



Attendance Is Everyone's Business

Why every interaction matters

♥ CULTURE

🔑 CONSISTENCY

👐 CARE

Why We're Talking About Attendance

Attendance is not an administrative issue confined to the office or a number on a spreadsheet. It's a fundamental indicator of how well we're serving our pupils, and it touches every corner of school life. When we talk about attendance, we're really talking about belonging, engagement, and the daily relationships that make children feel safe enough to come through our doors each morning.

Attendance Affects Everything

The impact of poor attendance ripples through every aspect of a child's life and their future. Learning is disrupted when pupils miss lessons, creating gaps that compound over time. Wellbeing suffers when children feel disconnected from their peers and the school community.

Safeguarding concerns often first emerge through attendance patterns, making it one of our earliest warning systems. And ultimately, life chances are significantly diminished when education is inconsistent.

Systems Alone Aren't Enough

We can have the most sophisticated tracking systems, the most carefully worded letters, and the most detailed attendance policies in the world. But schools do not improve attendance through systems alone. Attendance improves when adults across the school are consistent in their approach, visible in their presence, and genuinely caring in their interactions. Every conversation matters. Every greeting counts. Every moment of noticing makes a difference.

 **This session is not about blame. It's about influence.** We all have the power to make a difference in whether a child chooses to attend school tomorrow.

The National Picture

CONTEXT

Brief and Honest

Persistent absence remains a significant national concern, and it would be dishonest to pretend otherwise. The statistics tell us that disadvantaged pupils and those with special educational needs and disabilities are disproportionately affected by poor attendance. The drivers are complex and often intertwined: anxiety, physical and mental health challenges, family pressures, caring responsibilities, and sometimes simply the erosion of routines that began during the pandemic and never fully recovered.

We're not alone in facing these challenges. Schools across the country are grappling with similar patterns. Families are struggling. Children are struggling. The support systems that once existed in communities have, in many cases, weakened or disappeared entirely. The cost-of-living crisis, housing insecurity, and stretched health services all play their part.

But here's what we know matters most: Schools can make a genuine difference, especially through consistent daily practice. Research and evidence tell us that school culture, adult relationships, and predictable routines are amongst the most powerful tools we have. We cannot solve every societal problem, but we can ensure that our school is a place where children want to be and where families feel supported.



Schools can make a difference — especially through daily practice

Attendance = Safeguarding

Attendance is often the earliest indicator that something isn't right in a child's life. Before a disclosure is made, before bruises appear, before a crisis escalates, attendance patterns often tell us that a child or family is struggling. This is why attendance monitoring is not simply an administrative function but a crucial safeguarding responsibility that belongs to everyone.

Patterns Matter More Than Single Days

A single day's absence might mean nothing, or it might mean everything. What we're looking for are the patterns that emerge over time. Is it always Monday? Does absence cluster around certain lessons or times of day? Are there unexplained gaps that families struggle to account for? These patterns are the language through which children and families sometimes communicate distress without words.

Warning Signs to Notice

Monday absences can indicate weekend difficulties or struggles with transition. Late arrivals that become more frequent may suggest chaotic home routines or parental capacity issues. Frequent illness complaints, particularly without medical evidence, can signal anxiety, school avoidance, or sometimes fabricated illness by adults. Physical symptoms can be very real manifestations of emotional distress.

The Quiet Ones

Perhaps most concerning are the quiet pupils who disappear without fuss. The child who doesn't cause trouble, who slips away gradually, whose absence doesn't create obvious disruption. These are often our most vulnerable pupils, and their silence can mask significant safeguarding risks. We must notice the quiet absences as keenly as we notice the loud ones.

"Attendance is one of our core safeguarding indicators."

This is the key line for Ofsted, for parents, and for ourselves. It reminds us that monitoring attendance isn't bureaucracy — it's child protection.

What Attendance Is NOT

LET'S BE CLEAR

Before we talk about what attendance work looks like, it's crucial to be absolutely clear about what it isn't. There are myths and misconceptions that can undermine our efforts and create unnecessary anxiety amongst staff and families. When we strip away what attendance work is not, we can focus our energy on what actually makes a difference.

