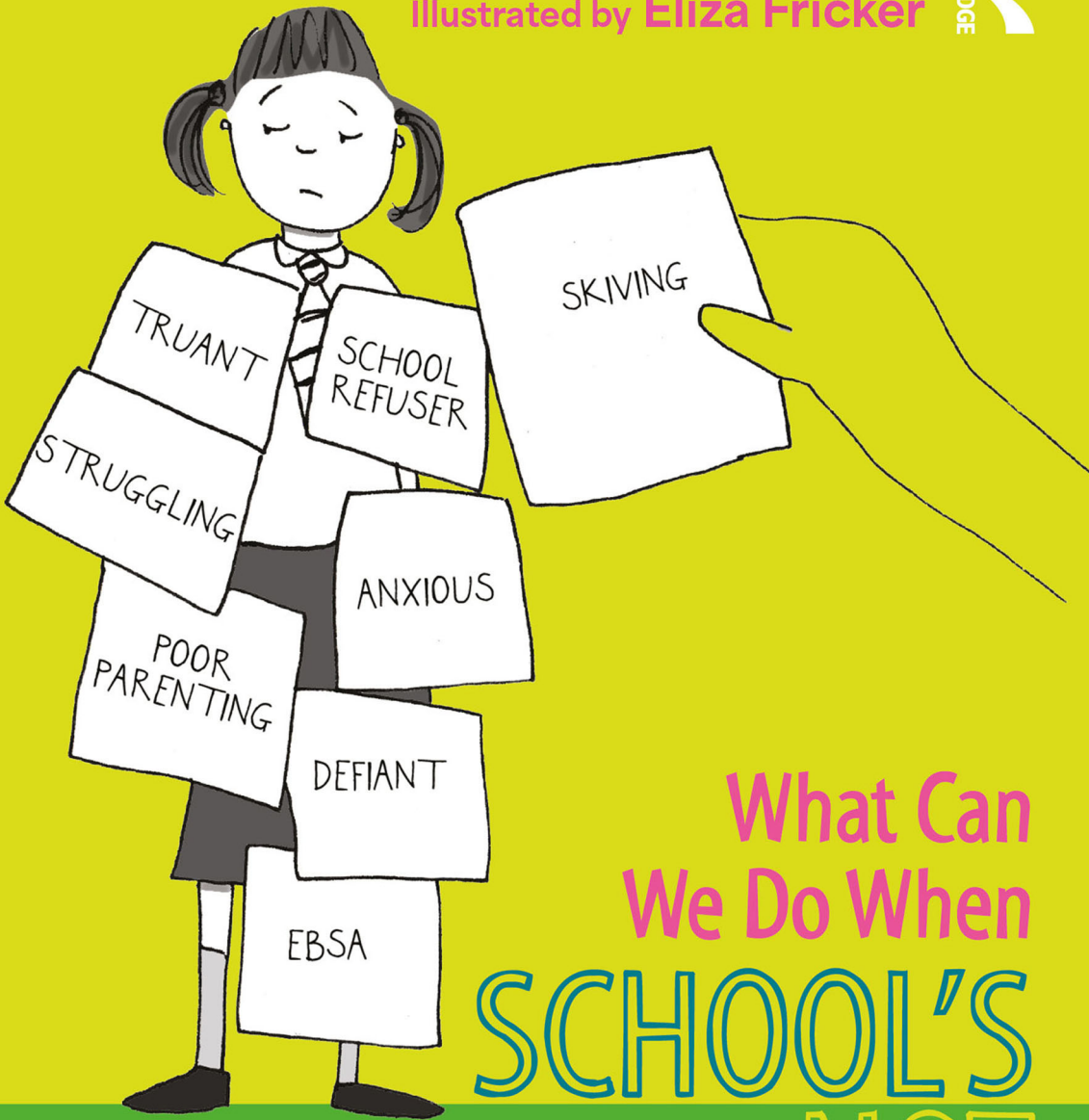


Abigail Fisher and Naomi Fisher

Illustrated by Eliza Fricker



What Can  
We Do When

# SCHOOL'S NOT WORKING?

An Illustrated Handbook  
for Professionals

A **Speechmark** Book

“This book highlights the expertise too often missing from discussions around education – the expertise of professionals working in child development and psychology, the expertise of parents, and the expertise of children themselves. I do believe that these are frequently the missing pieces of the puzzle.”

– **Rebecca Brooks**, Education Policy Advisor at Adoption UK

“It’s groundbreaking! Most books focus around CBT and other behaviourist techniques. This explores a range of different ideas centred around child development, trauma informed and relational practice. It’s also the only book I am aware of that uses such a range of different ‘experts by lived experience’ in the form of children, parents and professionals. It’s really going to stand out as something new and different and, most importantly, it contains techniques that really work.”

– **Catrina Lowri**, Neurodiversity Trainer and Consultant, Neuroteachers

“A complete departure from most of what is available in this subject area. I love it.”

