From Attendance to Belonging:
The Emotional Roots of Chronic Absence

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Attendance in schools has become one of the most discussed, most measured, and most politically charged issues in English education. Following the disruption wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic, successive governments, inspectorates, and sector leaders have trained sustained attention on the figures: the proportion of pupils classified as persistently absent, the number missing more than half the school year, the widening gap between the attendance of disadvantaged pupils and their more affluent peers. The data are genuinely troubling and warrant serious response. What is less consistently examined, however, is the question that the data cannot answer on its own: not how many children are missing school, but why.

The national conversation about attendance has, too often, defaulted to a framework of enforcement and escalation — fines, referrals, attendance contracts, legal proceedings. These tools have their place in a proportionate response to specific patterns of non-attendance. They are not, however, a theory of change. For a significant and growing proportion of children, persistent absence is not the product of parental indifference or deliberate choice. It is a symptom: a communicative act from a child or young person for whom school has ceased to feel safe, manageable, or belonging. Treating the symptom without attending to what it communicates is unlikely to produce sustained change, and may deepen the harm already present.

This article argues for a more emotionally intelligent understanding of chronic absence — one that takes the relational and psychological dimensions of non-attendance seriously, connects the attendance crisis explicitly to the quality of emotional experience in schools, and positions early intervention in wellbeing not as an adjacent concern but as a direct and powerful lever for improving attendance. Belonging, in this framing, is not a soft aspiration; it is the foundation upon which sustainable attendance is built.

The Scale and Shape of the Attendance Crisis

The scale of post-pandemic absence in England has been well documented. Department for Education (DfE) statistics for the 2022–2023 academic year showed that 22.3% of pupils were persistently absent, meaning they missed 10% or more of possible sessions — more than double the pre-pandemic rate (DfE, 2023a). Severe absence, defined as missing 50% or more of sessions, affected approximately 140,000 pupils, a figure that represents both a human tragedy and a systemic failure of considerable proportions.

The distribution of absence is not uniform. Pupils eligible for free school meals, those with identified special educational needs, those in the care of the local authority, and those living in areas of high deprivation are all significantly over-represented in persistent absence data (DfE, 2023a). This pattern is not incidental. It reflects the reality that the factors which create vulnerability to absence — housing instability, family stress, mental health difficulties, experience of trauma,

navigating complex needs within an insufficiently adapted school environment — are concentrated in communities already managing multiple structural disadvantages.

The attendance crisis is therefore not a singular, uniform phenomenon. It encompasses a diverse range of profiles: the child whose anxiety makes the school gate feel insurmountable; the pupil whose experience of bullying has made the corridor more threatening than the classroom; the young person managing an undiagnosed or under-supported learning difficulty that makes sustained engagement increasingly effortful and increasingly unrewarding; the child carrying the weight of family complexity that leaves them, by the time they arrive at school, with little psychological resource to spare for learning. Each of these profiles requires a different response, and none is well served by a primarily procedural or punitive approach.

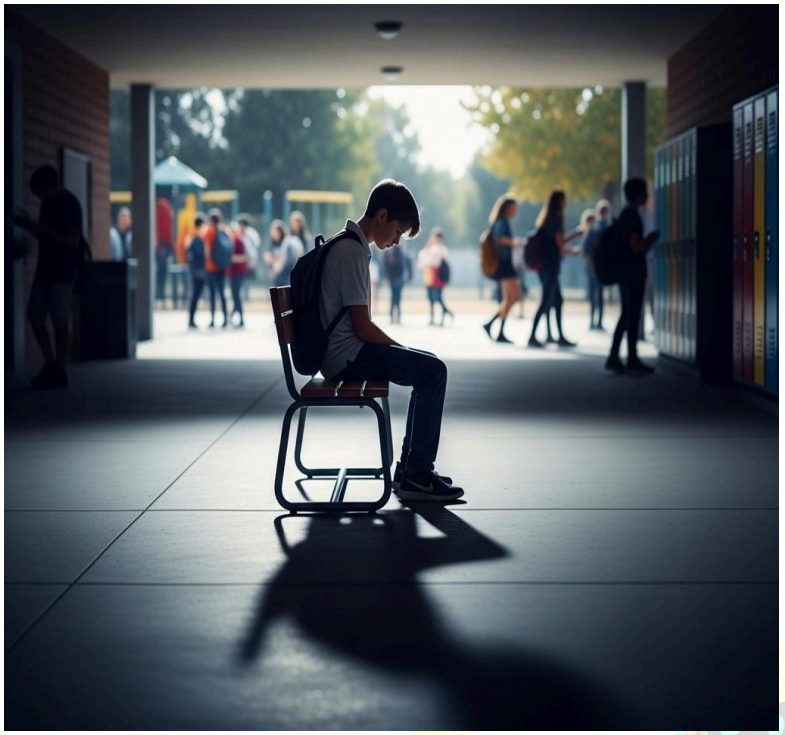
Anxiety, Avoidance, and the Misreading of Behaviour