Not About Punishment

Attendance work is not about punishing children or families. Sanctions and penalties have their place in specific circumstances, but they are not the foundation of good attendance practice. Children don't stay away from school to be difficult; they stay away because something is stopping them from attending. Our job is to understand and remove those barriers, not to add punishment to an already struggling situation.

Not About Blame

Similarly, this is not about apportioning blame to families, to staff, or to the children themselves. Blame is corrosive and counterproductive. It shuts down communication, damages relationships, and prevents us from getting to the heart of what's really happening. When we approach attendance with curiosity rather than judgment, we create the conditions for honest conversations and meaningful change.

Not Just the Attendance Officer's Job

Attendance is everyone's business. Whilst we have designated staff who coordinate our attendance systems and interventions, improving attendance is not solely their responsibility. Every adult in this school has a role to play. The caretaker who greets children by name, the lunchtime supervisor who notices who's missing, the teaching assistant who builds trust — all of these interactions matter.

Not Solved by Letters Alone

Letters have their place in our attendance procedures, but no child ever returned to school because of a well-written letter. Letters can inform, they can set expectations, they can provide evidence of our efforts — but they cannot substitute for human connection. Attendance improves through relationships, not correspondence.

So what is attendance work really about? It's about relationships, routines, and expectations. It's about creating a school where children feel they belong, where adults are consistent and predictable, and where everyone holds the belief that being here matters.

The Power of Daily Interactions

The most powerful attendance interventions aren't expensive programmes or complex strategies. They're the small, daily interactions that communicate to a child: "You belong here. You were missed. We're glad you're back." These micro-moments, repeated hundreds of times across a school day, create the culture that makes children want to attend.



Greeting Pupils by Name

When we greet a child by name, we see them as an individual, not just another pupil passing through the corridor. That moment of recognition – "Good morning, James" – can be the difference between a child feeling anonymous and feeling valued. It costs nothing, takes seconds, and its impact can last all day.



Noticing Absence and Following Up

When a child returns after absence, acknowledging that we noticed they were gone sends a powerful message. "We missed you yesterday – is everything okay?" This isn't interrogation; it's care. It tells the child that their presence matters, that they were noticed in their absence, and that adults are paying attention.



Calm, Predictable Classrooms

Children attend more readily when they know what to expect. Calm, well-structured classrooms where routines are predictable and adults are consistent create psychological safety. Anxiety thrives in chaos; attendance flourishes in calm. The way we structure our lessons, manage behaviour, and create classroom culture all influence whether a child wants to come back tomorrow.



Warm but Firm Expectations

High expectations and warm relationships are not opposites – they're partners. We can expect full attendance whilst also being compassionate about individual circumstances. We can be firm about the importance of being in school whilst also being flexible in how we support a child's return. Warmth without expectations becomes permissiveness; expectations without warmth become harshness. We need both.

 **Reflection prompt for all staff:** "Would a pupil feel noticed if they were absent today?" If the answer is no, what could you do differently tomorrow?

Language Matters

The words we choose when talking about attendance — with pupils, with parents, with each other — shape beliefs and behaviours more than we might realise. Language can either build a culture of attendance or subtly undermine it. Every conversation is an opportunity to reinforce expectations or to accidentally communicate that attendance is optional.

Avoid This Language

"It's fine, don't worry"

When said to a parent explaining absence, this phrase accidentally communicates that attendance doesn't really matter. Whilst we want to be kind and avoid making parents feel judged, we also need to convey that school attendance is important. Better alternatives acknowledge the difficulty whilst maintaining the expectation.

"They're anxious, so what can we do?"

This phrase suggests helplessness and inevitability. It implies that anxiety is an insurmountable barrier rather than a challenge we can work through together. Anxiety is real and valid, but it's also something we can support children with — not something that permanently excuses them from education.

"Attendance isn't my role"

Perhaps the most damaging phrase of all. When any staff member says this, it fragments our collective responsibility and sends the message that attendance is someone else's problem. Every role in school touches attendance in some way, whether directly or indirectly.

Use This Language Instead

"We've missed you"

Simple, warm, and powerful. This phrase tells the child they matter, their absence was noticed, and they belong in this school community. It opens dialogue rather than closing it down, and it comes from a place of care rather than judgment.

