

Q: Why do parents receive a letter about their child's attendance, when the child was absent due to a medical appointment and the school had been notified?

The government have set all schools targets to reduce what they term 'persistent absence'. In this instance, absence includes any time off school, even where this is authorised by the school (*Please note: In law ONLY a head teacher can authorise absence from school, even where this pertains to a medical issue*). Hence, when a child's attendance falls below 85% - at any point - schools are likely to generate a letter to the parents asking them to improve their child's attendance. Basically, the schools have to be seen to be doing something, even when they know the absence is for genuine reasons.

Q: What do parents need to do when they receive a letter?

These letters are standard and you should not be alarmed. In law, only absence which is NOT authorised is prosecutable. My best advice would be to respond to the letter by saying something like:

'Thank you for your letter dated..... regarding my child's X% attendance rate. As you are aware this is due to unavoidable medical appointments (*or whatever the reason*) of which you were informed in advance and which you have agreed to authorise. While I/we always endeavour to keep absence from school to a minimum, given my child's situation medical appointments must take priority until further notice. Please keep me informed of any concerns that you may have regarding the impact of his/her absence on his/her educational progress'.

Q: Sometimes schools give rewards for 100% attendance. Children with a cleft may miss out on this because they had time off for appointments, and parents often feel this is discriminatory. Is there anything that can be done about this?

This is a tricky one. Schools are actively encouraged to promote good attendance in school as the data clearly shows a direct correlation between attendance levels (even at Primary School) and later educational outcomes. Put simply, low attendance has a direct long term effect on the number and grade of GCSEs a student can eventually get. That having been said, clearly some pupils, for a variety of reasons, find 100% attendance impossible and where reward systems exist this can have a demoralising effect on both the pupil and the class.

Under the terms of the Equality Act, schools have to make 'reasonable adjustments' to ensure all young people access the curriculum fully and one possible answer would be for a school to make such an adjustment in terms of attendance data and measure a pupil's attendance against the maximum they could hope to achieve. This, however, can be confusing for schools where a number of pupils have different targets to the norm. My best suggestion would be to discuss with the school changing their reward scheme to highlight 'excellent', 'improved' and/or 'maximum' attendance rather than 100%. This allows for everyone to be able to succeed.

One point to bear in mind - if a child is in registration to be marked present and later leaves for an appointment, they retain their 'present' mark for that session (morning or afternoon) -

but MUST be signed out by the parent for fire regulations purposes. Hence it is often better to have a later appointment in the day, rather than the first one in the morning!

Q: What happens about appointments for speech therapy? Will the school be aware of these (when they are provided through the hospital cleft team)?

Schools will normally not be informed of these directly, so the onus of responsibility is still on the parent to inform the school with as much advance notice as possible. If there are a series of appointments, schools have the facility to book these in advance, but parents must then remember to inform them of any cancellations/changes.

Q: Is there a difference between primary schools and secondary schools in terms of how they monitor/record appointments as absences?

None whatsoever. The legal guidance is exactly the same for all schools. The response to absence from the different types of school may not be the same, however, as clearly absence at certain times of year/point in the education cycle (Beginning of the school year, SATs, GCSE's etc) has more significance.

Q: If a child is in secondary school, parents may have increased concerns about their child missing school for appointments – how can parents and schools work together to manage this?

Information exchange is the key! Parents should be aware of their child's timetable and try and ensure that medical appointments do not always occur during the same lessons. Discuss with your child's teachers how they can catch up on work missed or homework set if they have to be absent. Try and make appointments during PE lessons, on teacher training days or other times that are less crucial. Give the school as much notice as possible and use the opportunity of parent-teacher meetings to ensure that ALL staff are aware of the important reasons behind the child's absence as this is often not passed on to subject teachers. Know who your child's pastoral head is (head of house, year group etc probably) and discuss in depth with them the issues. If you are aware that there may be a need for any extended absences in future (for surgery, longer-term therapies etc) then let the school know that in advance so they are prepared and can keep you informed of any key periods to try and avoid.

Q: Is there a letter/form that parents can fill in to notify a new school about their child's cleft?

CLAPA has created a letter for parents to add their child's details to, and this can be found on CLAPA's website under the 'Parents' section.

Our thanks go to Ros Gowers, Independent Education Social Worker, Oaktree Co-Operative, for her time and assistance in answering these queries.