



PUBLIC PROTECTION
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Out of Sight & At Risk

The Hidden Safeguarding Crisis of Children Missing in Education



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Executive Summary

Children Missing Education (CME) represent a growing safeguarding concern across the UK, with increasing numbers of children not registered at school or receiving suitable education elsewhere. Defined by the Department for Education (DfE) as children of compulsory school age who are not on a school roll, CME includes those who are excluded, frequently moved, home educated without oversight, or have disengaged from learning entirely. The absence of regular contact with education professionals means these children are effectively “*Off The Radar*,” heightening the risk of exploitation, neglect, and abuse.

Schools provide one of the most consistent and effective mechanisms for identifying safeguarding risks. When a child goes missing from education, that safety net disappears. Research and practice evidence link CME to increased vulnerability to criminal exploitation, forced marriage, human trafficking, and other forms of harm. Despite local authority duties under the Education Act 1996 (Section 436A), inconsistent data-sharing, resource limitations, and the absence of a national register hinder effective monitoring and intervention.

Policymakers must recognise CME as both an educational and safeguarding priority. A coordinated, multi-agency approach, linking education, social care, health, and law enforcement, is vital to identifying and protecting children at risk. National policy should prioritise:

- ✦ Establishing a **statutory national register** for children not in school.
- ✦ Enhancing **data-sharing frameworks** between agencies.
- ✦ Restoring **local authority capacity** to track and engage missing learners.
- ✦ Embedding **safeguarding awareness** within elective home education oversight.

Children missing education are not merely absent from classrooms, they are absent from protection. Ensuring every child is visible within the education system is fundamental to safeguarding, equality, and social justice. Stronger national coordination, clearer accountability, and proactive early intervention are essential to prevent vulnerable children from slipping through the cracks of the UK’s safeguarding framework.



Why Children Go Missing from Education

Children go missing from education for a variety of complex and interconnected reasons, often reflecting wider social, familial, and systemic challenges. While some cases result from administrative oversights, many are indicators of deeper issues such as poverty, instability, exclusion, or safeguarding risks.

Family circumstances are a common factor. Families experiencing housing instability, domestic abuse, or migration may move frequently, causing gaps in school attendance or difficulties with re-enrolment. In some cases, families deliberately remove children from school to conceal situations such as forced marriage, honour-based abuse, or child labour. These scenarios often occur when families disengage from authorities, making it difficult for professionals to maintain oversight.

School-related factors also contribute significantly. Exclusion, both permanent and informal, can push children out of the system, particularly those with special educational needs (SEN), behavioural difficulties, or mental health challenges. Bullying, unmet learning needs, and a lack of emotional support can lead to school refusal or parental withdrawal from formal education.

Elective Home Education (EHE) has become another pathway for children to disappear from education oversight. While many families provide effective home education, others use it to avoid scrutiny or because they feel unsupported by schools. The absence of a statutory register of home-educated children further limits local authorities' ability to monitor welfare and learning.

Finally, **Systemic failures**, including inconsistent data-sharing between schools, local authorities, and safeguarding partners, mean children can slip through administrative cracks. Without a coordinated approach, these gaps create opportunities for neglect or exploitation to go unnoticed.

Ultimately, children go missing from education when the systems designed to protect and support them fail to connect, highlighting the urgent need for stronger inter-agency coordination and proactive early intervention.



Family Circumstances

Family circumstances play a central role in why children go missing from education. Instability within the home environment, whether through housing insecurity, financial hardship, family breakdown, or domestic abuse, can disrupt a child's ability to maintain regular school attendance. Families facing eviction, homelessness, or frequent relocations often struggle to secure or sustain a school placement, leading to prolonged absences or children being left unregistered.

In some cases, parents may deliberately remove children from school to conceal situations that place them at risk. This can include forced marriage, honour-based abuse, or child exploitation. Where families are disengaged from authorities or fearful of intervention, children may become effectively "invisible" to professionals. The lack of regular school contact removes one of the few consistent points of monitoring and support available to vulnerable children.

Migration and language barriers also contribute to disengagement. Families arriving from abroad or moving between local authorities may not understand the UK education system or their legal responsibilities regarding enrolment. Without appropriate guidance or follow-up from schools and local authorities, children can easily fall out of education.

Parental mental health, substance misuse, or coercive control within the household can further undermine a child's access to education, as routines and priorities become disrupted by crisis or neglect. These challenges often intersect, compounding vulnerability and making re-engagement more difficult.

Addressing family-related causes of missing education requires a coordinated, multi-agency approach that combines safeguarding, housing, and social care interventions. Early identification and holistic family support are key to ensuring children remain visible, protected, and engaged in education.



School-Related Factors

School-related issues are a significant contributor to children missing education, often arising from unmet needs, exclusionary practices, or negative experiences within the school environment. For some children, schools can become places of stress, fear, or disconnection rather than safety and belonging. Factors such as bullying, poor relationships with teachers, and lack of tailored support can lead to persistent absence or complete disengagement.

