

# Raising school attendance

Anne Sheppard asks whether legal sanctions can really be the answer to problems of truancy

**Adults may not think much about school attendance as they themselves went to school diligently and so do (or did) their children. However, a minority of children and young people persistently miss school, with the figure varying from about 2 to 10 per cent of the school population. Poor life outcomes are associated with this group, and the government sets ever higher attendance targets for schools to meet. This article discusses why schools can find it hard to meet these targets and argues that much more needs to be understood about attendance difficulties if the group of persistent absentees is to be helped into education.**

## question

What might the discipline of psychology offer to the knowledge base and practice of education social work?

## resources

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For over 10 years the UK government has promoted the raising of school attendance with targets for schools and local authorities. In 2004 David Miliband, then schools minister, wrote in a letter to local authority directors that it is:

because of the strong link between attendance and attainment – and also because of the well known links between truancy and street crime and antisocial behaviour – that government sees reducing absence from school as a priority. (DfES, 2004)

This statement assumes that increasing school attendance will solve the problems of attainment and antisocial behaviour in a straightforward causal manner and is the justification for expenditure on trying to improve school attendance, with schools having ever-higher targets to reach.

Of course, most children and young people do not question whether they should go to school. They believe what their parents, teachers and society tell them: that going to school will give them the qualifications they need for a good career. Most go to school regularly with varying mixtures of enjoyment, acceptance and dislike. However, every day 8–10 per cent of pupils miss school (Reid, 1999), and this figure has barely changed since compulsory schooling began in 1870. In spite of £885 million being spent on initiatives to reduce school absence between 1997/98 and 2003/4, there has been no decrease in rate and some indication that the problem is worsening,

with children showing absence earlier in their school careers (Reid, 2006).

Also unchanged since compulsory schooling began is the responsibility given to parents for ensuring that their children receive an education (although this need not be in school). Both the Elementary Education Act 1876 and the Education Act 1996 enforced this, threatening parents with legal sanctions, including a possible prison sentence since 2004.

In this article I am going to discuss some of the difficulties and contradictions associated with the notion of 'raising school attendance', which may help explain why it is so difficult to achieve, and question the role of legal sanctions. I will also suggest how the discipline of psychology may contribute to this complex area.

## Separation of behavioural and attendance difficulties

The first problem concerns the arbitrary separation of so-called 'behavioural' and 'attendance' difficulties. These difficulties are often present in the same individual pupils. However, in practice they are tackled separately, with behavioural support teachers or school pastoral staff working on behavioural difficulties and education welfare services tackling poor attendance. This results in different professions, which have different ways of working and different rates of pay, often receiving referrals for the same pupils. It is doubtful whether such professionals have much background in science-based psychology, which should be an important part of any knowledge base concerning childhood behavioural difficulties.

From a developmental psychology perspective, it would be expected that behaviour and school attendance problems evolve in the same way; that is, through social learning that takes place within the family, school and wider community (Bandura, 1977) with parental expectations, attributions and beliefs influencing their self-efficacy (Bandura,

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1995) and their children's attitudes and reaction to school (Sheppard, 2007). Similar multimodal solutions are likely to be needed for both types of difficulty.

Government suggests that increasing school attendance will reduce antisocial behaviour. A prospective longitudinal study, following a sample of individuals from eight years of age to 40 years of age (Farrington, 2000), investigated psychosocial predictors of adult antisocial personality and convictions. It showed that the most important predictors were having a convicted parent, large family size, low ability or attainment, and child-rearing factors, such as poor parental supervision and disrupted family. Data on school attendance were collected but poor school attendance was not an independent predictor of either offending behaviour or other poor life outcomes (Farrington, 1996). Therefore, it was not included in the 22 explanatory risk factors for offending studied.

Farrington's research actually suggests that a mixture of family background and individual characteristics had more influence on whether a child developed antisocial behaviour than did schools or

attendance at school. Collins (1998) reported that girls tended to be absent from school more than boys, yet had significantly lower rates of offending; so any causal relationship between school absence and offending must be different in the two genders. The conclusion is that poor school attendance may accompany antisocial behaviour, but is not the cause.