"Let's work this out together"

This positions the school and family as partners rather than adversaries. It acknowledges that there's a problem to solve but frames it as something we'll tackle collaboratively. It assumes good intentions and invites cooperation rather than defensiveness.

"Being here matters — and we'll support you"

This language holds both the expectation and the support in balance. It doesn't excuse absence, but it doesn't shame either. It communicates that attendance is non-negotiable whilst also reassuring that we'll provide whatever help is needed to make it happen.

Pay attention to the language you use in the staffroom as well. When we talk about "reluctant attenders" rather than "school refusers," when we speak of "barriers to attendance" rather than "poor parenting," when we frame absence as a problem to solve rather than a character flaw — we maintain the professional, compassionate stance that actually changes outcomes.

Consistency Builds Confidence

One of the most significant factors in improving attendance is consistency. Children and families need to know what to expect from us, day after day, week after week. When schools are predictable, calm, fair, and consistent across all staff members, attendance improves because pupils feel psychologically safe. They know what's coming. They know how adults will respond. That predictability reduces anxiety and builds the confidence children need to attend.



Predictable

Routines are clear and followed. Lessons start and end the same way. Rules don't change depending on the day or the mood. Pupils can anticipate what will happen next, which reduces anxiety and increases their willingness to engage.



Calm

The adult emotional temperature remains steady. We don't react dramatically to behaviour or absence. Our voices are level, our responses measured. Calm adults create calm environments, and calm environments feel safer to anxious children.



Fair

Similar situations are handled similarly. Pupils see that consequences and support are applied equitably. Fairness doesn't mean identical treatment — it means appropriate responses based on need — but it does mean children can trust that adults aren't arbitrary or unpredictable in their decision-making.



Consistent

All staff apply the same expectations and approaches. The rules in one classroom apply in another. The response to absence from one adult mirrors the response from another. This consistency across the staff team prevents children from experiencing whiplash when moving between different spaces and adults.

What Inconsistency Creates

When schools lack consistency, the consequences are significant and often counterproductive to our attendance goals. Inconsistency creates anxiety because pupils never quite know what to expect or how adults will respond. It creates opportunities for negotiation, as children and families quickly learn which adults are "easier" or more lenient, leading them to shop around for the answer they want rather than accepting the school's position. Most damagingly, inconsistency creates avoidance — if a child knows that some days or some teachers are unpredictable, they're more likely to stay away altogether rather than risk a negative experience.

📌 The good news is that consistency is entirely within our control. It costs nothing. It requires no additional resources. It simply requires us to be intentional about our practices and to hold each other accountable for maintaining them.

Attendance and Inclusion

INCLUSIVE PRACTICE

Good attendance practice is inclusive practice. The two cannot be separated. When we think carefully about how we approach attendance, we're making decisions that profoundly affect our most vulnerable pupils — those with special educational needs and disabilities, those experiencing mental health challenges, those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and those who find school difficult for a multitude of reasons.

SEND and Vulnerable Pupils Benefit Most from Routine

For pupils with autism, ADHD, anxiety disorders, or other SEND, predictable routines and consistent attendance are not just helpful — they're often essential. Disrupted attendance makes it harder for these pupils to maintain the routines that help them manage their needs. Every day missed is a day when the routine is broken, making the return to school even more challenging. Regular attendance, supported appropriately, is often the most therapeutic intervention we can provide.

This doesn't mean dragging reluctant children through the gates or ignoring genuine crises. It means recognising that, for many vulnerable pupils, irregular attendance exacerbates their difficulties rather than alleviating them. When we work hard to maintain their attendance — with appropriate adjustments and support — we're actually serving their best interests.

High Expectations + Reasonable Adjustments

The inclusive approach to attendance holds high expectations for all pupils whilst making reasonable adjustments for those who need them. This might mean a phased return for a pupil with anxiety, a later start time for a pupil with sleep disorder, or a modified timetable for a pupil in crisis. But these adjustments are designed to facilitate attendance, not replace it. They're bridges back to full attendance, not permanent alternatives.

