

Supporting School Attendance: The Vital Role of GPs in Helping Pupils with Medical Conditions Thrive

School attendance is a cornerstone of a child's development, wellbeing, and future opportunities. For pupils with medical conditions, regular attendance can be particularly challenging—but with the right support from health professionals, especially GPs, these barriers can be overcome. This article explores how GPs can play a pivotal role in improving attendance, with real-world case studies and practical guidance on effective communication with schools.

Why GP Involvement Matters

GPs are often the first point of contact for families navigating health-related school absence. Their trusted relationships and holistic understanding of family dynamics position them uniquely to:

- Identify early signs of persistent absence.
- Reassure families about the benefits of school attendance.
- Collaborate with schools to create tailored support plans.
- Signpost to mental health and wellbeing services.

The Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) has endorsed five key principles to guide GPs in this role

1. Encourage attendance where appropriate.
2. Promote the long-term benefits of education.
3. Address anxiety sensitively, especially at term starts.
4. Signpost to school-based mental health resources.
5. Schedule appointments to minimise school disruption.



Case Study 1: Managing Chronic Illness with Collaborative Care

Pupil: A 13-year-old with juvenile arthritis

Challenge: Frequent absences due to pain and fatigue

GP Action: The GP worked with the school's SENCO to develop a flexible timetable and rest breaks. They provided medical evidence to support a reduced PE schedule and referred the pupil to a physiotherapist.

Outcome: Attendance improved from 60% to 85% over two terms. The pupil reported feeling more included and less anxious about falling behind.

Case Study 2: Supporting Mental Health and Reintegration

Pupil: A 15-year-old with anxiety and panic attacks

Challenge: School refusal and isolation

GP Action: The GP liaised with the school's pastoral team and Mental Health Support Team (MHST). They co-developed a phased reintegration plan and provided reassurance to the family about the importance of attending the first week of term

Outcome: The pupil returned part-time initially, then full-time within six weeks. Attendance rose from 40% to 90%, and the pupil began engaging in extracurricular activities.

Case Study 3: Effective Communication and Early Intervention

Pupil: A 10-year-old with asthma and frequent colds

Challenge: Parents unsure when child was “too ill” for school

GP Action: The GP used NHS guidance to clarify when attendance was safe and encouraged the family to communicate directly with the school. They also helped the school understand the child’s condition and provided a care plan.

Outcome: Absences due to minor illness decreased. The school adjusted expectations and provided a warm, supportive environment

Best Practice in Communication

The Department for Education’s toolkit for schools emphasises the importance of timely, personalised, and empathetic communication

GPs can support this by:

- Using child-specific data when discussing attendance.
- Framing absence in terms of missed learning and social opportunities.
- Encouraging parents to speak with school staff early.
- Reinforcing the school’s role in safeguarding and wellbeing.

Statutory Guidance and Local Authority Support

Local authorities are required to ensure children with health needs receive a suitable education, whether in school or through alternative provision

GPs can help by:

- Providing timely medical evidence.
- Supporting reintegration plans.
- Advocating for trauma-informed approaches and SEND assessments where needed.

Conclusion

GPs are not just healthcare providers—they are key allies in a child’s educational journey. By fostering strong partnerships with schools and families, GPs can help ensure that pupils with medical conditions are not left behind. Every child deserves the chance to learn, grow, and thrive—and together, we can make that happen.

Local contacts:

Local Authority	LA contact for family or professional for advice:
Buckinghamshire	Present for Their Future Buckinghamshire Council countyattendanceteam@buckinghamshire.gov.uk
Oxfordshire	attendance@oxfordshire.gov.uk Contact the Education, Employment and Training (EET) Team Oxfordshire County Council
Reading	cspoa@brighterfuturesforchildren.org Early help - Brighter Futures For Children
Wokingham	Education.welfare@wokingham.gov.uk triage@wokingham.gov.uk
West Berkshire	ewss@westberks.gov.uk child@westberks.gov.uk