– **Dr Lisa Cherry**, Director, Trauma Informed Consultancy Services Ltd

*“What Can We Do When School’s Not Working?”* is a fantastic resource and an absolute must read for parents of children struggling with school as well as all professionals and policy makers working in Education and anyone working with children. Bringing together the different perspectives on the purpose of school, on behaviour and attendance and why school isn’t working for so many, this much-needed book explains why behaviour and attendance are signs of an underlying, systemic problem, rather than the problem being located in children or their parents. Written in an honest, easy-to-read, insightful way and brought to life by lived experiences, this book explains school trauma and burnout and how to support children with these experiences as well as drawing upon psychological research in order to consider how to produce psychologically healthy schools, where children are more likely to enjoy learning and thrive. It also offers alternative ways to support young people when they decide not to return to school and examples of those who have engaged young people with learning in different and more psychologically healthy ways.”

– **Dr Hayley Smith**, Clinical Psychologist and Systemic Family Psychotherapist

“This is a fantastic book that challenges key theories of education and highlights the fact that we have slipped into a rut of a system which is clearly not meeting so many children’s needs. This book also challenges the status quo of the education system but in a sensible and non-emotional way. It is not a negative, scaremongering or combative read, and offers sensible alternative approaches to education. Filled with lovely illustrations and honest and enlightening quotes from young people and teens, this book will be highly relatable to parents, and I hope show educators that there is another way for young people to thrive.”

– **Laura Kerbey**, Founder of PAST – Positive Assessments  
Education Support and Training

# What Can We Do When School's Not Working?

*An increasing number of children are struggling to attend school. The conventional approach prioritises a rapid return to their setting. For some children, this simply doesn't work. They are stuck, not attending school but not learning out of school either. What happens then – and what can we do about it?*

This illustrated guide lifts the lid on the experiences of children and families who are struggling within the school system and explores how we can work with these young people to maximise their chances of a positive and fulfilled life.

The book encourages professionals to take a new perspective and to consider what can be done differently. It explores the ways in which difficulties with school are understood by children, parents and professionals, and shows how things can go wrong (and right), using real-life examples from a range of settings. Chapters delve into common interventions and the impact these can have in practice, before introducing alternative approaches which have the child at the centre. The voices of young people are foregrounded throughout, shedding light on their struggles with attendance – including when placements have completely broken down – and, importantly, showing how they have gone on to succeed. Original illustrations are included throughout to bring these ideas to life.

Placing authentic experiences at the core, this book offers a valuable insight into the lives of children and families when school has gone wrong and will leave you with new ideas as to how to turn things around. *What Can We Do When School's Not Working?* is essential reading for professionals working with children who are struggling with school attendance, from SENCOs and educational support workers to educational psychologists, senior leadership teams, and local authorities.

**Abigail Fisher** is a qualified teacher and educational psychologist. She has worked with schools and local authorities supporting staff and children with a wide range of issues, including children struggling to attend school. Abigail taught in primary schools across London before training as an educational psychologist.

**Naomi Fisher** is a clinical psychologist and author. She has a PhD in Developmental Psychology (Autism) in addition to her doctorate in clinical psychology, and she specialises in trauma and autism. She runs popular webinars for parents on school distress and works clinically with families whose children are not fine at school. She is recognised as an expert in neurodiversity and alternatives to school.

**Eliza Fricker** is an author and illustrator. She is the mother of a child who experienced barriers to school attendance and gives talks to local authorities about the experience. Eliza also runs a blog focused on anxiety and school attendance issues.

# What Can We Do When School's Not Working?

*An Illustrated Handbook for Professionals*

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Abigail Fisher and Naomi Fisher

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# Not Fine at School

What you'll find in this chapter:

1. Perspectives on School Attendance
2. Behaviour and Attendance
3. What Is the Problem?
4. The Language of School Attendance
5. EBSA, School Refusal or Just Behaviour?
6. One Size Does Not Fit All

## Introduction

*My daughter did quite well in primary school. She got into it. She had very nice teachers.*

*Then she went up to secondary school, and she struggled straight away. She found the whole environment hard and the attitude of teachers to be really different.*

*She said, "At primary school, everyone knew me and they knew my parents." Going to secondary school was different. As a parent, I didn't know any of the teachers.*

*The first person I got to know at secondary school was the Attendance Officer because I'd have to ring up and tell them why my child wasn't coming in. She had a very stern manner and she was very procedural. These are people that see my child more than I do, and suddenly I don't know any of them, they don't know me. It's a very odd experience.*

*My daughter would have stomach aches a lot. I would drive her into school most days and we'd take half an hour or more getting in, and that went on for two years really.*



Then at age 13, the school was like, "Right, you've got to make your choices now about your thing." They said to her, "This is when you start thinking about your future and your job. This is when you've got to knuckle down." It's weird. I think her school was really trying to be tough for the kids that need a tough approach. But the kids who don't need the tough approach, they were destroying them. It's like a really broad mallet, it just hit them all on the head. "Right, so you've got to knuckle down."

My daughter was someone who works really hard all the time. She really cares about her work. She goes, "I don't know. I am 13. I don't know what I want to do."

