



# **School refusal:**

# **Insights from Action for Children's Parent Talk Service 2022-23**

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## Summary

School refusal and anxiety is the most common issue that parents and carers<sup>1</sup> seek support with from Action for Children's Parent Talk service. Parent Talk is a unique service that provides online support to parents and carers through both one-to-one sessions with family support workers and advice articles.

Last year our advice article on the issue of school refusal was used more than 50,000 times. We have looked into the issues that parents dealing with school refusal face in more detail by analysing a sample of one-to-one conversations. Three particular problems stand out.

### 1. Parents don't know where to turn

The most common challenge raised by parents whose children are refusing to go to school, or struggling with school anxiety, is that they don't know where to turn for help. That can be because their child's school is struggling to offer the support they think their child needs, or because they simply aren't being offered any support at all.

### 2. Parents struggle to access specialist support for their children

Where families are struggling with school refusal it is often related to challenges accessing specialist support. That can be mental health services, support for special educational needs, or early help services.

### 3. Learning from home can help and hinder school attendance

Many parents struggling with school refusal mentioned the impact of home learning during the pandemic. For some parents home learning was a lifeline, enabling their child to stay in touch with their schooling to some degree. For others, the option of learning from home had compounded their child's reluctance to attend school.

High levels of absence from school is a major problem both for the country and for children missing out on school. One thing that would help reduce absence is better support for parents. The government has made some progress on developing better support services for parents but could do more. Three changes would help reduce school absences:

1. Ensure there is a plan to roll out the new approach to family help services set out in Stable Homes, Built on Love. That should include incorporating attendance mentors into family help services.
2. Commit to delivering family hubs in every area of the country.
3. Review the provision of information and advice services for parents and carers - through services such as Family Information Services and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Information Advice and Support Services (SENDIASS) - to ensure the advice on offer is helping them to help children struggling with school refusal get back to school.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this report we refer to 'parents' rather than 'parents and carers'. Parent Talk is an inclusive service that supports anyone who needs support with issue related to their family life. When we use 'parents' it is as a shorthand for parents and carers.

## Background

There are over 12 million parents in the UK.<sup>2</sup> The support they provide to their children is a crucial determinant of child wellbeing and later life outcomes.

At Action for Children, we support hundreds of thousands of parents every year. Just through our Parent Talk service we supported 540,000 parents last year, including nearly 7,000 through one-to-one sessions with family support workers. Through providing that support, we know that parents face a huge range of challenges.

Our Parent Talk service is a unique, online service that provides accessible and trustworthy support to parents free of charge. Parents can access one-to-one advice from parenting coaches – trained family support workers – as well as support and advice articles across a range of common parenting challenges.

## Data

This briefing paper uses data collected through our Parent Talk service and helps shine a light on the specific challenges that some parents in the UK face. The report uses two types of data collected between April 2022 and March 2023:

- Anonymised one-to-one conversations – each conversation is recorded and given ‘tags’ based on the types of support that parents needed. We have also analysed a sample of anonymised conversations to better understand the nature of the issues parents faced.
- Webpage views. The Parent Talk website provides information, advice, and guidance to parents.

Where we have used text from conversations with parents, we have anonymised the conversations to ensure the confidentiality of the parents and children we are supporting.

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<sup>2</sup> ONS, (2022) [Families and households in the UK: 2022](#)

