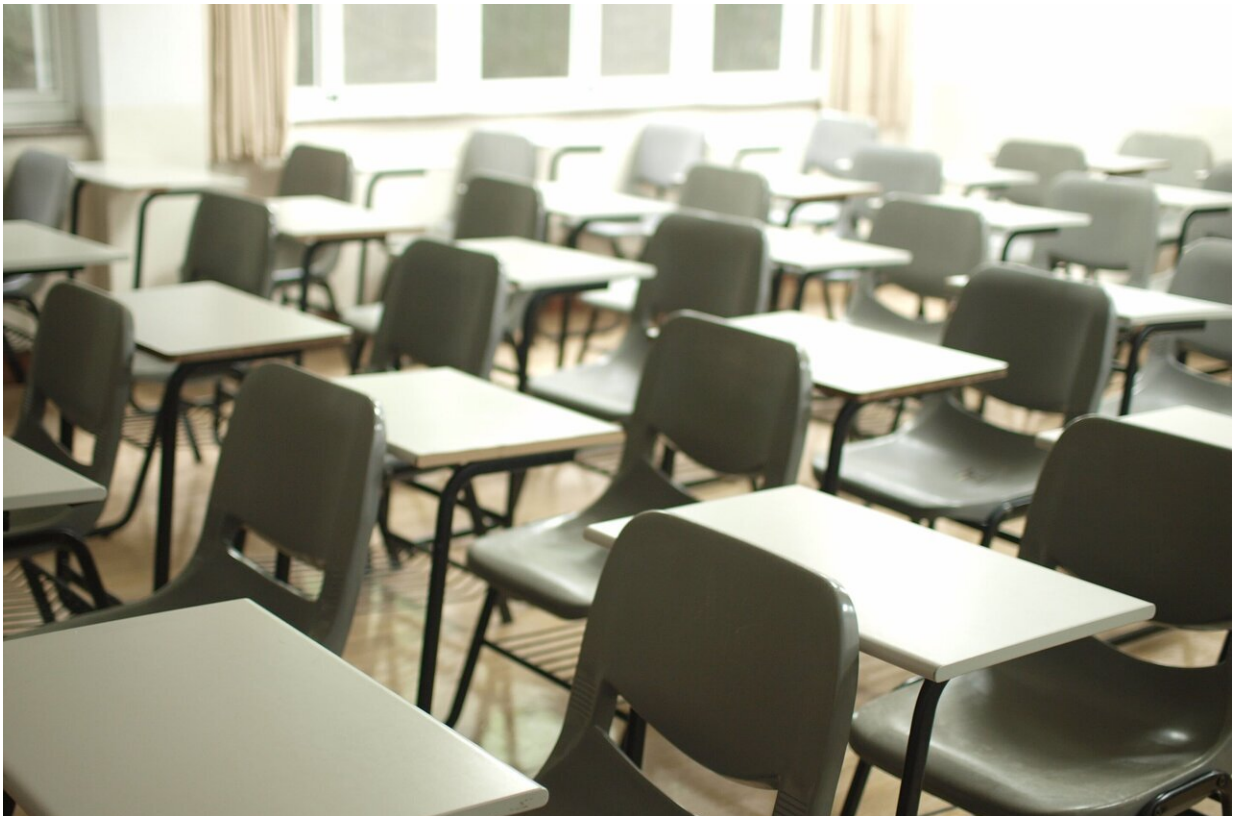


# Early childhood problems linked to persistent school absenteeism

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Children who are not considered "school-ready" by their teachers are more than twice as likely to become persistently absent at some point in their education, according to a new study led by the University of Leeds.

Researchers analyzed data for 62,598 children aged 5-13 from across the Bradford district and compared it with school absence records between the academic years 2012-2013 and 2019-2020 to identify associations between early childhood problems and absenteeism.

The team from the School of Psychology and the Born in Bradford Centre for Applied Education Research found that 67% of all persistent absentees with attendance below 90% were considered "not school-ready" when they entered reception. This contrasted with only 37% of "not school-ready" children who were not persistently absent.

The researchers believe their findings, which are published today in the *Royal Society Open Science* journal, show that the seeds of absenteeism are sown early in childhood, and that school readiness measures already used by teachers could identify children at risk of long-term disengagement from the education system.

Lead author Dr. Megan Wood, a post-doctoral research fellow in the School of Psychology, said, "School is where children develop and flourish, academically, emotionally, socially, and physically. However, as a society, we are edging towards a school absence epidemic, with many pupils missing out on opportunities to thrive by not attending every day. This has worsened dramatically since the pandemic."

In the UK, absenteeism is a major concern for school leaders and policymakers, with data from the 2022-23 autumn term showing that nearly a quarter of all pupils missed at least 39 half-day sessions. According to the UK's Department for Education, this means they are considered "persistent absentees" with attendance below 90%.

The number of children classified as being "persistently absent" has risen over time, particularly between 2017-18 and 2020-21, with the more recent figures attributed to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

These figures have led to a formal inquiry by the UK Government's Education Committee.

The researchers say there is an urgent need to understand the factors that lead to absenteeism and determine how children at risk of this behavior can be identified before they disengage from the school system.

School readiness assessments in England involve teachers using a three-point scale (emerging, expected, exceeding) to rate a child's performance in various areas of development, including physical; personal, social and emotional; communication; math and literacy. Children rated as "emerging" in any of the early learning goals are defined as not being school-ready.

The researchers say potential explanations for the relationship between school readiness and absenteeism could be due in part to the engagement levels of parents, with those who are more engaged better preparing their children for the learning environment, resulting in children who are more excited to learn. Such parental engagement may continue throughout the child's school journey, in the form of helping with homework and ensuring children arrive at school ready to learn.

Alternatively, not being school-ready may be indicative of underlying needs, such as neurodivergence or [mental health issues](#) that are not currently being met, making school difficult for these children.

Co-author, Mark Mon-Williams, Professor of Psychology at the University of Leeds, said, "There is a school absence crisis and the long-term consequences for the UK are frightening. The UK's future depends on a well-educated and healthy workforce and the evidence shows clearly that school absence is a major risk factor for poor health in later life.

"This research shows that we need to act early and how we can identify children at risk before they disengage with school. It also highlights that there are many reasons why children are absent, and suggests we need evidence-based responses tailored to individual circumstances to address the crisis."

The researchers found that socioeconomic circumstances, measured by eligibility for free school meals, were a major risk factor for persistent absence.

Ethnicity was also found to be associated with persistent absenteeism, with children of Pakistani heritage having significantly lower odds of becoming persistent absentees compared to children of white British heritage.

Dr. Wood added, "It is often too late to intervene once the problems have already begun. Instead, [preventative measures](#) should be adopted to avoid children disengaging from school in the first place. These findings demonstrate how we can use existing data—readily available to schools and teachers—to highlight the pupils who may need additional support to keep them engaged with [school](#), even prior to problems arising.

"We urge policymakers to encourage the use of such data within schools. By identifying needs early, we can ensure all pupils are provided the opportunity to grow and develop the skills needed to function within society."

The researchers believe their findings raise further questions about which early interventions or support may be the most appropriate to stop persistent absenteeism. They intend to investigate those questions in subsequent studies.

**More information:** Megan L. Wood et al, The relationship between

'school readiness' and later persistent absenteeism, *Royal Society Open Science* (2024). [DOI: 10.1098/rsos.240272](https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.240272)

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