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978-1-911-62314-4 — Mental Health and Attendance at School

Edited by Katie Finning , Tamsin Ford , Darren A. Moore

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every effort has been made to disguise the identities of the individuals involved.
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Preface

This book brings together a perennial educational issue, school attendance, and a critical health concern, children and young people's mental health. The mantra about the importance of 'bums on seats' belies the complexity mediating the link between pupils' absence from school and their academic achievement. However, it is both well known and thoroughly researched that losing time in school results in missing important learning. There is also a 'double deficit', as the wide-ranging reasons for school absence can often, but not always, present a barrier to learning in themselves. So why, given important links to learning and other important factors affecting attendance, focus on mental health difficulties?

Anyone who has experience working with and supporting children and young people with either their school attendance or their mental health will only be too aware of the association between the two. Put simply, absence from school, and its potentially protective factors, risks the deterioration of mental health, while worsening mental health difficulties can understandably make attending school more challenging. Our previous research has demonstrated this instinctive link [1-3]. However, although this association exists at the cohort level, for some individuals, aspects of the school environment may be detrimental to their mental health, so withdrawing from this situation may provide some release. Things are further complicated as different mental health difficulties may predict different challenges with school attendance and reasons for absence. We can also identify a range of factors, such as special educational needs and adverse experiences, that interact with school attendance as well as children and young people's mental health.

The complex link between mental health and attendance is therefore hard to do justice to in a short academic paper. Editing a book is a significant undertaking, but a couple of key things solidified the need for this book in our minds. Firstly, one of the journal articles from Katie Finning's PhD generated a lot of academic and media interest. We had carefully reviewed existing research on the association between anxiety and school attendance. We found nothing ground-breaking: an association between anxiety and unexcused absences/truancy, and school refusal. Underpinning this we noted a lack of high-quality evidence, little longitudinal research and limited evidence relating to overall absenteeism or excused/medical absences. However, the topic and association clearly resonated as an important one and generated great interest. Alongside Katie Finning's PhD, we had numerous conversations with parents whose children were struggling with their mental health and attendance at school, as well as with educators who were at a loss about how to support them. These conversations highlighted the substantial and wide-ranging impact these issues can have on young people and their families and further solidified the need for a book to begin to address some of the complexities and suggest a way forward.

When Tamsin Ford trained as child and adolescent psychiatrist in the mid-1990s, contact with school was perceived to be essential to thorough assessment, but the increasing pressure on Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services has left many practitioners believing that conversations with educators are a luxury rather than a

necessity. While School Mental Health Teams will hopefully redress the increasing separation between mental health and education practitioners, one of our aims was to curate an evidence-based but practical guide to the complex issues influencing attendance at school and mental health.

This book captures some of this complexity across individual chapters written by invited experts from both mental health and education backgrounds. We start by setting the scene and appreciating that school absence is varied in type but can be a critical marker for early intervention. Different types of mental health difficulties and their barriers to school attendance are then discussed in subsequent chapters. Later in the book, the association between attendance and mental health is considered for particular groups and from the parent perspective. Finally, we acknowledge the changing face of education during the Covid-19 pandemic, which emerged during the preparation of this book. More of us have come to appreciate the impact of missing time with peers at school, as well as the varying impact on children and young people's mental health of not attending school during lockdowns. A wider audience can now relate to some of the previously more acute challenges of going into school after some time away as feeling alien, stressful and overwhelming. That said, we hope this book demonstrates the importance of supporting school attendance and recognising the associated mental health difficulties and will help practitioners and researchers alike.

We are extremely grateful to Fran Morgan at Square Peg and all of the parents/carers from the Facebook group *Not Fine In School* who spoke to us about their experiences. Those conversations provided us with invaluable insights that encouraged us to produce this book and helped to shape its content. We would also like to thank all the authors who, despite their own busy schedules, dedicated their time to contribute their thoughts and research experience to the book. Most, but not all, of the contributors are based in the United Kingdom. Therefore, many of the issues in this book are considered primarily through a UK lens, but we also draw on international research and practice where we can and, indeed, most, if not all, of the topics addressed are highly relevant to an international audience.

We look forward to hearing your thoughts and hope that you find the work interesting, useful and informative.

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