Perhaps the most significant and most consistently misunderstood dimension of chronic absence is its relationship to anxiety. School-based anxiety — sometimes described within clinical literature as school refusal or emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) — is a growing and frequently misidentified phenomenon. The term EBSA, increasingly preferred in professional discourse because it centres the emotional cause rather than the behavioural presentation, describes a pattern in which anxiety, depression, or other emotional difficulties create sustained difficulty in attending school, resulting in significant and often prolonged absence.

Estimates of the prevalence of EBSA vary, partly because identification is inconsistent and partly because many children remain unrecognised within generic persistent absence data. However, the Anna Freud Centre (2023) and the charity Anxiety UK have both highlighted the substantial increase in school anxiety presentations in the years following the pandemic, with school-age children among the most acutely affected groups. NHS Digital's Mental Health of Children and Young People in England survey (2023) found that one in five children aged eight to sixteen met the threshold for a probable mental disorder in 2023 — a figure that has risen

sharply since 2017 and that carries direct and obvious implications for educational engagement.

The diagnostic and professional challenge is that the anxiety driving EBSA is frequently invisible or actively concealed. Children do not typically present to their parents or schools with a clear articulation of their emotional distress; they present with physical symptoms — stomachaches, headaches, nausea — that are genuine somatic expressions of psychological distress. They may become dysregulated in the morning, refuse to get dressed, or make promises about attending that dissolve at the school gate. To an adult without training in anxiety or EBSA, this pattern can easily be misread as opposition, avoidance of consequences, or parental over-accommodation. The response that follows from that misreading — pressure, escalation, enforcement — typically worsens the very anxiety it aims to resolve.



This misreading carries a significant cost. Children whose anxiety-driven absence is treated as a behavioural or attendance management issue without meaningful engagement with the underlying emotional cause tend to experience a deterioration in both their mental health and their relationship with school. The absence deepens. The anxiety, reinforced by each unsuccessful attempt to re-engage, becomes more entrenched. The child who was ambivalent about school at the beginning of the pattern may, months later, be experiencing significant clinical levels of anxiety, depression, or trauma responses that require far more intensive support than earlier intervention would have demanded.

Belonging as an Educational Necessity, Not a Luxury

At the heart of the attendance question lies a concept that has accumulated substantial empirical support but has not yet been adequately translated into mainstream educational policy: the concept of school belonging. Goodenow (1993), in foundational research that has been extensively replicated and extended, defined school belonging as the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment. Her work established that belonging is not merely a pleasant feature of school life but a psychologically necessary condition for sustained engagement, motivation, and learning.

The evidence base connecting school belonging to attendance is substantial and consistent. Allen and Kern's (2017) meta-analysis, drawing on studies across multiple countries and age groups, confirmed that school belonging is a robust predictor of a wide range of educational outcomes, including attendance, academic engagement, and persistence. Critically, the relationship is bidirectional: belonging supports engagement, and engagement reinforces belonging. Absence, particularly when it becomes sustained, disrupts both sides of this relationship simultaneously — the child who is absent cannot build or maintain the relational connections that generate belonging, and the absence of belonging removes a significant motivating force for return.