I think she felt this pressure. I think the teachers were feeling a lot of pressure as well to achieve things. She was missing more and more days. There's a hub at her school she'd go to. But that was only about two or three weeks where she could go to this hub and then after a week, she had to go back to normal.

By this point I was walking her up to school. I'm someone who's worked with people with differences a lot in my life, and I was using all my tactics I could think of to help my daughter. I was trying to engage and distract her and work through things. After about six months of it, I was just like, "It's not working. That really isn't working. The school system isn't working. I just have to take her out."

I think the hard thing is you feel a lot of guilt as a parent as well. We're tribal creatures. We usually all do what other people do. When your child is failing in the system everyone seems to be thriving in... Even though when you take your kid out, everyone else goes, "Yeah, my kids hate it. They're not having a great time."

*We took her out of school, and then suddenly we could actually deal with what the situations were and understand her anxiety and look into her just finding out who she is. She's now 16, and she's doing media studies and she wants to be a director. She's got ambition. She understands her anxiety more. She still gets anxious, but she understands it more.*

*(Tom, parent of two, June 2023)*

The “unwritten agreement” between parents and schools in England has broken since the Covid-19 crisis, according to Ofsted’s chief inspector Amanda Spielman, with pupil absences remaining stubbornly high and disruptive behaviour now more common.



Delivering her final annual report in the role, Spielman said she had noticed a disturbing “shift in attitudes” among pupils and parents.

“This breakdown is feeding into a troubling shift in attendance, in attitudes, in behaviour since the pandemic. Absenteeism has become a stubborn problem. Some of that is down to illness, including mental health problems, but nevertheless disruptive behaviour has become more common.

It’s a problem in colleges as well. And it’s clear that there’s more friction between schools and parents, who are increasingly willing to challenge school rules.”

Spielman, who steps down as chief inspector next month after seven years, said parents were partly to blame for the disruption because of growing hostility towards school rules over discipline or uniform requirements.

Parents were “a little bit less willing to support schools, and a bit more willing to find fault”, she said, with Ofsted recording increased numbers of complaints from parents but no increase in complaints that required action.  
(The Guardian, Adams, 2023)

## School Attendance

You've just read two perspectives on the same problem. One from the parent of a teenager who struggled with attending school, and the other from a former chief Ofsted inspector. Reading them next to each other, the tension between their views is apparent. Tom, the parent, sees his child breaking down in a system which isn't working despite his best efforts. He feels he had no choice except to remove her from school. Spielman sees attendance and behaviour in school deteriorating – and puts it down to a problem in attitude among pupils and parents.

This difference is the starting point for this book. Among the three of us, we hold and hear many perspectives. We are a clinical psychologist (Naomi) who works with parents and young people who are struggling with school. An educational psychologist and former teacher (Abigail) who knows the system from the inside, and has worked for local authorities. And the parent of a young person who was deeply distressed by school, and who ultimately was unable to attend (Eliza), and who has written and drawn about their experiences. All of us also bring our own experiences of school, of success, failures, and attendance difficulties, and Naomi has lived experience of school-related distress (and attendance problems) at ages six and 14.

No one comes afresh to the subject of school. We are all informed by our own experience of being at school ourselves and then perhaps working within the education system or being the parent or carer of children within the education system. We all have our own prejudices and assumptions. The word “school” will bring up different associations for each person.

When writing this book, we talked to professionals, parents and young people. The professionals in particular talked about how their previous assumptions about learning and education had been challenged by seeing how much some children struggled with school. They told us how flexible they had become in order to help those children access education.

In this book we are foregrounding the experiences of parents and young people, because it is our experience that while many schools feel they are listening (and may be trying very hard to do so), many parents and young

people do not feel listened to. It can seem like professionals and parents are in different worlds. Parents complain that professionals do not hear their concerns about their children, and professionals complain that parents are unsupportive of school policies and discipline. Teachers feel under siege and criticised from all angles. Everyone is defensive and the situation can easily become combative, with both sides feeling attacked and undermined. And caught in the middle are the young people. Young people who are struggling within the school system and who may not be getting much of an education.



For that is something on which parents and professionals can generally agree. Young people are struggling, more than before. More of them are not attending school regularly, and for those who do attend, reports are that their behaviour has become increasingly disruptive. This has got to the point where, as we write, there are reports that at a Kent school teachers are striking over pupil behaviour. Teachers are leaving the profession in higher numbers than ever before, and one of the reasons they give is poor pupil behaviour.

How do we make sense of what is happening – and what can we do about it? That is the core of this book. We'll start by talking about the different ways in which difficulties with school are understood and the implications

of that. We'll then move on to talking about the school system, particularly examining the assumptions on which it is built and asking what impact those assumptions have on our young people. We'll talk about the interaction between children and school, and how things can go wrong (and right), using real-life examples.

Next, we'll move on to talking about what happens when children are struggling with school. We'll discuss common interventions and how they work in practice. We'll talk about the different ways in which school attendance difficulties are understood by the different groups involved, and how that affects what happens next.

