

The Institutional Truant.

Torbay Educational Psychology Service Briefing Paper

Introduction:

Since the COVID lockdown, there has been a rise of emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) among young people.

The 2022 Attendance Audit from the Children's Commissioner found that in Autumn 2021, 1 in 4 children were persistently absent. In 2018/2019, this figure was 1 in 9 – meaning that persistent absence has more than doubled.

Increase in young people attending school but not attending lessons.

It has been noted that a cohort of young people, especially in Torbay Secondary schools, have been attending school but not engaging in learning. They attend school primarily for social reasons, to see friends and enjoy themselves. They resist school staff by running away, engaging in confrontation and hiding within the school; this resistance is seen as 'fun' and a contributing factor to their behaviour.

Debate on terminology: the distinction between traditional truants and those experiencing EBSA.

There has been considerable debate around the terminology used to describe young people who do not attend school. In the past, this was described as "truanting". This implied a deliberate wilfulness, whereas many young people experienced high anxiety around school attendance. The distinction was made between the traditional truant, who may avoid school for prosocial (meeting friends), behavioural or work reasons, and those who avoided school for psychological or negative social reasons (being bullied). EBSA (Emotionally Based School Avoidance) was coined for this second group of young people. However, it has been noted that all non-attendance has an emotional basis and has far-reaching impacts on an individual's social, emotional, cognitive and personal development (Dannow et al., 2020)

However, there has not been much focus on the young people who attend school but do not attend lessons. The term institutional truant was used by Ken Reid (1999, 2000, 2001). These young people have also been referred to as "internal truants". It is noted that the term "institutional truant" does not reflect the more nuanced understanding reflected in the term EBSA; however, in the absence of a more inclusive term, this document will refer to young people experiencing these difficulties as institutional truants.

The Institutional Truant:

Description of the institutional truant as a different category of non-attending students.

Institutional truants miss school purely for educational reasons, usually related to their school. Unlike traditional truants, they may be extroverts, engage in confrontation, and even remain on the school premises, although out of lessons. Institutional truants are more likely to indulge in "on the spur of the moment" absences from lessons and to be selective about missed days or lessons. They often have a higher self-concept than traditional truants and have quite large numbers of friends. Institutional truants may even be the leaders of groups of absentees, completely disregarding authority and unconcerned about the outcome of any punitive measures taken against them. Like traditional truants, they will come from deprived

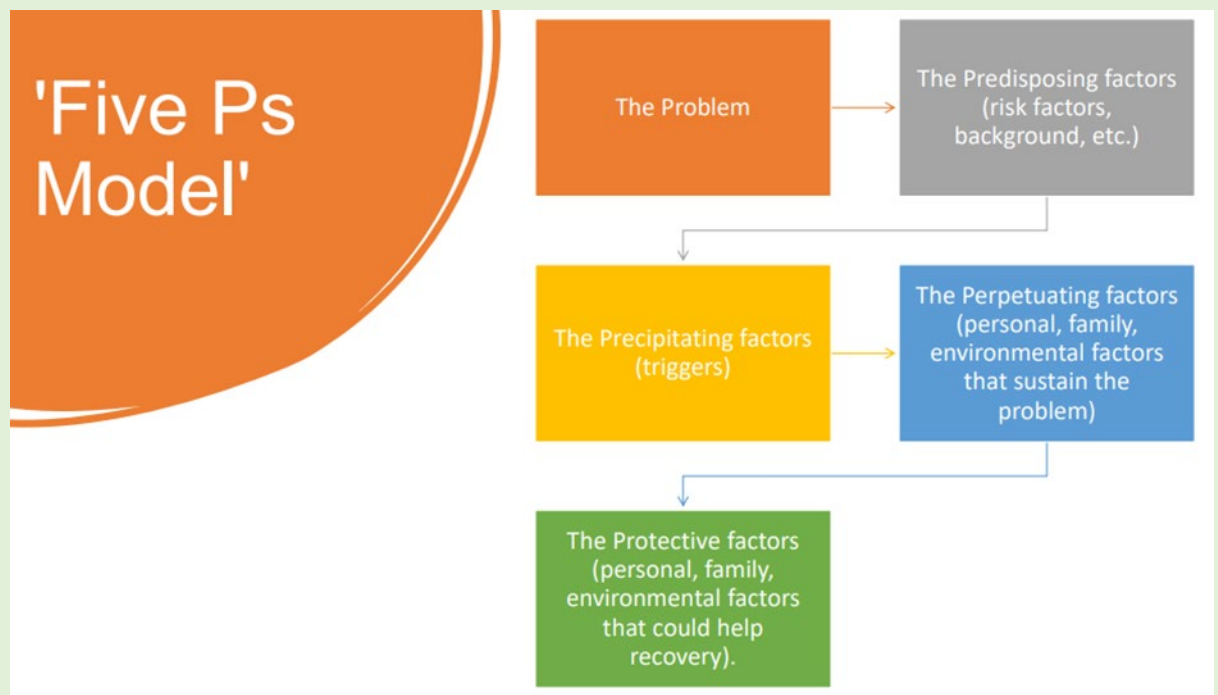
and unsupportive home backgrounds. Some institutional truants will have 'matured' on a diet of disputes at home, in their immediate neighbourhood and classrooms.