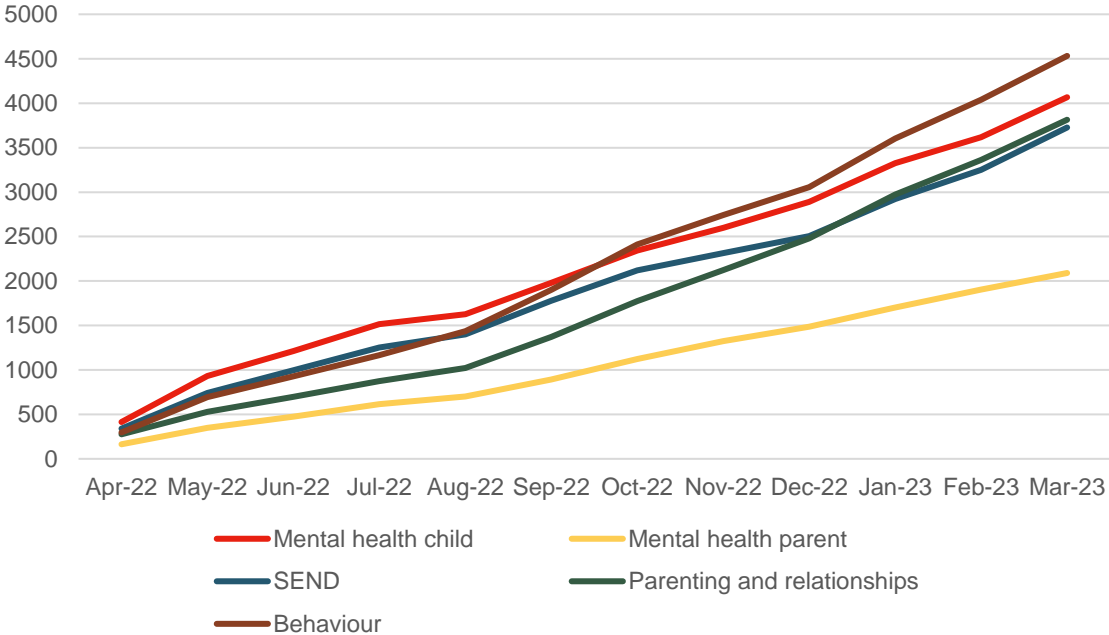
# The challenges parents face

Last year we supported 6,869 parents through one-to-one conversations and Parent Talk advice and information pages were accessed 759,000 times.<sup>3</sup> Through providing that support we have some insight into the nature of the issues that parents and carers face when giving their children the support they need.

## One-to-one conversations

Looking just at the one-to-one conversations from last year, behaviour related issues were the most common our family support workers helped parents with. We supported parents with 4,500 issues related to behaviour. That was followed by child mental health issues (4,000), and parenting and relationship related problems (3,800).<sup>4</sup>

**Chart 1: One-to-one conversations – total cumulative issues (April 2022 – April 2023)**



## Advice and information

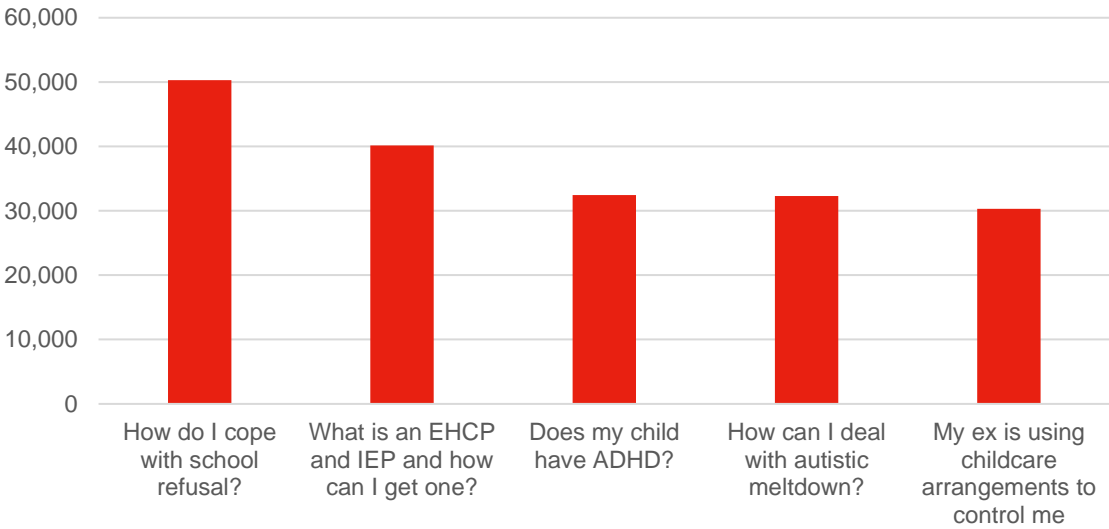
Due to the limited capacity of our family support workers, far more parents can get support through our online advice and information pages. Last year, these articles were visited 759,000 times by parents struggling with parenting related challenges. As shown by the chart below, three of the top five most visited articles related to special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

The most widely visited article – used more than 50,000 times last year provides support to parents who are struggling to manage school refusal. We look into the issue of school refusal in more detail below.

<sup>3</sup> By 540,000 parents

<sup>4</sup> Those categories contain broad ranges of issues which we can provide on request.