Finally, we'll move on to talking about a group of children who have always existed, but which has become larger since the pandemic. Those who have completely stopped going to school, and who have often withdrawn from life as well. Those who may not even be leaving their bedrooms. We'll talk about what happens to them, and how we can work with these young people to maximise their chances of a positive and fulfilled life.

## **What This Book Is Not**

This book does not attempt to review the research literature about young people with school attendance difficulties, nor will it provide a comprehensive overview of the way in which this is addressed in different contexts and countries. These reviews have been done elsewhere (see Finning, Ford and Moore 2022 and Thambirajah, Grandison and De-Hayes 2008) and we would urge readers to consult these books if they wish to inform themselves about the research.

This book is first and foremost a practical book for practitioners who work in education, and it is informed by research, clinical practice and lived experience. It aims to bring together diverse perspectives on school attendance and to offer different ways to approach this difficult and complex area with young people and their families. It aims to give professionals insight into the experience of families and young people who struggle with school attendance.

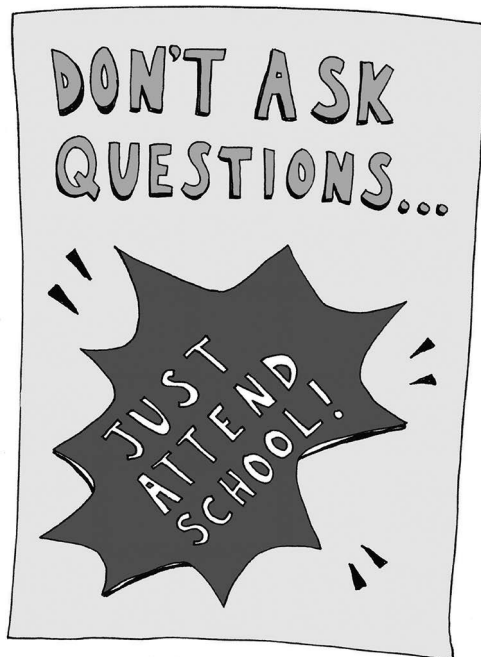
This book focuses on school, what happens there and how this affects children. We know that for many children home is a difficult place and that they show the impact of this at school. We do not dismiss or discount the importance of this. However, when defining the scope of this book, we

have decided to focus on education and school and how things could be different there rather than on things which may be going on at home and within the family.

To start with, we will talk about the difficulties which young people have with school and how adults usually understand those problems.

## Behaviour and Attendance

Whenever school comes up, there are two things we hear about more than anything else. Behaviour and attendance. How do we make young people behave, and how can we ensure that they attend school? There's sometimes a decrying in the media that this generation are *the worst*, they have the highest levels of persistent absenteeism from school, their behaviour is the most unacceptable – and their parents aren't backing up the schools in the way that schools would like. Parents are challenging school policies and rules – as one headteacher says in *The Guardian*, "They question more than they support". He doesn't mean that as a positive.

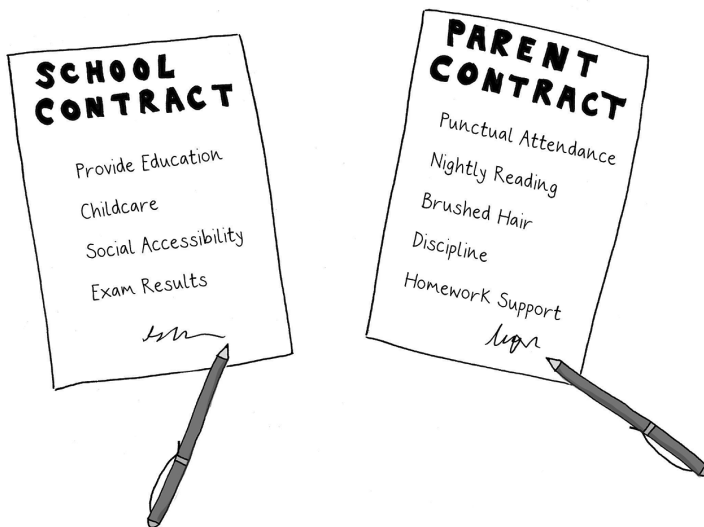


Behind the headlines are stories like Tom's. Stories of families who are trying to support their children to attend school, but who are faced with overwhelming distress, expressed both physically and emotionally. Families whose experience is that the focus on behaviour and attendance is seriously missing the mark when it comes to their children's needs. Those families say that they are being met with sanctions when they need support, and that the advice they are given makes things worse rather than better for their children.

How do we make sense of all of these stories, and what we can we do to help these young people?

## Distressed by School

Since the start of mass schooling at the end of the 1890s in the UK, the expectation has been that children from aged five upwards should be at school. This has become part of the culture, and school is generally seen as an unequivocally good thing for all children. There is an (often unspoken) social contract, where parents get their children to school, and support them through reading, or homework, and the school, for its part, provides an education in the form of lessons, as well as oversight and safeguarding of the children during school hours. It's a contract which few question until something goes wrong.