Belonging is not, it must be emphasised, reducible to academic support or pastoral check-ins, however valuable these may be. It is shaped by the quality of relationships with both teachers and peers; by the extent to which a child feels genuinely known rather than merely managed; by whether their particular way of experiencing and engaging with the world is accommodated or marginalised within the school's dominant culture. For many children — those who are neurodivergent, those who have experienced trauma, those whose family or cultural backgrounds differ from the school's implied norm — the experience of belonging cannot be assumed. It must be actively constructed, through intentional, relational, and culturally responsive practice.

The absence of belonging is not a neutral condition. It is experienced as exclusion, however structurally inadvertent. And exclusion — the sense of not fitting, of being unseen, of being tolerated rather than welcomed — is a powerful driver of avoidance. Children do not consistently return to environments in which they do not feel safe or valued, and the argument that attendance is ultimately compulsory does not resolve the psychological reality that coerced presence in an environment experienced as hostile or alienating is not education in any meaningful sense.

The Role of School Culture in Generating or Preventing Absence

If belonging is a prerequisite for sustained engagement, then school culture — the aggregate of values, relationships, expectations, and daily experiences that characterise life in a particular setting — is the medium through which belonging is either cultivated or denied. This places school culture at the centre of any serious attendance strategy, and it is a dimension that whole-school attendance guidance has not always engaged with sufficient depth.

The government's attendance guidance, Working Together to Improve School Attendance (DfE, 2024), makes helpful advances in framing attendance as a shared responsibility requiring multi-agency collaboration and early help approaches. It acknowledges the role of barriers to attendance beyond simple unwillingness and directs schools towards understanding the individual circumstances of persistently absent pupils. These are meaningful developments. Yet the guidance stops short of a sustained engagement with the relational and cultural dimensions of why children do or do not feel that school is a place worth attending.

Research on effective school environments consistently identifies a small cluster of cultural features associated with strong pupil engagement and lower rates of absence: high quality, consistent, and caring relationships between staff and students; a genuine commitment to inclusion that extends beyond formal SEND provision; a culture of emotional safety in which pupils feel able to express difficulty without fear of judgement or consequence; and visible, meaningful pupil voice — the genuine experience of being heard and of having some influence over one's educational environment (Roffey, 2013). These features do not emerge

spontaneously. They are the product of sustained, deliberate investment in the human dimensions of school life, and they require leadership that understands their importance.

The relationship between bullying and attendance deserves particular attention in this context. Anti-Bullying Alliance (2023) research has consistently demonstrated the relationship between bullying experience and school avoidance; children who experience sustained bullying — including cyberbullying that extends into the domestic environment and removes the former refuge of home — are significantly more likely to develop anxiety-based school avoidance patterns. A school that takes bullying seriously only at the level of incident response, without addressing the relational and cultural conditions that allow bullying to persist, is unlikely to create the environment of safety that sustained attendance requires.

Early Emotional Intervention: The Evidence for Acting Sooner

The case for early intervention in children's emotional wellbeing is well established, and its relevance to attendance is direct and demonstrable. Evidence from the Education Endowment Foundation's systematic reviews of social and emotional learning interventions consistently shows that programmes addressing emotional literacy, self-regulation, and relational skills have measurable positive effects on a range of outcomes including academic engagement, behaviour, and — where explicitly measured — attendance (Education Endowment Foundation [EEF], 2021).

The principle at stake is straightforward, though its implementation is complex: children who have greater access to their own emotional experience — who can identify what they are feeling, understand why, and communicate it to others — are less likely to be overwhelmed by the anxiety, distress, or relational difficulty that drives school avoidance. They are also more likely to be identifiable as struggling by the adults around them, because they have greater capacity to signal their distress in ways that adults can recognise and respond to.

Early identification of emotional difficulty is a cornerstone of effective intervention, and it is here that the design of monitoring systems becomes directly consequential. Traditional approaches to monitoring wellbeing in schools — teacher observation, pupil voice surveys, pastoral conversations — are valuable but inherently reactive and inconsistent. They are dependent on the availability and attentiveness of individual adults, on the child's willingness and capacity to communicate their distress, and on the presence of systems that translate identified concern into timely action. Each of these dependencies represents a potential point of failure.

