

## 2.3 Attendance

Evidence has found that there are a variety of factors that lead to poor attendance amongst CLA.

**Attitudes to education in the birth home environment:** some CLA may not attend school due to habits picked up prior to entering the care system. The Child Looked After's parents' own experience of school is likely to influence the example of school behaviour and academic learning that they model to their child. Children who are poor attendees may have grown up with inconsistent parental attitudes to education and often perceive their parents as not having achieved at school.

**Previously disrupted school attendance:** CLA have often had long standing school attendance issues and have often moved schools several times. As a result of this, they may have gaps in their learning, and have fallen behind their peers before they become looked after. These learning gaps make coming to school onerous, since the child may find it difficult to participate in the set work, and are constantly reminded that they are not working at the same level as their peers.

**Peer pressure:** the literature has shown that peer pressure, which can develop into bullying, is one of the reasons for poor school attendance amongst CLA. This needs to be addressed early as peer pressure can lead to exclusion, disengagement and under achievement

**Behavioural issues:** one of the main reasons for exclusion is persistent disruptive behaviour and early intervention to prevent poor behaviours escalating to a crisis point is essential to tackle this issue.

**Underlying social and personal issues:** CLA dealing with the loss of a parent or underlying parental drug or alcohol problems may have poor attendance rates.

**Personal factors:** a lack of self-esteem and poor social skills, can lead to higher absenteeism rates. Personal factors can also include experiencing learning difficulties and Special Educational Needs

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**Contact with birth parents:** A stable foster carer environment can lead to higher attendance rates amongst CLA. However, where a child makes contact with their birth family, this has the potential to have a negative impact on school attendance, both in the short and long term.

**Socio-economic circumstances:** evidence suggests that overall the higher the rate of deprivation in a school, the higher the absenteeism rate. The literature also shows that children from deprived socio-economic backgrounds have less positive attitudes to school and learning than their peers in more affluent areas.

**Age when a child enters the care system:** research shows that children who enter care before the age of 12 outperform those who enter care at age 12 or above. A reason for this may be that those who became looked after when they were younger have tended to live in foster homes and therefore have more settled lives. As Children Looked After become older, there are potential issues in relation to placement stability.

**Placement type and stability:** the literature suggests that Children Looked After in foster care have better attendance rates than those children in residential care settings. For the latter group, attendance at school may be influenced by pressure from their peers who are also not attending school. Also, those children in long term or more stable placements tend to have better attendance rates than other groups of Children Looked After.

### **Strategies to improve attendance amongst CLA**

- Be sensitive in sharing information about children who are looked after. Most children do not want to be identified by their peers as looked after.
- Maintain regular contact with carers, encouraging high expectations of CLA and what they can achieve.
- Keep the child's social worker informed if there are concerns about attendance.
- Encourage other professionals to hold CLA meetings/reviews out of school hours.
- Raise aspirations of CLA by offering lots of opportunities for children to develop their strengths and talents. This has been identified as one of the key factors that lead to CLA succeeding educationally (Happer et al 2006).
- Encourage involvement in school activities outside school hours such as visits, outdoor activities, sports, drama, art or any other club that might interest the young person.
- Encourage carers and CLA to attend informal activities at the school such as plays, concerts, social events and sporting activities.
- Use positive rewards such as vouchers, day trips or token rewards such as stars or virtual points for improved attendance and punctuality. Set realistic targets for the CLA to achieve the rewards. In the short term, these may not be the usual targets that other pupils are expected to achieve.
- Consider reduced hours or phased returns especially after a traumatic event. However, the expectation must be that the child will return to full attendance over time.
- Provide a consistent adult in school for the child to have regular, easy contact with. This needs to be someone that the child likes, trusts and respects. Ideally this child will choose who this key person should be. The relationship should be a long term one: try to choose an adult who is likely to remain in the school for a long time. This key person does not have to be the Designated Teacher. The aim is to develop a relationship with an adult who focuses on the child's personal, emotional and academic needs.

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- Consider peer mentoring. This provides a supportive social relationship for the child with a person of their own age.
- Counselling is offered by many schools to CLA. Working through some of the complex factors that affect school attendance can be helpful.
- Ensure that all stakeholders working with the CLA are operating in a coherent way, placing a high priority on school attendance and achievement.
- Ensure that the needs of CLA are specifically addressed in school development planning and clear in school policies and procedures. Whilst generic support may be appropriate for some CLA, others will have complex needs and require tailored support and a flexible approach to school systems and procedures. Planning needs to be proactive, rather than reactive.
- Offer training on the needs of CLA to school staff, so that the day to day experience of the CLA supports their needs.

**Read more:**

PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP (2011). *Study into how the education system can improve the attendance of looked after children at post primary school*. Bangor, County Down: Department of Education, Northern Ireland.