We must be careful not to conflate inclusion with low expectations. True inclusion means believing that every child deserves access to education and then doing whatever it takes to make that happen. It means adapting our provision so that school becomes accessible to pupils who find it challenging, not accepting that school simply isn't for them. Inclusion is supported presence, not sanctioned absence.



"Inclusion means helping pupils attend, not excusing them from school."

Everyone's Role

SIMPLE AND CLEAR

Improving attendance is not one person's job — it's a shared endeavour that relies on every adult in the building playing their part. Each role brings unique opportunities to influence attendance, and when everyone understands their contribution, the cumulative effect is powerful. Let's be clear about what this looks like in practice.



Teachers and Tutors

Create welcoming classrooms where pupils feel safe, known, and valued. The quality of relationships in your classroom directly affects whether a child wants to attend tomorrow. Think about your classroom as a place pupils want to return to, not somewhere they're trying to avoid.

Notice patterns in attendance and lateness. You see these pupils every day. You're often the first to notice when something changes — when the punctual pupil starts arriving late, when the chatterer becomes quiet, when absence becomes more frequent. This noticing is not surveillance; it's care.

Raise concerns early rather than waiting for patterns to become entrenched. A quiet word with the pastoral team after a couple of unusual absences can prevent a crisis later. Don't wait until attendance becomes critical before acting.



Support Staff

Build trusted relationships with pupils who might find it easier to talk to you than to teaching staff. Support staff often have different relationships with pupils — less formal, more conversational. These relationships are invaluable in understanding what's really happening in a child's life and why they might be struggling to attend.

Share intelligence with colleagues. The conversation you had with a pupil at breaktime, the comment you overheard, the change in behaviour you noticed — this information needs to be shared appropriately so that the school can respond effectively.

Support routines by being consistent in your approach and helping pupils navigate the school day. Whether you're a teaching assistant, lunchtime supervisor, office staff, or caretaker, your interactions contribute to the overall sense of order and care that makes school feel safe.



Leaders

Model expectations through your own behaviour and the messages you communicate. When leaders are visible, when they greet pupils, when they follow up on absence, they set the tone for the whole school. Your actions tell staff and families what really matters.

Support staff in carrying out attendance work by providing clear systems, appropriate training, and backing them up when difficult conversations are needed. Don't leave staff to manage challenging situations alone, and don't undermine their efforts by being inconsistent.

Remove barriers to attendance wherever possible. Whether that's financial barriers, transport issues, or systemic problems within school that make attendance harder — your role is to identify and eliminate these obstacles.

What Staff Are NOT Expected to Do

It's crucial to provide reassurance about the boundaries of your role in attendance work. There can be anxiety amongst staff about what's being asked of them, particularly in relation to complex issues like mental health and family difficulties. Let's be very clear about what sits within your remit and what doesn't, so that you can focus your energy appropriately and without unnecessary burden.

You Are Not Expected to Diagnose Anxiety

Recognising that a pupil seems anxious is different from diagnosing an anxiety disorder. You're not a mental health professional, and you're not expected to be. Your role is to notice when a pupil appears distressed, to respond with compassion, and to refer appropriately to those with the expertise to assess and support mental health needs. Trust your observations, but don't feel you need to provide clinical expertise.

You Are Not Expected to Fix Family Problems

Many pupils miss school because of complex family situations — domestic abuse, substance misuse, housing instability, parental mental health, poverty. These are serious issues that sit outside your control and expertise. Your role is to recognise when family factors are affecting attendance and to ensure appropriate agencies are involved. You cannot and should not try to resolve these problems alone.

You Are Not Expected to Chase Attendance Alone

Following up on absence is part of a coordinated whole-school system, not something individuals should be doing in isolation. There are designated roles and processes for monitoring and responding to absence. Your part in this is important, but it's one piece of a larger system. You don't need to be phoning parents from your personal phone or spending your evenings worrying about individual pupils' attendance.

You Are Not Expected to Have All the Answers

Attendance challenges can be incredibly complex, with multiple intersecting factors. You're not expected to know how to solve every situation or to have a perfect response to every difficulty. What matters is that you're willing to be part of the solution, to ask for help when needed, and to work collaboratively with colleagues and external agencies.