Retrospective studies suggest that most adult offenders had childhoods associated with behavioural problems at school and antisocial behaviour in adolescence and adulthood (see e.g. Herbert, 2006), with aggressive behaviour remaining a stable personality trait. It is childhood behavioural difficulties that predict adult offending, not school absence.

### Links between attendance and attainment

The Miliband letter highlighted the links between attendance and attainment. Such a positive correlation is expected, as good attenders are likely to have attributes that promote attainment, such as motivation, self-discipline and persistence, which will have derived from parent and school

relationships from the early primary years. However, a study by Morris and Rutt (2004) showed that there was an uneven association between school attendance and attainment in 14- and 15-year-old pupils. For example, boys showed underperformance compared to girls with the same level of attendance.

In fact, it has been consistently shown that there is a strong negative correlation between most measures of social disadvantage and school achievement, with the effects of disadvantage being cumulative. In spite of extra resources for schools in areas of high need, findings have generally shown that family circumstances, parental interest in and attitude to education,

accounted for significantly more of the variation in children's school achievement than school factors (Mortimore & Whitty, 2000). Therefore encouraging attendance without changing some of the other characteristics of social disadvantage may not result in significantly improved attainment.

### Attendance figures

A third difficulty in assessing the link between attendance and attainment concerns the attendance figures themselves. Schools must keep registers, which distinguish so-called authorised from unauthorised absence and describe the attendance of each child, coding absence type (e.g. illness, holiday). However, this detail is not reflected in the overall attendance figures schools provide for government. If children miss school for genuine illness, authorised by the school, or they just miss a day, not authorised by the school, then both types of absence contribute to the official figures. However, post-register and specific lesson absences, increasingly common in the later secondary school years, do not contribute to such figures (Reid, 2006). Schools are under considerable pressure to reach their national attendance targets.

Poor attenders often have behavioural difficulties in school and tend to get excluded, with these days of exclusion incorporated in pupils' absence percentage. Therefore, on the one hand, poor attenders are being told by education welfare services that they must attend school, but on the other, schools enforce their absence by excluding them. This discrepancy can seriously affect the attendance figures and must confuse parents and poor attenders alike.

### Types of non-attender

A fourth difficulty involves the different types of non-attender, which can be defined differently by practitioners, local authorities, researchers or academics.



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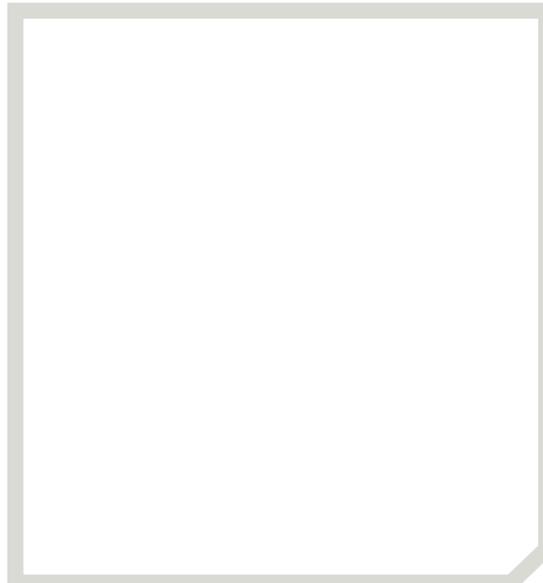
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Broadly, I will describe three types, but practice suggests considerable variability and overlap.