When a child is distressed by school, or refuses to go, they challenge this social contract, and it often seems to catch both parents and schools by surprise. Parents describe the child's distress manifesting itself in a number of ways; some children refuse to go entirely, while others go reluctantly, and complain of stomach ache or headaches. Parents talk about children "losing their spark" or "having checked out". Some young people are disruptive while at school or try to abscond. As they get older, some of them will absent themselves from school without their parents' knowledge. Others behave perfectly while at school but are extremely difficult to manage at home.

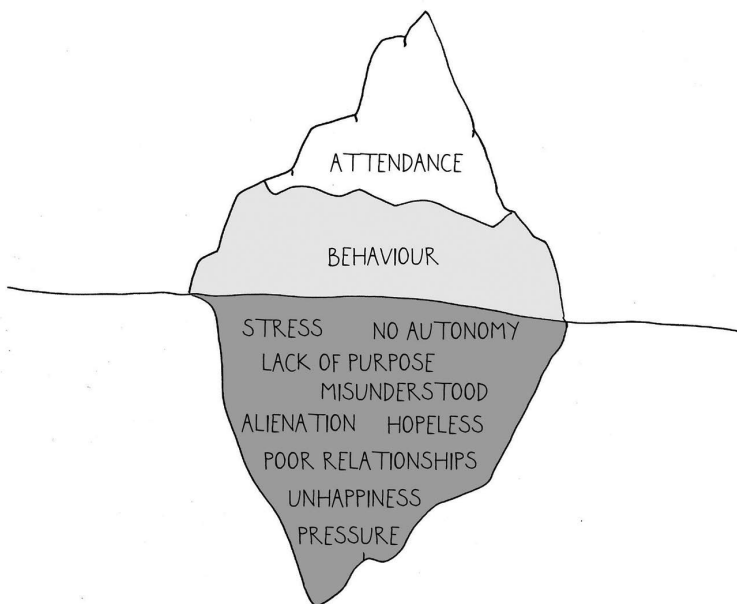


Many parents tell us that they are told that their school has never experienced this situation before, and that their child's behaviour is unique. Many families will have other children who have no problems with school or may even be thriving there. Some parents are themselves teachers and are highly

invested in the school system, and having a child who isn't thriving at school challenges their whole belief system. One of the things we learnt while writing this book was that school-related distress can affect families from all walks of life, including those who least expect it and who are highly invested in the education system.

Unhappiness at school is unfortunately not rare at all. Disillusionment with school affects a lot of young people, particularly as they get older. A recent research study by the Edge Foundation found that nearly half of 15–16-year-olds described school as something they just had to get through and that many of them found the teaching methods in their English secondary school alienating and stressful (McPherson et al. 2023). This problem isn't unique to the United Kingdom: a recent large-scale, nationwide study in the United States found that 75% of the feelings that students reported about school were negative (Moeller et al. 2020). The study was carried out by researchers at Yale university. "Overall," said study author Marc Brackett on their website, "students see school as a place where they experience negative emotions."

In this context, one way to see those who stop attending school or who have great difficulty attending is as the tip of the iceberg. These are the young people who are demonstrating the most obvious distress, but it would be



wrong to assume that they are the only ones for whom school is an unhappy place and that everyone else is fine. It may be more accurate to see them as the visible manifestation of a wider problem of school-related distress, or the canaries in the mine. Many young people are unhappy and feel negative about school, even those who do not have visible problems with attendance or behaviour.

Much of what is written about school attendance problems and behaviour does not make this connection. There is a consistent assumption that school is the best place to be for all children. This bias may well be partly down to the fact that professionals tend to be those who have done well at school, since achieving at school enables people to access professional qualifications and careers. Education professionals in particular have made the choice as adults to spend their careers working in and around schools. Even if they themselves had bad experiences at school, their faith in the school system as a force for good was enough to lead them back. This may mean that they find it hard to consider the possibility that school itself is not a positive or beneficial experience for a child.

## **What Is the Problem?**

What actually is the problem that we're talking about here? You may think it's obvious, just as Amanda Spielman says in the article we quoted at the start. Persistent absenteeism and poor behaviour. Children not attending school and behaving badly when they are there. This is certainly the priority of many government campaigns and something which Ofsted are preoccupied by. If only children would just go to school without a fuss and behave themselves while there then the problem would be solved. If only their parents would just insist and be firmer.

Well, yes and no. Poor school attendance and behaviour is what we see, but that doesn't necessarily mean that those things in themselves are the root of the problem. Poor attendance and behaviour could instead be a sign that there is a problem elsewhere. Behaviour is one way in which children express themselves and show us how they are feeling. Attendance and behaviour are feedback on what is working (or not) in a child's life.

Defining what the problem actually is matters because it affects the solutions we use. If a child is deeply unhappy at school, for example, and is not attending as a result, then insisting that they attend will not solve the

real issue. It could in fact make their unhappiness worse. An unhappy child attending school because they are forced to isn't a positive outcome.



Just as in the two accounts at the start of this chapter, there is often a clear divide in how people understand school attendance difficulties. From one perspective, the child's behaviour *is* the problem, while from another perspective the child's behaviour or distress is a signal, *alerting us* to the existence of a problem.