 **You ARE expected to notice, care, and escalate.** Those three actions — noticing when something isn't right, caring enough to say something, and escalating appropriately — are within everyone's capability. They're also all that's required of you. Everything else sits with designated staff and specialists.

Our Shared Principles

These principles form the foundation of how we approach attendance work in our school. They guide our decisions, shape our conversations, and define our culture. When every adult in the building operates from these shared principles, we create the consistency and clarity that pupils and families need.

Attendance Is a Priority

This isn't just something we say — it's reflected in how we allocate time, resources, and attention. It's visible in our actions, not just our policies. When attendance is genuinely a priority, it shows in everything from how leaders spend their time to how staff meetings are structured, from what we celebrate to what we intervene in promptly.

Relationships Matter

The quality of relationships between adults and pupils, between school and families, and amongst staff themselves directly affects attendance outcomes. We invest in building and maintaining these relationships because we know they're the foundation of everything else. When relationships are strong, difficult conversations become possible, challenges become more manageable, and support becomes more effective.

Early Action Is Better Than Late Escalation

We don't wait for attendance to become critical before we act. Early intervention, when patterns first emerge, is far more effective than crisis response after weeks or months of poor attendance. This means being proactive, noticing changes quickly, and responding proportionately but promptly. Prevention is always better than cure.

We Work With Families, Not Against Them

Families are partners in their children's education, not adversaries. Even when we disagree about expectations or approaches, even when we need to be firm about attendance requirements, we maintain a stance of working together towards the shared goal of the child's wellbeing and education. Blame and judgment shut down partnership; collaboration opens possibilities.

Children's Needs Come First

Every decision we make about attendance is filtered through this question: What does this child need? Not what's easiest for us, not what's most administratively convenient, not what other pupils are doing — but what this individual child needs to attend school successfully. Our approaches may differ from pupil to pupil because their needs differ, but the commitment to putting children first remains constant.

When disagreements or uncertainty arise, return to these principles. They'll guide you towards the right course of action far more reliably than rigid rules or fixed procedures. Principles are portable; they work in every situation and can be applied with professional judgment.

Reflection

 2 MINUTES

Before we move on, let's pause for a brief moment of personal reflection. This isn't about making grand commitments or completely overhauling your practice. It's about identifying the small, achievable actions that collectively make a significant difference to school attendance.

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One Thing I Already Do That Helps Attendance

Think quietly about something you're already doing that contributes to good attendance in your school. It might be how you greet pupils, a routine you've established, the way you follow up with absent pupils, or the relationships you've built. Recognise and value this existing practice. These are your strengths to build upon.

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One Small Change I Could Make

Consider one small, specific change you could make that might improve attendance. It doesn't need to be dramatic or time-consuming. Perhaps it's learning the names of pupils you don't yet know, asking "Are you okay?" when you notice someone seems off, or mentioning to the pastoral team when you spot a concerning pattern. Small changes, multiplied across all staff, create transformational impact.

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 **Optional:** If appropriate, turn to a colleague nearby and briefly share one of your reflections. Sometimes articulating our thoughts to another person helps solidify our commitment to action. Keep it brief — just a minute or two of conversation.

The goal of this reflection isn't to create guilt about what you're not doing or to add more to your already full plate. It's to help you see that you already have influence over attendance, and that small adjustments to what you already do can amplify that influence. Attendance work isn't an additional burden; it's woven into the everyday interactions and relationships that are already part of your role.

What Comes Next

THIS IS THE FOUNDATION

This session has established the fundamental principles and shared understanding that underpin all our attendance work. But it's just the beginning of a broader professional development journey. Building a strong attendance culture takes time, practice, and ongoing learning. The following modules will deepen your understanding and equip you with more specific strategies and knowledge.

Module 2: Attendance Data and Bandings

Understanding how attendance is measured, what the different categories mean (authorised/unauthorised, persistent absence, severe absence), and how to interpret data to identify pupils who need support. You'll learn to read attendance reports and understand the thresholds that trigger different levels of intervention.