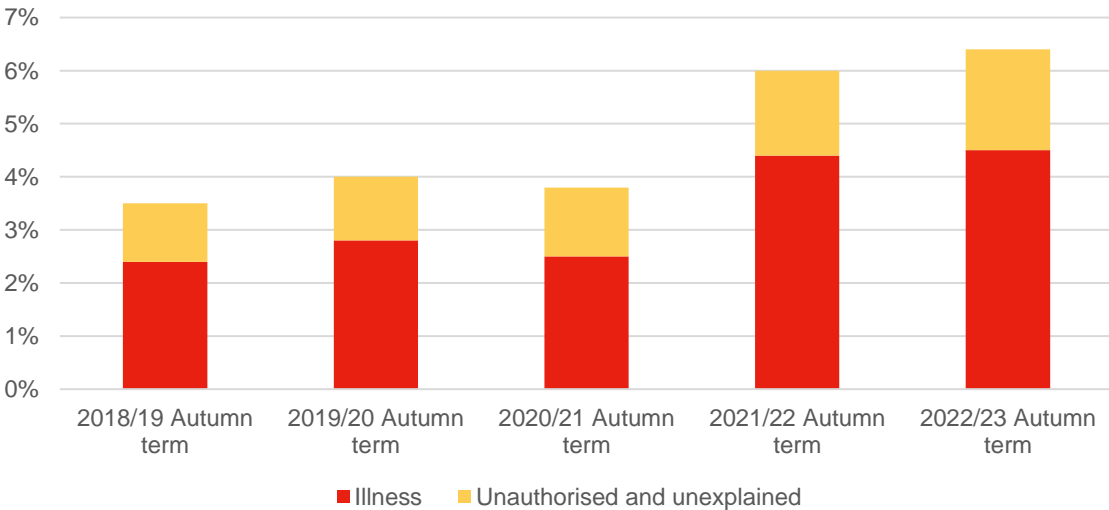
**Chart 2: Online articles – top five most visited advice articles**  
*April 2022 – March 2023*



## School refusal

School refusal was the most common issue that parents sought support for from our Parent Talk service last year. That is concerning but not surprising. As shown by the chart below school absence jumped from around 4% in the autumn term of 2020/21 to 6% in 2021/22. It stayed high last year, rising to over 6%.<sup>5</sup>

**Chart 3: Rate of illness and unauthorised and unexplained absences across state-funded English schools in Autumn term**  
*Autumn Term 2018/19 to Autumn term 2022/23*



<sup>5</sup> Office for National Statistics, Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn term. Action for Children calculations. Data accessible at <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england>

There are lots of reasons for that jump in absences. The biggest underlying factor is higher rates of illness, which have increased from 2.8% in 2020/21 to around 4.5% for the last two years. However, underpinning both illness and unauthorised absences there are a range of complex issues facing children and parents.

In its attendance audit, the Children's Commissioner for England's Office highlighted issues relating to mental health, SEND, and being a young carer as particular challenges that made it more likely that children might be absent from school.<sup>6</sup>

Using anonymised data from one-to-one conversations where parents raised the issue of school refusal, we can look at some of the reasons we have seen at Action for Children that are related to school refusal. Three issues stand out.

## **1. Parents don't know where to turn**

The most common issue that parents raise when they speak to Action for Children about school refusal is a feeling of not knowing where to turn for help. One parent turned to Action for Children when the work they were doing with the school didn't seem to be getting anywhere.

*'My son is experiencing severe anxiety and panic attacks. That includes about school. We are working with the school but at the moment can only get him to go into a dedicated room for one hour. And only if one of us (his parents) wait at the school. We are struggling to know what to do.'*

School refusal can often be linked to a wide range of issues. Whether those are behavioural or related to health problems. That means when parents turn to Action for Children, they can be confused about the next step they should take. For instance, one parent told us they had noticed a number of behavioural changes but were 'at a loss' in terms of what to do next.

*'My daughter's behaviour at school is a constant worry. She fell out with friends and has started refusing to go to school. She often goes to sleep early after she gets home from school. I don't know what I've missed. She has always done well at school until now. I'm at a loss.'*

### ***Schools struggle to provide the support parents need***

A common theme from the support we provide to parents is the concern that schools aren't able to provide them or their children with the help they need to get their children to go to school.

*'I need help for my daughter at primary school. She has been diagnosed with autism but I'm struggling to get her to attend school. I don't think the school are doing enough but I just want advice.'*

Sometimes parents feel the way their child's school reacts to attendance issues makes it harder for them to resolve the issue. For example, one parent of a child with SEN got a letter from a doctor recommending uniform changes to accommodate the child's needs. The school refused and the parent described being 'at their wit's end in what to do.'

### ***Parents are often doing the right thing***

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<sup>6</sup> Children's Commissioner, (2023) [Attendance is everyone's business](#)

Despite parents feeling like they are struggling to find support, often family support workers find they are providing reassurance to parents who are doing everything they can. Often parents have tried a range of approaches to try and resolve school refusal issues. One parent was looking for advice on whether to seek private mental health support.

*'My son was refusing to go to school last year but the school made adjustments and that helped. However he's now having difficulties with anxiety again. I have used advice from the NHS and helped him to communicate his feelings. But I need more help.'*

## **2. Parents struggle to access specialist support for their children**

Even when parents do know where to turn, that doesn't mean they get the help they need.

### ***Mental health support***

One common issue parents face is getting help for children with mental health problems. One parent asked for support whilst waiting for a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) assessment.