Characteristics and behaviours of institutional truants.

- They are extroverted and engage in confrontation.
- They may remain on school premises even when not attending lessons.
- Their absences are often impulsive and selective.
- Institutional truants have a higher self-concept compared to traditional truants.
- They tend to have many friends and may lead groups of absentees.
- They disregard authority and are unconcerned about punitive measures.
- Institutional truants often come from deprived and unsupportive home backgrounds.
- Some may have experienced frequent disputes in their homes, neighbourhoods, and classrooms.

The 5P model:

- Examining psychological traits that make some students more prone to absenteeism and skipping lessons. The 5P model developed by Tina Rae (2020) outlines Problems; Predisposing Factors (risk factors, background and so on); Precipitating Factors (triggers); Perpetuating Factors (personal, family, and environmental factors that sustain the problem) and Protective factors (personal, family, environmental factors that could help recovery).



The 5P model developed by Tina Rae (2020) can be practically used in a secondary school setting to support children with institutional truanting by considering the following steps:

- **Problems:** Identify and understand the specific problems related to institutional truanting behaviour in individual students. This involves assessing the reasons behind skipping lessons and its impact on their academic, social, and emotional well-being.
- **Predisposing Factors:** Explore the risk factors and background circumstances contributing to skipping lessons. This includes examining personal factors (academic self-concept), family factors (lack of support or dysfunctional relationships), and other environmental influences.
- **Precipitating Factors:** Identify the triggers or events that lead to episodes of institutional truanting. This involves understanding the specific situations, experiences, or emotions that prompt students to skip classes.
- **Perpetuating Factors:** Examine the personal, family, and environmental factors that sustain the institutional truanting behaviour over time. This may include factors such as lack of consequences, enabling by family members, or reinforcing negative peer influences.
- **Protective Factors:** Identify and leverage personal, family, and environmental factors to help support the recovery and improvement of students' lesson attendance. This may involve fostering positive relationships, providing academic and emotional support, establishing clear boundaries and expectations, and creating a supportive school environment.

By applying the 5P model, teachers, pastoral leads, and support staff can comprehensively understand the underlying factors contributing to truanting behaviour. This understanding can inform targeted interventions and support strategies that address the specific needs of individual students and promote positive attendance patterns.

Case Study:

Bayside Secondary School's experience with institutional truants.

Bayside secondary school had difficulties with a group of young people who persistently attended school for social reasons. The young people tended to register and then hide in the school, often the toilets, refusing to go to lessons. Primarily this was motivated by a social reason. There were many girls within this group of "institutional truants". If the young people did attend lessons, they could be disruptive and often would walk out of the lessons and encourage others to do so.

Response strategies implemented by the school.

The school responded by using registration software to identify young people who were not in lessons. Then members of the Pastoral staff would look for them. Parents were contacted immediately.