Module 4: Working With Parents

How to have productive conversations with parents about attendance, including how to navigate difficult discussions, how to build partnership with families, and how to be both supportive and firm when expectations aren't being met.

Module 6: Targeted Interventions

The graduated response to attendance concerns – from early help to intensive support, from pastoral interventions to external agency involvement, and when and how to escalate when attendance doesn't improve.

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Module 3: Daily Routines and Systems

The practical systems and routines that make attendance monitoring effective – registration processes, first-day calling, return-to-school conversations, and the daily procedures that ensure attendance is tracked accurately and responded to promptly.

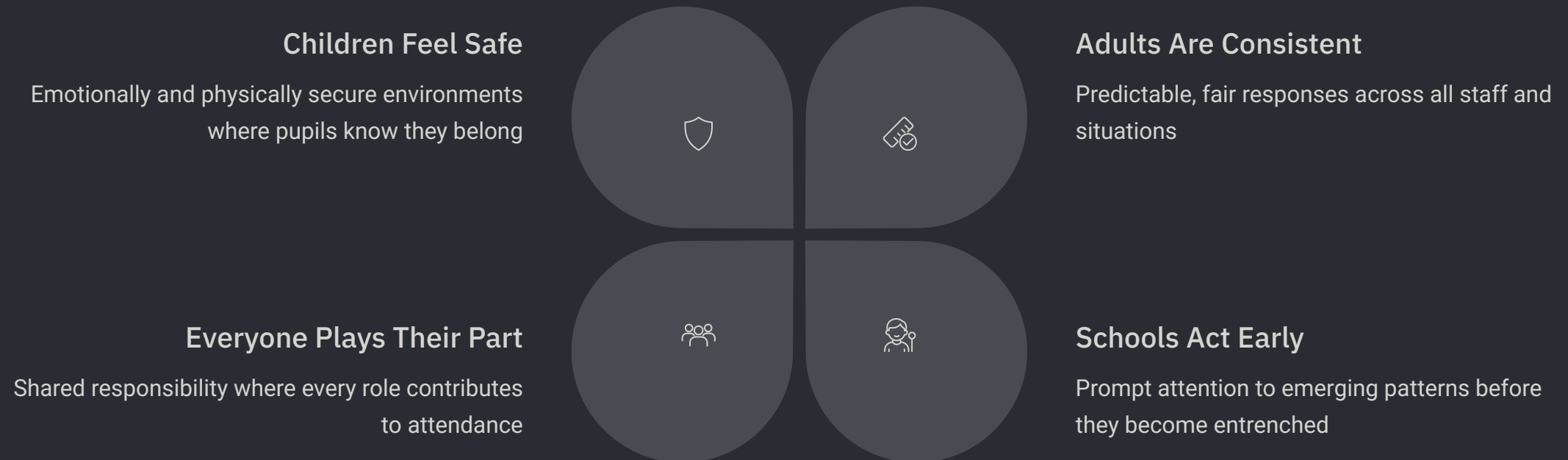
Module 5: EBSA and SEND

Understanding emotionally-based school avoidance (EBSA), how it differs from truancy, and how to support pupils with SEND whose attendance is affected by their additional needs. This module will explore practical strategies and reasonable adjustments.

Each module builds on this foundation, adding layers of knowledge and practical skills. Attendance improvement is a journey, not a single training session. It requires sustained focus, regular reflection, and continuous refinement of practice. This is long-term culture change, not a quick fix.

Final Message

As we close this first module, let's return to the core truth that underpins everything we've discussed today. Attendance improves when the conditions are right — when children feel genuinely safe in our school, when adults are reliably consistent in their approach, when we act early rather than waiting for problems to escalate, and when everyone recognises their part in creating a culture where attendance matters.



"Every day counts — and every adult counts."

This is our closing commitment to each other and to the pupils we serve. Every day of education matters for a child's learning, wellbeing, and future opportunities. And every adult in this school — regardless of role or responsibility — counts in making that attendance happen. You have influence. You have impact. What you do tomorrow morning when you greet a pupil, what you notice over the coming week, how you respond to the next absence — it all counts.

Thank you for your commitment to this work and for everything you do to make this school a place where children want to be. The journey continues, and we're in it together.