Tom, the parent, thinks that his daughter's behaviour is alerting him to a problem in the way that secondary school affects her emotional wellbeing. He thinks that any intervention would have to start with his daughter's wellbeing at school, and when none of this helps, his intervention was to remove her from school. Amanda Spielman, Chief Ofsted Inspector, thinks that behaviour and attendance *are* the problem, and that there has been a "shift in attitudes" within children and their parents. From this perspective, the interventions include fines and sanctions, anything which will bring the children back to school. In this perspective, it doesn't matter if they are distressed or

not by attending school, nor whether they are learning or happy when they get there. What matters is that they attend (and behave themselves).

This clash in perspectives means that many parents feel that the support they need is very different to what they get. Many feel that their child needs help and that they are working hard to get them into school, but they say they are met with punitive measures which aim to compel them to force their children to attend. Tom told me about the experience of being fined for their daughter's low school attendance.

*When you get fined, both parents get fined. We got fined £100 each just before Christmas. It felt like they were saying "The parents don't care. The money will make the parents care."*

*I care. I deeply care about my child. To fine me just makes me go: "You don't care about my child." It pushed me to a point of going: "Well, this system is really stupid."*

*I think it's the County Council that fines you. They go: "The attendance has gone too low, this is triggering a response by our computer to send this thing out." It feels very inhuman. "You fall below this threshold, therefore you will be fined now."*

*It's horrible when you're trying to explain: "My kid's really struggling with this and that." She'd start off with a stomach ache when she started going to secondary school. That would become worse and worse. I would be spending an hour in the car trying to get her through the door with her crying.*

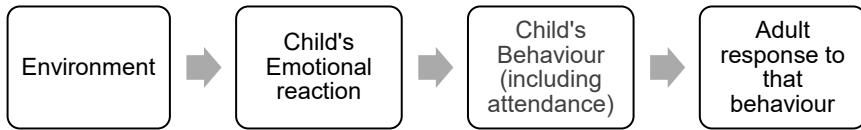
*That was my life for two or three years. Get up, drive my daughter to school, try and cajole her and use all the tricks I have from working with autistic kids and kids with challenging behaviour to get them into school.*

*After a while, you go: "If the school is really damaging my kid, why am I doing this?" But then again, what else is there to do really? I've got to pay the rent. It's a big thing to take your kid's education into your hands.*

*Especially when you find out there's no support at all, and instead you'll be questioned and doubted. Sometimes I think people think that I'm just doing this for fun.*

The intervention which Tom's family experienced – fines – is punitive. He picks up on this when he says it felt like they were saying that he as a parent just didn't care and should be made to care. Lack of care was not the reason why his daughter was struggling to attend, and fines just pushed them further down the road towards removing their daughter from school entirely.

Below is a simple flow chart showing how attendance and behaviour exist as part of a system.



Different perspectives put a different emphasis on the different parts of this flow chart – which leads them to different ideas as to how this should be approached.

If we emphasise the influence of the environment, we might focus our efforts on changes schools can make in their environment. If we focus on the child's emotional reaction, we might focus on trying to reduce their anxiety, using anxiety strategies. If we focus on their behaviour as the problem, we might introduce an attendance goal, or put pressure on the child's parents to get them to attend.

## The Language of School Attendance

Over the last 40 years, school attendance difficulties have variously been described in different contexts as school refusal, school phobia, truancy, skiving, mitching, absenteeism, dropping out, barriers to school attendance and emotionally based school avoidance or non-attendance. The language we use shapes how we think about what is going on, sometimes without our even being aware of it. In interactions with parents and families, the language we use can make the difference between a successful interaction or one which becomes combative. In the next few pages, we're going to unpack the assumptions behind some of these descriptions.

### ***Can't or Won't?***

One issue which runs through any discussion about attendance and behaviour is that of intentionality. Essentially, the point of contention is this: are young people *choosing* not to attend school or is this something about which they have little choice? Is it a "wilful decision" or something beyond their control? The implication is that if this is a choice, then families and children deserve no sympathy, but if it is because they are incapable of attending, then that should be treated differently (and with more compassion).

Many of the most heated debates between parents and schools are about this issue. Parents feel that their children cannot attend school, while schools (often) feel that they could, if only they were more motivated. In Australia, the parent support organisation for those with children who are struggling with school attendance is called *School Can't* which makes it very clear where they stand.

Discussions are typically highly polarised as a result, something which we aim to step away from in this book. Many struggles between parents and schools focus on this issue, and it is often not helpful for the children involved. Both sides can become entrenched. Those who think it is intentional put in place harsher consequences and bemoan modern parenting. Those who think the problems are due to a lack of capacity, arguing that poor school attendance is not a “choice” but what happens when schools do not meet a child’s needs. Both positions have drawbacks and lack nuance.

The drawbacks to the “won’t” narrative are easy to see. By framing poor attendance as a choice, the problem is located directly in the young people and their parents who are seen as lazy, defiant, anti-social – the list goes on. In practice this can mean that the onus is entirely on the young person to “change their attitude” while the adults try to pressure them into doing so. It can also mean that parents are told to force their children into school, or to make them deliberately unhappy at home.