If caught, the young person attends an inclusion room for the day and after-school detention. The young person was also placed in senior teachers' lessons for the subsequent days. A senior management/senior member met a young person who did not register with their tuition group.

Parents were spoken to about any factors that might contribute to the young person's difficulties in school.

Factors supporting the reduction of institutional truants.

The school has mostly successfully gotten the young people back into lessons. Senior management support, meeting pupils, and pupils attending their lessons gave a clear signal to the young people and others around the seriousness of the school viewed the issue.

Telephone calls home- although parents were annoyed by the number of calls home, this affected the young people's lesson attendance.

Intelligence, knowledge of the pupils, knowledge of the school, and speaking to the pupils all contributed to supporting the young person's sense of school belonging

Strategies to Use:

Various strategies and initiatives for addressing non-attendance issues.

The most important factor in addressing institutional truancy is developing intelligence around the young people at risk. Four questions are essential in developing this intelligence.

1. Do we know when pupils are missing from a lesson?
2. Do we know where the pupils go?
3. What are the consequences for the pupils (both intended and unintended)?
4. Do we know why the children miss lessons?
5. Have they been interviewed?

The most important strategy to address institutional truancy is an immediate response. Although this behaviour may not be viewed as "the most serious" misdemeanour, having strong and immediate consequences can effectively reduce future incidents of this behaviour. Long-term, institutional truancy can profoundly affect a young person's education and life chances, much more so than single incidents of aggression and therefore should be seen as one of the most significant behaviour problems facing a school.

50 ideas to tackle institutional truancy:

1. **First-day response** – parents are contacted immediately when a child misses a lesson.
2. **Computer-based registration** that highlights who is missing lessons immediately.
3. **Personal Social and Health Education programmes-** Recognising the need to address internal truancy, schools and parents can raise awareness through education. Integrating truancy topics early on in PSHE programs helps students understand the consequences and discourages skipping lessons.
4. **Buddy system:** a form of mentoring that originated in the US and comes in various types. They pair students based on abilities, age, ethnicity, or teacher-student relationships to help needy students achieve their learning goals and seek help without fear.
5. **Corrective Schemes to overcome literacy and numeracy difficulties:** Concentrated efforts can swiftly enhance pupils' literacy and numeracy skills. Corrective reading schemes, emphasising regular attendance and offering rewards, have proven effective in raising basic literacy levels within a few months. This helps reduce long-term non-attendance among truants and persistent absentees from disadvantaged backgrounds.
6. **The use of classroom assistants-** Teachers' busy schedules often hinders providing necessary attention to students, leading to the widespread use of classroom assistants for support, particularly in addressing inequality and disadvantaged backgrounds.
7. **Mentoring programmes-** Mentoring schemes are widely used in UK schools, including peer, adult, school, and parent mentoring. These initiatives aim to build positive relationships, boost confidence, and facilitate the return to traditional classroom settings.
8. **Improving the quality of registration time-** Schools have attempted various strategies to address form periods and registration time, including PSHE programs, self-signing-in schemes, and swipe

cards. However, no perfect solution has emerged. Form tutors are crucial in identifying and supporting needy students, making them the first line of defence for attendance matters.