Children with **Special Educational Needs (SEN)** or disabilities are particularly at risk. When schools fail to provide appropriate support, adjustments, or inclusive teaching, parents may withdraw their children out of frustration or concern for their wellbeing. Similarly, pupils with emotional or behavioural difficulties can be informally excluded or placed on reduced timetables, effectively denying them full-time education. These practices, while sometimes presented as temporary measures, can result in long-term educational detachment.

Permanent exclusions are another pathway into missing education. Once excluded, some children experience delays in finding alternative provision, or parents may not engage with reallocation processes due to stigma or lack of support. The result is an extended period without formal education, increasing vulnerability to exploitation or harm.

Additionally, the growing number of children in **Elective Home Education (EHE)** reflects both parental choice and systemic failure. While many parents educate responsibly, others turn to EHE due to dissatisfaction with school environments or unmet needs, often without sufficient oversight from local authorities.

Ultimately, school-related disengagement highlights the need for early intervention, inclusive practices, and stronger accountability to ensure every child feels safe, supported, and valued within their educational setting.



Systemic Failures

Systemic failures within the education and safeguarding framework are a major underlying cause of children missing education in the UK. Despite clear statutory duties under the **Education Act 1996 (Section 436A)**, gaps in policy implementation, coordination, and communication continue to allow vulnerable children to slip through the cracks. When education, social care, and health services operate in isolation, no single agency maintains a complete picture of a child’s circumstances, leading to missed opportunities for intervention.

Inconsistent data-sharing practices between schools and local authorities are one of the most persistent problems. When pupils move, change schools, or are withdrawn from education, there are often delays or failures in transferring information. This fragmentation makes it difficult to track children effectively, particularly those from transient families or with complex safeguarding histories. Without a unified system, children can disappear from education databases entirely.

Another systemic weakness is the lack of a national register for children not in school. This absence limits accountability and prevents local authorities from identifying children who may be receiving no education at all. Budget reductions and staff shortages in education welfare and attendance services further compound the issue, reducing local capacity for early identification and follow-up.

These systemic shortcomings create an environment where children can become “invisible” to professionals tasked with their protection. To prevent this, national and local policies must prioritise stronger inter-agency collaboration, standardised data-sharing frameworks, and sustained funding for education welfare. Only through cohesive, well-resourced systems can the UK ensure that every child remains visible, supported, and safeguarded within education.



Safeguarding Risks linked to Children Missing in Education

Children Missing Education (CME) face significantly heightened safeguarding risks due to the loss of daily oversight provided by schools and education professionals. Schools play a crucial role in monitoring children's wellbeing, identifying signs of abuse, neglect, or exploitation, and triggering early interventions. When a child is no longer in education, this protective layer disappears, leaving them more vulnerable to harm that may otherwise go unnoticed.

Children who are missing from education are at particular risk of exploitation and trafficking. Offenders often target children who are not visible to services, exploiting their isolation for criminal activity, forced labour, or sexual abuse. Similarly, some children are removed from school to facilitate forced marriage, honour-based violence, or domestic servitude, especially where families wish to conceal abuse from authorities.

Neglect and emotional harm are also prevalent concerns. In unstable or abusive households, removing a child from school can serve to isolate them further, cutting off contact with trusted adults who might raise safeguarding alerts. For children with disabilities or special educational needs, missing education often compounds existing vulnerabilities by depriving them of essential support.

Moreover, disengagement from education increases the likelihood of youth offending, mental health difficulties, and long-term social exclusion. Without structured learning and professional oversight, children are more likely to experience instability, poor outcomes, and ongoing cycles of vulnerability.

Recognising CME as a safeguarding priority is therefore critical. Education is not merely a right, it is a protective factor. Ensuring every child remains visible within the education system is essential to preventing harm and promoting their safety, wellbeing, and long-term development.



Statutory Duties

The safeguarding and educational responsibilities for Children Missing Education (CME) in the UK are underpinned by clear statutory duties designed to ensure every child of compulsory school age receives suitable education and remains visible to professionals. The primary duty is set out in **Section 436A of the Education Act 1996**, which requires local authorities to identify children not receiving a suitable education and to take appropriate action. This legal framework positions education as both a right and a safeguarding mechanism, ensuring that no child is left without oversight or opportunity.

Local authorities must maintain effective systems to track and monitor CME. This includes investigating referrals, maintaining up-to-date records, and working with schools and safeguarding partners to locate and re-engage missing children. Under **Section 175 of the Education Act 2002**, schools and local authorities also have a duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils, reinforcing the link between education and protection.

Furthermore, statutory guidance such as the **Department for Education’s “Children Missing Education” (2016)** and **“Keeping Children Safe in Education” (2024)** outlines the expectations for multi-agency cooperation. Schools are required to inform local authorities when a child is removed from their roll and to follow established procedures for pupils who leave without a known destination.

While these duties provide a robust legislative foundation, their effectiveness depends on local implementation. Consistent data sharing, adequate resourcing, and inter-agency collaboration are essential to fulfilling these statutory obligations and ensuring every child is identified, supported, and safeguarded through continuous access to education.