The Mental Health and Wellbeing Plan for children and young people (Department of Health and Social Care & DfE, 2023) represents a meaningful national commitment to earlier and more integrated support for children's mental health, including within educational settings. The expansion of Mental Health Support Teams into more schools and colleges is a positive development. But the Plan is explicit that schools themselves must take greater responsibility for the emotional environment they create and for the identification of children in need of support — responsibility that requires both cultural commitment and practical tools.

Proactive Monitoring and the Animikind Approach

Effective early intervention requires effective early identification, and effective early identification requires a monitoring approach that is proactive rather than reactive — one that surfaces emerging emotional difficulty before it has manifested in sustained absence, escalating behaviour, or acute mental health crisis. This is the gap that technology, thoughtfully designed and ethically deployed, has genuine potential to address.

The Animikind Proactive Ecosystem is built on the understanding that emotional wellbeing has identifiable patterns — that changes in a child's emotional state, engagement, communication, and behaviour carry information that, if captured consistently and interpreted intelligently, can signal distress at a point when intervention remains relatively straightforward. By learning the individual emotional signature of each pupil and monitoring for meaningful deviation from that baseline, the system is designed to place timely, actionable information in the hands of the adults best placed to act: pastoral leads, DSLs, class teachers, and support staff who know the child.

In the context of the attendance crisis, this matters in a specific and practical way. A child whose anxiety is beginning to build around school attendance is unlikely to present with a sudden, dramatic refusal. The pattern is typically gradual: increasing reluctance, more frequently reported physical symptoms, subtle withdrawal from peer relationships, declining engagement in classroom activities. Each of these signals, taken individually, may appear unremarkable. Taken together, across time and in the context of that child's established baseline, they constitute an early warning that warrants attention.

Where those early signals are missed — because monitoring is inconsistent, because the child's communication style does not readily alert adults, or because case loads are simply too high for individual observation to be reliable — the opportunity for early intervention passes. The pattern deepens. By the time absence is formally flagged, the child may already be significantly entrenched in a cycle of avoidance that requires far more resource-intensive support to address. Proactive monitoring, in this sense, is not a technological luxury; it is a strategic investment in preventing the kind of prolonged disengagement that carries lasting consequences for children's life trajectories.

Crucially, the Animikind approach does not replace the human relationship at the centre of effective pastoral practice. It supports it. By reducing the administrative burden of monitoring and flagging, it frees pastoral professionals to direct their time and attention towards the relational work that cannot be automated: the trusted conversation, the carefully held concern, the gradual, patient re-engagement of a child for whom school has become a source of dread rather than connection.

Conclusion

The national attendance crisis is real, and it demands a serious, sustained, and multi-dimensional response. But the response will only be effective if it begins from an honest account of what is driving absence for the children most deeply affected by it. For a significant proportion of chronically absent pupils, the issue is not a shortage of enforcement. It is a deficit of belonging, of emotional safety, of early recognition, and of timely support.

Moving from attendance to belonging means shifting the framing of the question: from 'how do we get children into school?' to 'what would make school a place that children choose to come back to?' These are not the same question, and they do not produce the same answers. The first tends towards escalation; the second tends towards investment — in culture, in relationships, in emotional literacy, in the quality of pastoral care, and in the systems that support those who provide it.

Schools that create genuine belonging do not simply perform better on attendance registers. They create the conditions in which children can learn, develop, and flourish. Attendance, in that context, is not the goal; it is the natural consequence of getting the deeper things right. And getting the deeper things right — for every child, including those whose emotional needs are most complex and most easily missed — is the work that this moment in educational history demands.

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To follow Animikind's ongoing reflections on emotionally intelligent education, connect with us on social media (links below). To learn how the Animikind Proactive Ecosystem can support your school's attendance, wellbeing, and early intervention, visit www.animikind.com. For questions or to speak with our team, please book an online appointment with our client experience team. We look forward to connecting.