- | The largest category is those who are absent with parental consent and knowledge (Reid, 2002). Naturally parents will agree to absence for genuine illness, but research shows that two thirds of 12- to 13-year-olds press their parents for a day off school, occasionally or more often, generally using the excuse of illness (Sheppard, 2005). Parents of good attenders tend not to grant this request, while parents of poor attenders are inconsistent in their responses (Sheppard, 2007).
- | Real truants, defined in this article as pupils absent from school for the whole or part of the day without parental consent, make up only a small percentage of school absences.
- | The third group are school refusers, who are anxious about attending school and show emotional difficulties, including somatisation illnesses. This is a heterogeneous problem that may be related to childhood social phobia or depression and may accompany difficulties such as physical illness, parental psychiatric disorder or sexual abuse (Elliott, 1999). Although there are research-based cognitive behavioural treatments available (Spence et al., 2000), adolescents are likely to 'refuse' these also. This is often an extremely complex group with neither parent nor child able or willing to discuss candidly the reasons for school absence. Failure to find medical or psychological reasons for school absence leads to the conclusion that the children are uncooperative, that parents are not getting them to school and should receive legal sanctions.

In general, there are few established criteria to determine accurately the features or type of non-attender, although how the child is perceived by education welfare services and schools heavily influences practice with the family. Many non-attenders display a confusing mix of emotional and behavioural difficulties. Comprehensive psychological/social assessment, using clinical interviews, behavioural observation and validated rating scales, would be helpful for disentangling the variables and informing intervention, but the availability of either educational or clinical psychologists to



**Pupils absent from school without parental consent make up only a small percentage of school absences**

carry out such procedures varies between local authorities.

### **Fining and prosecuting parents**

The law decrees that parents are responsible for their children receiving an education. The threat of legal action against parents is successful in getting some young people back to school (Halsey et al., 2004). However, for children from families with multiple problems, there is no such easy process, and no evidence that taking the parents to court works either. The scant evidence shows that more frequently prosecuting authorities do not have better attendance (Blacktop & Blyth, 1999; Zhang, 2004), but, in spite of this, education services can be under considerable pressure from schools to take legal action and it remains a significant role of the education welfare service.

A regression design in research would settle this question convincingly by demonstrating whether a procedure (i.e. parental prosecution) caused a change in outcome (i.e. improved pupil school attendance). The use of multiple regression would illuminate whether parental prosecution predicted improved attendance over and above other contributory factors. As there is no empirical study of this kind, clarifying the effectiveness of legal action, practitioners are not able to use it in either a systematic or fair manner and there is variability in the use of the law both within and between local authorities. Legal action, often a last resort, tends to be taken with parents who are socially excluded, with financial penalties serving a mixture of deterrence, retribution and a culture of blame (Hoyle, 1998), leaving the

professional involved to grapple with moral and ethical questions.

As attendance and behaviour problems result from similar causal factors, developing through social learning in the childhood years – with parents playing a role in the onset of both difficulties – it could be argued that if it is 'right' to prosecute parents for their children's school absenteeism, then it is 'right' also to prosecute them for their children's behavioural difficulties or school exclusions. To date, legislation still recommends parental prosecution for poor school attendance but not for other behavioural problems, which is irrational and ignores knowledge gained about causes of behaviour during the 20th century.

### **Conclusion**

I have discussed five problems associated with trying to increase school attendance that help explain why improvement is so difficult to achieve. Poor school attendance is not a unitary construct that can be solved by simple solutions, such as legal sanctions. It should be thought of, at best, as a quantifiable indicator of more complex problems. School absenteeism represents one way some children or young people have learnt to cope with these problems.

Do we know what we're doing when we try to raise school attendance? Apart from some of the inconsistencies or contradictions I have mentioned in this article, much more needs to be understood about why some children do not attend school, when the majority do. This means using the knowledge base of psychology and other social sciences to inform sophisticated family assessments and multi-agency interventions, and to influence attitudes to learning, school and employment.

I have cited Bandura's work on social learning theory as an important causal explanation for both attendance and behavioural difficulties, so it seems fitting to end with a statement from him in a recent article from *The Psychologist* about his current work (Bandura, 2009):

Failure to address the psychosocial determinants of human behaviour is often the weakest link in social policy initiatives.



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