However, we also have reservations about the “can’t” narrative, having seen it play out for some young people. The problem is that, while it has the effect of making it clear that problems at school are not a choice, it simultaneously removes agency from young people and frames them as incapable. They hear repeatedly that they can’t do things other young people do and they believe it. Sometimes multiple assessments will be done, all documenting the things that this young person cannot do as well as their peers. The focus is on deficit and impairment, because that seems like the only alternative to blame.

It may well be true that at this time they can’t do some of the things that other children do. However, one result of the focus on “can’t” is that young people tend to think that their difficulties are set in stone and it will always be like this. Childhood is a time of great change, learning and development, and our approach would always be to try and keep opportunities for change open. In some cases, the “can’t” narrative closes options down. We meet children who, aged 10 or 11, tell us all the things they can’t do (like organise themselves, work towards a goal, concentrate) with, apparently, no

expectation that they will be able to learn to do these things as they grow up. They sometimes say things like “my brain doesn’t work like that”, which precludes the possibility of change.

In reality, of course, the can’t/won’t dichotomy is much less clear than it first appears. Naomi has resigned from jobs which she strongly disliked, and which made her ill – she physically *could* have continued to go but chose not to when she saw the effect on her. We all make life choices based on a range of factors, and it’s worth thinking about why we think this agency shouldn’t apply to children, that the only option open to them other than “won’t” is “can’t”. We want to empower children to make choices, even if those aren’t the choices adults would choose for them. Otherwise, they may grow up to see themselves as incapable.

We think the question “Is this a choice?” is unhelpful when it comes to school attendance. It’s always possible to argue that people have choices. We can choose to do things which make us feel extremely ill or unhappy. Instead, we see choices as something which are made in reaction to circumstances and context. They are the best option that the child can come up with right now.

As a final drawback, both “won’t” and “can’t” narratives locate the problem in the individual child or family. As an alternative, we prefer Dr Ross Greene’s philosophy which he sums up as “kids do well if they can” (Greene 2014). The follow-up to this is, if they aren’t doing well, what can we change so that they can?

We raise this issue here because it runs through the language that is used. School attendance difficulties have been described and categorised in many ways over the years. None of these terms are neutral. Some people dislike every single one of them. None of these descriptions are official diagnoses. They are not included in the diagnostic manuals of mental health problems used by clinicians. However, they are often used in the same way as a diagnosis, with families being told that a child “has emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA)” in the same way as they might be told their child “has chicken pox”. However, unlike “chicken pox” (which is an illness caused by the varicella-zoster virus), the terms below have no explanatory power. They are just labels that describe the situation. In physical health terms, it’s like saying a child has a rash. It describes the problem, but doesn’t explain why.

The reason why language is important is because it’s the argument of this book that the way we understand a problem informs what then happens. If we think a child is wilfully refusing to do something, then an intervention

might focus on trying to change their mind (or force them to accept what we say). If we think that they aren't capable of doing something, then there is no point in trying to change their mind. We'd have to change the task or help them learn the skills that they need.

This difference underlies many of the most fierce arguments about school attendance and behaviour. People come from very diverse perspectives, often without realising how different things look from the other side of the room.

### ***School Refusal/Avoidance***

School refusal is perhaps the mostly widely used term describing those with difficulties attending school. Many parents dislike it, because they feel it assumes that this is a wilful refusal by the child. It's right there in the name – the problem is defined as refusal, which leads us to interventions that focus on changing refusal to compliance.



There are many books written about school refusal and how to overcome it, both for parents and professionals. The motivation for school refusal is assumed to be either behavioural or anxiety. The literature on school refusal

generally conceptualises it as irrational behaviour on the part of the child, who either needs to learn that school isn't as bad as they think it is, or that their life will become increasingly unpleasant if they don't attend school. This will motivate them to behave differently. Interventions for school refusal are largely focused on the child and parent (who is often assumed not to be insisting hard enough and not parenting well enough).

Christopher Kearney, a clinical psychologist who has written many books with "School Refusal" in the title, takes what he calls a "functional approach" to school refusal. This means that he looks at what function the school refusal apparently has and what the child achieves through that behaviour. He then plans interventions to change that. His research identifies four main types of "school refusers".

1. Those who refuse school in order to avoid general school-related distress (for reasons either known or unknown).
2. Those who want to escape the social or academic pressures of school.
3. Those who refuse to go to school in order to get more attention from their parents.
4. Those who have things which they would prefer to do at home and who refuse to go to school in order to do those things.

Kearney is clear about what he thinks a successful outcome is – one of his most popular books is called *Getting Your Child Back to School* and to this end he advises parents to stop reacting to what their child is doing and instead to take control of the situation. He recommends setting up a system of consequences for not attending school, saying: "Your child should dance to your tune . . . You are the boss!"

### ***School Phobia/Anxiety***

Phobias are irrational fears. A phobia is an anxiety disorder, where there is a persistent and excessive fear generated by a specific object or situation. Labelling anxious feelings as a phobia implies that the fear is out of proportion to the harm caused by the object. Common phobias are spiders, driving and snakes. People with a spider phobia will go out of their way to avoid spiders at all costs, even choosing their holiday destinations or housing in order to minimise their chances of meeting a spider.