9. **Parents with pupils** - parent mentoring in schools, addressing issues like internal truancy, bullying, and alienation.
10. **Establishing an attendance hotline with local shops**
11. **Teenage sports leaders** - The Teenage Sports Leaders scheme pairs skilled students with less experienced peers in sports like soccer, hockey, and netball. Similarly, the Role Models scheme extends the concept to aesthetic and cultural studies like art, drama, and music.
12. **Spot checks** have been a consistent school policy for decades, targeting internal hotspots like toilets and unused rooms. However, checking external areas near school boundaries is often neglected, despite evidence showing many absentees remain close by, especially when fearing parental disapproval.
13. **Creating a pupils' school council**- School councils effectively promote student support for school policies and deter absenteeism. Pupils' conformity mindset and involvement in decision-making contribute to a sense of community and value, yet their implementation remains limited.
14. **Specialist pastoral training for staff on 'sensitive' issues**- equips staff to address sensitive topics such as mental health, trauma, diversity, and ethics. It promotes active listening, cultural competence, confidentiality, and self-care.
15. **Young carers scheme** - supports young individuals caring for family members with disabilities or illnesses, offering counselling, education support, and financial assistance.
16. **Provision of free bus passes** Schools issue free bus passes within a three-mile radius to tackle non-attendance excuses. Ensuring buses drop students off within school boundaries promotes safety, but bullying during travel remains a concern.
17. **Using legal powers decisively** – push for the Local Authority to use powers at the first opportunity.
18. **Limiting school exit points and monitoring school transitions**- Some schools neglect control and management of entry and exit points, allowing students to skip specific lessons and registration freely. Known internal truancy holes persist for years without intervention.
19. **Use of at-risk registers/measures** - At-risk registers in schools help identify potential internal truants early, including those with truanting siblings, from single-parent families, with academic concerns, or facing serious home problems. These registers provide targeted support and monitoring for students throughout their school years.
20. **Return to school policies Home-school, parent-pupil, pupil school contracts**-implementing home-school contracts for all pupils to encourage shared responsibilities. While the legally binding nature of these contracts requires further research, their use can be beneficial. Pupil-school contracts also show the potential to reduce internal truancy but lack comprehensive testing and evaluation.
21. **Developing strategies for punctuality and combating lateness**, Smith et al. (1994) stress the need for schools to tackle lateness. They propose a clear policy, a balanced approach, and effective monitoring and define lateness as arrival ten minutes after the session bell.
22. **Managing subject choices effectively**- Selecting GCSE subjects is sensitive. Insensitive handling and pressures contribute to non-attendance. Encouraging suitable choices can prevent internal truancy.
23. **Improving special needs facilities**- more resources and time are still needed to improve outcomes for special needs pupils, especially as their numbers are rising.
24. **One-to-one experiences—case reviews**- Schools are adopting specialist one-on-one sessions for disengaged or absent students. These sessions involve reviewing attendance, behaviour, and

academics and implementing report cards and teacher support strategies. Exclusion is a last resort.

25. **Use of homework clubs and ICT** - Homework clubs aid disadvantaged students, promoting learning skills. Funded study centres provide resources for homework, sports, and arts, benefiting many schools. Research reveals inadequate homework and excessive TV viewing among 12-year-olds.
26. **Specialist in-school Projects** are being implemented as an alternative to regular lessons for disaffected students, aiming to prevent dropout. These projects involve vocational activities and work placements on various themes.
27. **Breakfast clubs** The concept of school breakfast clubs, popular since 1998, encourages early arrival with free breakfast, socialisation, and targeted support. They benefit disadvantaged students and working parents, aiding attendance and addressing specific needs. Breakfast clubs vary in purpose and organisation.
28. **After-school club** offerings vary between schools, including sports like soccer and hockey and diverse options like surfing and ice skating. Music, drama, and ICT clubs are popular cultural and recreational activities. These clubs promote attendance, cater to students' interests, and prevent absenteeism. Work-related curriculum strategies
29. **Appointment of specialist staff**— The attendance support teacher's responsibilities are to improve attendance, monitor and address absenteeism, develop strategies, collaborate with parents and agencies, ease transitions, provide support, and ensure effective communication.
30. **Key skills lessons** Extra key skills lessons for less able students vary in availability and support. Resource constraints and diverse roles of learning support staff impact provision. Lessons are preventative and positive.
31. **Special needs assistants** - work with individuals or groups of pupils in regular or special needs classrooms. The increasing complexity of special needs challenges requires effective support to address absenteeism. The rising number of pupils with special needs in certain areas is a concerning trend.
32. **Appointing a home-school coordinator** Home-school communication needs better management, especially regarding lesson non-attendance.
33. **Red lists** identify and support needy pupils in specific short-term contexts, such as those requiring study skills support or facing health, behaviour, attendance, or bullying issues. They prioritise monitoring and follow-up actions. However, in schools with a high number of at-risk students, red lists may be less effective. Compensatory programmes
34. **School-based review** - Regularly reviewing attendance policies and practices is essential for schools. The review process involves initial assessment, brainstorming strategies, staff development, and implementing a strategic plan. Evaluation and prevention strategies ensure effective control of lesson absenteeism.
35. **Schools are experimenting with flexible tuition times.** Some schools allow non-attendees to choose parts of the curriculum, while changing the school year may affect attendance.
36. **School-based questionnaires** - questionnaires can provide precise information for analysis and improvement. Keep them simple, clear, and anonymous. Plan data use in advance.
37. **After-hours support**—tutors or clubs After-school learning support clubs are a counterpart to breakfast clubs. Preferences vary, with after-hours support being more popular among younger age groups and in primary schools. These clubs cater to various needs, including reintegration, linguistic support, and gifted students. Organisational structures differ between schools.
38. **Tackling social exclusion** Collaborative efforts, such as integrating sectors and local coordination, is key to addressing social exclusion.