*'My son is waiting for a CAMHS assessment. He suffers with attendance as the school is unable to meet his needs. He has been diagnosed with a number of conditions but I feel unable to cope at the moment and need advice.'*

One particular challenge parents face when accessing mental health services is when services are refused despite high levels of need. One parent told a family support worker:

*'Our child has bad anger issues and is verbally and physically abusive to the point where it's not safe to be in the house. We were referred to CAMHS and they tested him for ADHD which he doesn't have so we haven't been offered any help. We just can't cope with it all.'*

### ***Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)***

As already described in the many of the conversations highlighted above, many of the issues parents ask for help with involve children with SEND. As with mental health problems, parents often seek support when they feel like they are running out of ways to help their children. One carer asked for help when their grandson's Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP), designed to meet a child or young person's additional needs relating to those areas, was stopped.

*'Our grandson hasn't been in school since Covid. The school provides tutoring but he's not in school. He has had support from early help as part of an EHCP but there was a limit to the number of sessions he could have. The school have stopped delivering the EHCP. He's falling behind at school and school refuse to give him work at home due to the cost and not wanting to encourage him to stay at home. He's been told that he will either be held back a year or will have to leave to go to a college. Which doesn't help.'*

### ***School refusal is often the result of a long term issue***

When parents are struggling with school refusal – and particularly school refusal related to issues with accessing specialist support – it's often the result of long-term challenges. One parent asked for support for their 15-year-old who she thought had 'fallen through the net' lots of times over the course of her childhood. They said:

*'She has now become so anxious that I had to take her out. But am being told I can't get any assessment as she doesn't want to do anything. The GP says I need a referral from school but I am being told different things. All I see is her getting worse, I am scared for her mental health. She has never had the help she needs and now I feel like I am being blamed. Is there any advice?'*

### **3. Learning from home can help and hinder school attendance**

An issue that parents facing school refusal raise is the impact of home schooling on their children. That can be the way children's behaviour has changed since Covid as well as how the option of learning from home can affect school refusal. One parent spoke about how their child was happy to learn at home, but how this was unsustainable.

*'My daughter started a new school this week but won't go back. She says she has no friends. She hasn't been to school for the last few months but says she is happy to work from home. I'm a nurse with three children so I need her to be in school.'*

Some parents feel like schools are too reluctant to enable their child to work at home, whilst others say the option encourages further school refusal. One parent said:

*'Their school are sending work home but that means she is becoming settled at home and there is no support with getting her back to school.'*

## **Conclusion**

High levels of absence from school is a huge problem for the country, the children missing out on school, and their families. Our family support workers provide help to parents of all ages – children as old as 17 and as young as five who are refusing to go to school and college.

Parents worry about their children's missed learning. Sometimes the impact on children can be severe. One parent asked for help after their child had gone missing having forced them to attend school. Parents also speak about the impact on their families, including their other children, and their own mental health.

School attendance is a high-profile issue with a wide range of causes and solutions. What stands out from helping parents through our Parent Talk service is that parents are often trying to get their child to attend school but can't get the support they or their children need.

The government has made some progress on developing better support services for parents but could do more. Three changes to the support we offer parents would help reduce school absences:

#### **1. Ensure there is a plan to roll out the new approach to family help services set out in *Stable Homes, Built on Love*.**

In its new strategy for children's social care, the government has proposed to establish a new approach to supporting families – family help. The current plan is to test how best to deliver family help in up to 12 local authorities. A new approach to early help is hugely needed. As our research has found<sup>7</sup>, the provision of early help is inconsistent and, too often, not a

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<sup>7</sup> Action for Children, (2022) [Too little, too late: early help and early intervention spending in England](#)



priority. The government must ensure it builds on those pilots so that the hundreds of thousands of families needing more support get the help they need.

The new approach to family help should incorporate attendance mentors so that attendance support is offered within the wider whole-family support system.

**2. *Commit to delivering family hubs in every area of the country.***

Around 80 local authorities have been offered funding to establish family help services until 2025.<sup>8</sup> Family hubs *should* include parenting support services and a digital offer for parents and carers.<sup>9</sup> Family hubs should be extended to all areas of the country, given long-term funding, and all family hubs should have in-person and digital parenting support services that can support parents and carers struggling with school refusal.

**3. *Review the provision of information and advice services for parents and carers - through services such as Family Information Services and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Information Advice and Support Services (SENDIASS) - to ensure the advice on offer is helping them to help children struggling with school refusal get back to school.***

Alongside those new initiatives, there are a number of existing approaches to providing support for the challenges that parents face specifically. Two of those are Family Information Services and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Information Advice and Support Services (SENDIASS). The government should initiate a rapid review of parenting support more generally to ensure that existing approaches are integrated into family hubs and new family help services.

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<sup>8</sup> DfE, (2023) [Thousands of families to benefit from local support in rollout of Family Hubs](#)

<sup>9</sup> DfE, (2022) [Family Hubs and Start for Life programme: local authority guide](#)

# Action for Children Report

Report Date: 24 October 2023