The term “school phobia” implies an irrational and specific fear of school which prevents the child from attending. Interventions for phobias are generally cognitive-behavioural and involve a graded exposure to the feared situation. The idea is that the person will learn over time that their fears are unjustified, and that the feared situation is not as bad as they think it is. When applied to school, this can mean a reintegration programme which starts with getting to the school gate and then gradually increases the amount of time that the child spends at school.

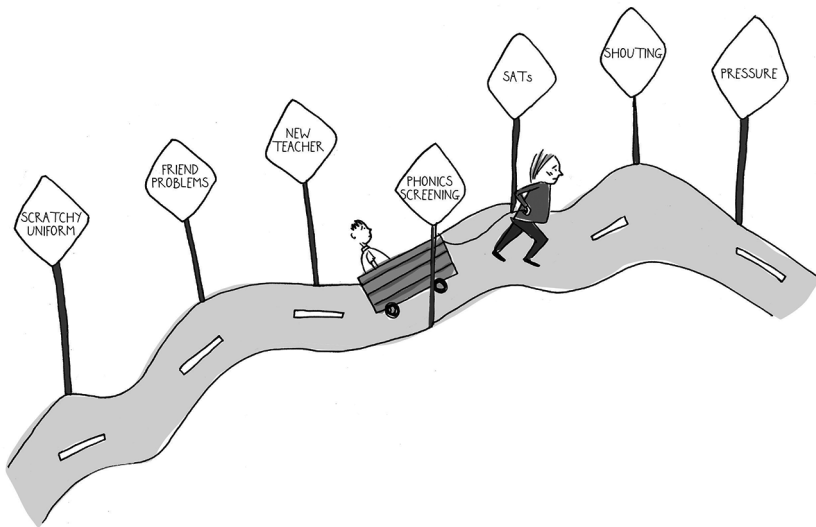
The term school phobia both situates the problem in the child (who is assumed to have an irrational fear) and also contains the assumption that school is less aversive than they think it is. Interventions are therefore exposure based, with the idea that more exposure to school will show the child that it’s not as bad as they fear.

### ***School Distress or School-Related Distress***

We are choosing to use the term school distress in this book, because it widens the discussion to include all children who are distressed at school, whether they are attending or not. It shifts the focus from the child’s non-attendance (terms such as truancy and school refusal focus on this) to their

emotional response. It also includes behaviour, since behaviour is one way in which children express distress. This term has been used by some researchers (Connolly, Constable and Mullally 2022).

We know that children often struggle with school for a long time before their attendance is affected (although there are also others for whom something changes and they quickly start having difficulties having been fine before). Research into school distress emphasises the long-standing nature of such distress. Parents describe distress which often started years before the child starts to demonstrate any difficulties with attendance. This means that when a child starts to not attend school and interventions are put in place to “nip it in the bud” then parents will often feel that this is years too late.



### ***Truancy***

Much of the literature on school attendance difficulties is explicit that their theories do not apply to truancy. Truants are defined as young people who do not attend school without the knowledge of their parents. They may leave house in the mornings dressed for school and then go into town or to a friend's house. This leaves them without adult oversight, as no one knows where they are, and they are vulnerable to exploitation.

Truants are typically seen in an entirely negative light. This extract from a handbook for professionals on school refusal is a good example of how truancy is often conceptualised and how both groups are stereotyped.

It is important to differentiate between SR (school refusal) and truancy. The child with SR is invariably a good student; the truant is a poor student. Truants openly acknowledge their dislike of schools; school refusers wish they could attend. The truant usually avoids both home and school, whereas the school refuser stays at home. Moreover, truants fabricate excuses to cover up their absence; the child with SR draws attention to their inability to leave home or stay in school.

(Thambirajah, Grandison and De-Hayes 2008)

This passage makes it clear that the authors' sympathies are firmly with the "school refusers", while they see truants as beyond the pale. Many parents are keen to maintain this distinction, as they (understandably) do not want their children to be seen as truants. However, when it comes to interventions, the approaches that the professionals we talked to described were very similar.



The distinction between “truancy” and other forms of school attendance barriers highlights something important in how these children are managed. This is the question of choice and blame. We are often asked whether children aren’t “just choosing” not to attend school, and therefore need to be given harsh consequences for non-attendance which will persuade them to choose to attend instead. Those who have been identified as truants are particularly likely to be seen as at fault, or their school absence as anti-social behaviour.

### ***Skiving/Mitching/Wagging***

There are many regional terms used for those who do not attend school, all of which have negative connotations.

These terms imply truancy but are sometimes used – particularly in the press – to describe all young people who are not attending school, no matter what the reason. This frustrates parents of young people who are not attending school for reasons of health or distress.

Politicians use this rhetoric, with Sky News reporting on 28 February 2023 that “Michael Gove suggests parents of skivers should have child benefit stripped” (Browne 2023). The term “skiving” is invariably used in a context which suggests that more discipline and less leniency is needed.

