

At a glance

How does the association between special education need and absence vary overtime and across special education need types?

What we found out

- Children with special education need (SEN) are more likely to have poorer school attendance, and that is in spite of other characteristics (i.e., being male/female, being from a certain ethnicity, ever being eligible for free school meals, ever having child looked after or child in need status).
- Among all SEN children, those with physical disability have the lowest attendance at school, followed by those with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties.
- Absence is more common in older age groups regardless of having SEN or not. However, those with a behavioural, emotional and social difficulties type of SEN have the sharpest increase in absence rates as they get older.
- The relationship between SEN and absenteeism varied substantially across Local Authorities.

Why we did this study

Children who attend school on a regular basis are given the greatest opportunity to learn and develop skills, which is an important step towards reaching their full potential. Children who do not attend school regularly, on the other hand, are much more likely to leave school with few or even no qualifications, and they are more likely to be drawn into crime and anti-social behaviour such as drug and alcohol abuse.

Absence from school is related to many different factors. Some absences are accounted for by individual factors such as chronic illness, mental health problems, disability, and alcohol/substance use. Some are associated with factors to do with the school environment such as poor school climate, unreliable school transport and bullying. Some are associated with familial problems such as family members' health or mental health problems, housing instability or homelessness, and lack of structure or supervision. Lastly, some absences are also associated with wider

societal issues such as poverty and unsafe neighbourhoods.

Not all schools regularly collect information on mental health difficulties of their students, but every school is required to have systems in place to identify children who need support. If children with SEN and especially those with certain types of SEN have higher rates of absenteeism, schools can use this information to channel extra attention and resources.

What we did

We analysed a routinely collected data set by the Department for Education. Our sample included 418,455 mainstream school pupils from 151 local authorities, from 2012/13, when the pupils were in year 7, until 2016/17, when they were in year 11.

Recommendations

Findings indicate children with SEN higher absenteeism and some specific needs are associated with more absences than others. The substantial variation in attendance across different local authorities suggests that there is scope for schools and local authorities to support children and young people with SEN to increase their attendance.

- Schools and local authorities should put preventative strategies in place to support attendance for children with SEN.
- Schools should review and monitor their attendance data from their earliest year groups onwards to identify emerging needs.
- Children with SEN may have increased absenteeism due to medical needs. Schools should work closely with parents, carers and children to identify what support might be needed to improve participation in learning.
- Schools and/or local authorities can share best practice examples which may help other schools to tailor their practices accordingly.

See [journal article](#) for more information.