39. **Using local sports clubs** Specialist sports tuition provided by local clubs is on the rise, supported by local or regional sponsorship. Schools aiming for specialist sports status can attract certain students and parents, potentially reducing absenteeism.
40. **Presenting attendance certificates** is now commonplace in schools as standalone rewards or as part of a broader system. They serve as positive reinforcement, especially for students who may not excel academically, and highlight the significance of attendance for various school prizes.
41. **Use of stickers and badges-** Stickers and badges are commonly utilised to encourage better school attendance. They serve as a form of recognition, particularly for younger students, and can be found in subject or homework books. Additionally, badges worn on lapels symbolise achievements and improved attendance, which contributes to implementing school reward systems.
42. **'Premiership'** Some schools create football-themed divisions with promotion, relegation, and playoffs to bring life to internal truancy league tables on performance and attendance. It motivates students and generates peer pressure for better attendance.
43. **Arrival and Departure Lounge**, where late-arriving or early departing pupils are directed. Staffed by a receptionist, it has effectively reduced lesson absence and internal truancy.
44. **Parents' Evening on Attendance** Traditional parents' evenings have evolved to include discussions on school policies, such as bullying and attendance. Some schools hold targeted parental days to address specific issues and consequences for students and parents.
45. **Quiet room** Certain schools use a designated "quiet" room for various purposes. While some refer to them as "sin bins" or "coolers," others use them to support bullied students or help "returners" catch up on missed work. They may also be used for potentially disruptive pupils or those with strained teacher relationships.
46. **End-of-day registrations** Some schools use end-of-day registration periods to tackle internal truancy and absence issues, potentially shortening the teaching day. Others alternate between afternoon and end-of-day registrations for spot checks.
47. **Parental sit-ins** Some schools are implementing parental "sit-ins" where a parent or relative attends a student's lessons to address attendance, bullying, or behavioural issues. This involvement has a positive impact on classroom behaviour and benefits other students as well.
48. **Missing-from-lesson slips** -Some schools use missing-from-lesson slips for pupils attending appointments, but others implement daily attendance checks. Form monitors carry lists of absentees, which are cross-checked with subject teachers. Any missing pupils are reported and followed up on. This system helps communicate staff concern for student welfare and emphasises the importance of attendance and pastoral care.
49. **'Catch up' units** 'Catch-up' units are designed to support the reintegration of students absent from school due to illness, non-attendance, or other reasons. These units aim to help students catch up on missed learning and coursework promptly, ensuring they do not feel disadvantaged and have no academic reason to continue missing school.
50. **Consistency of staff policies** Ensuring consistent interpretation and implementation of school policies is crucial. Inconsistencies among staff regarding rules and expectations, such as allowing or prohibiting certain behaviours or tolerating absenteeism, can negatively impact student behaviour and undermine the effectiveness of policies. Schools need to develop policy documents that are agreed upon by all staff and ensure consistent application throughout the school.

References

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