safely and meaningfully.



When Health Affects Attendance

Some children cannot attend school, or can attend only intermittently, because of health needs.

There is separate statutory guidance for local authorities on arranging education for children of compulsory school age who cannot attend school because of health needs. It applies whether a child is on a school roll or not and includes children who can attend only intermittently (Department for Education, 2023).

Key Fact

Where a child cannot attend school because of illness or other health reasons, duties concerning suitable education may arise under section 19 of the Education Act 1996. The circumstances and evidence need to be considered individually.

Questions to ask

- What education can the child currently access?
- What do health professionals say about attendance and educational access?
- Who is coordinating education while attendance is disrupted?
- How will provision in the EHCP continue, where applicable?

Important

Health-related absence, SEND-related barriers and other attendance difficulties can overlap. Avoid assuming that one label explains every situation; focus on the child's actual needs, evidence and access to education.



Alternative Provision and EOTAS

These terms describe different arrangements.

Alternative provision may be arranged for children who cannot attend their usual school for reasons such as illness, exclusion or other circumstances. Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) is different: in the EHCP context it refers to special educational provision arranged outside a school or post-16 institution where the statutory test is met.

Keep the distinction clear

AP — Alternative provision can be used in a range of circumstances and does not itself mean the child has EOTAS in an EHCP.

EOTAS — Under section 61 of the Children and Families Act 2014, a local authority may arrange special educational provision otherwise than in a school or post-16 institution where it is satisfied that doing so would be inappropriate.

Current Context

The government consulted on possible SEND reforms relating to EOTAS in 2026. Consultation proposals are not the same as changes to the law; this guide reflects the current framework at the date of publication.

Question to Ask

What arrangement is actually being proposed, who is responsible for arranging it, how will the child's EHCP provision be delivered, and is the arrangement intended to be temporary or longer term?



When the Plan or Placement May Need Review

A falling attendance pattern can be one sign that something has changed.

You do not necessarily have to wait for the next scheduled annual review if needs have changed significantly or the current plan is no longer working as intended.

Study Note

The SEND Code of Practice states that if a child or young person's SEN change, the local authority should hold a review as soon as possible to ensure that the provision specified in the EHC plan is appropriate (Department for Education and Department of Health, 2015).

Evidence that may help

- Attendance records showing the pattern over time.
- The child or young person's own account of barriers.
- School records, support plans and adjustments already tried.
- Health, therapy or specialist reports where relevant.
- Parent/carer observations, including recovery and impact outside school.

In Practice

When requesting a review, explain what has changed, how education is being affected, what has already been tried and which parts of the EHCP you believe may need reconsidering.



Working With School and the Local Authority

Keep the focus on access to education and the support required.

Attendance conversations can become stressful when different people are focused on different parts of the problem. A written summary can help keep the child's needs, current provision and agreed actions visible.

Useful questions

- What barriers have we identified together?
- Which adjustments or EHCP provisions are currently in place?
- What has been tried, for how long, and what happened?
- What education is accessible while attendance is reduced?
- Who is responsible for each next step, and when will we review it?

Keep a Record

After a meeting, a short written summary of the barriers discussed, actions agreed, responsibilities and review date can reduce confusion. Keep this with attendance information and EHCP evidence.



My Attendance and EHCP Check

Use this page to organise the pattern and the support around it.

What seems to make attendance harder?

Patterns I have noticed

Support / adjustments already tried

EHCP needs or provision I want reviewed

Questions / next actions



References & Further Support

References

Department for Education (2026) Working together to improve school attendance. Statutory guidance. London: Department for Education. Updated 9 July 2026.

Department for Education (2023) Arranging education for children who cannot attend school because of health needs. Statutory guidance. London: Department for Education.

Department for Education and Department of Health (2015) Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years. London: Department for Education.

Great Britain (2014) Children and Families Act 2014. London: The Stationery Office. See sections 42 and 61.

Further support

- SENDIASS — free and impartial SEND information, advice and support. Find your local service through your council or Local Offer.
- GOV.UK — Working together to improve school attendance and guidance for children unable to attend because of health needs.
- Your local authority's Local Offer — information about SEND services, EHCP processes and local support.

Important

This guide provides general information about the SEND, EHCP and attendance framework in England. It is not individual legal advice. Attendance and education duties depend on the child's circumstances, so seek advice where the position is unclear.