The Role of Professionals

Professionals across education, social care, health, and law enforcement play a critical role in identifying, supporting, and safeguarding Children Missing Education (CME). Each professional, regardless of their sector, shares responsibility for ensuring that children remain visible, protected, and engaged in learning. Effective collaboration and clear communication between agencies are essential to prevent children from falling through the cracks of the education and safeguarding systems.

Schools and Education staff are often the first to notice patterns of absence or signs that a child may be at risk of disengagement. They have a statutory duty to report unexplained absences, notify local authorities when a pupil leaves without a known destination, and ensure that attendance data is accurate and up to date. Designated safeguarding leads (DSLs) must work closely with attendance officers and pastoral teams to escalate concerns promptly.

Local authorities are responsible for maintaining accurate CME registers, investigating referrals, and coordinating responses between agencies. Education welfare officers, social workers, and safeguarding leads must share information effectively to locate children and assess potential risks.

Health professionals and **Police officers** also play vital roles in identifying children who may be missing from education through routine contact, community visits, or safeguarding investigations.

Ultimately, professionals must operate as part of a unified safeguarding network, using their combined expertise to identify risk early and intervene effectively. Regular training, clear communication pathways, and a culture of shared accountability ensure that every professional understands their role in keeping children visible, safe, and engaged in education.



The Role of Parents and Carers

Parents and carers play a vital role in ensuring that children access and remain engaged in education. Under UK law, they hold the primary responsibility for making sure their children receive suitable full-time education, either by attending school or through approved alternative provision, such as elective home education (EHE). When parents and carers actively participate in their child's learning journey, communicate with schools, and seek support when challenges arise, the likelihood of a child missing education is greatly reduced.

Strong parental engagement helps to identify and address problems early, such as attendance difficulties, bullying, or special educational needs. Parents who maintain regular contact with schools enable professionals to act swiftly if concerns about absence or wellbeing emerge. Open communication also fosters trust, allowing schools and local authorities to work collaboratively with families rather than punitively.

However, barriers such as poverty, housing instability, mental health issues, or limited understanding of the education system can hinder parental involvement. Families who are marginalised or frequently move, such as migrant or Traveller communities, may require additional support and guidance to navigate admissions and attendance procedures. Local authorities and schools must therefore provide accessible information, early intervention, and culturally sensitive outreach to ensure parents understand their legal responsibilities and the importance of sustained education.

By building partnerships based on trust, respect, and shared accountability, parents and professionals can work together to prevent children from slipping out of education. Active parental involvement is not only central to learning, it is fundamental to safeguarding and a child's right to thrive.



Addressing and Preventing Children Missing Education

Effectively addressing and preventing Children Missing Education (CME) requires a coordinated, multi-agency approach that recognises education as both a right and a vital safeguard. Local authorities, schools, social care, health services, and law enforcement must work together to identify, track, and re-engage children who fall out of the system. Collaboration, clear communication, and accountability are key to ensuring that no child becomes “invisible.”

Local authorities have a statutory duty under **Section 436A of the Education Act 1996** to identify children missing from education, yet this can only be achieved through strong **information-sharing frameworks**. Schools must promptly report pupils who leave without a known destination, and local authorities should maintain accurate, up-to-date CME registers. Establishing a **national register for children not in school** would strengthen consistency and close existing data gaps.

Prevention also depends on early intervention. Schools should adopt inclusive practices that reduce exclusion, support children with special educational needs, and address barriers to attendance before disengagement occurs. Education welfare and attendance services, many of which have been reduced due to funding cuts, should be properly resourced to carry out proactive home visits and support families in crisis.

Community engagement and parental support are equally important. Families often need guidance on their educational responsibilities and help navigating the system, particularly those facing housing, language, or social difficulties.

Ultimately, preventing CME is about visibility, compassion, and coordination. By strengthening partnerships, investing in prevention, and recognising education as a safeguarding cornerstone, the UK can ensure that every child remains seen, supported, and safe.



Key Legislation and Statutory Guidance

Education Act 1996 – Section 436A

- ✚ **Summary:** Requires local authorities to identify children of compulsory school age who are not receiving suitable education and take action to ensure provision.
- ✚ **Full Text:** [Education Act 1996, Section 436A – Children Missing Education](#)
- ✚ **Purpose:** Places a duty on local authorities to maintain visibility of every child’s educational status.

Education Act 2002 – Section 175

- ✚ **Summary:** Places a duty on local authorities and governing bodies to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.
- ✚ **Link:** [Education Act 2002, Section 175](#)

Children Act 1989 & 2004

- ✚ **Summary:** Core safeguarding framework outlining parental responsibilities, local authority duties, and thresholds for intervention.
- ✚ **Links:**
 - [Children Act 1989](#)
 - [Children Act 2004](#)

Statutory Guidance: Children Missing Education (DfE, 2016)

- ✚ **Purpose:** Defines CME, outlines local authority duties, inter-agency working, and processes for prevention and response.
- ✚ **Access:** [Children Missing Education – Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities \(DfE, 2016\)](#)

Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE, 2024)

- ✚ **Purpose:** Key safeguarding document for all education providers. Reinforces the duty to monitor attendance and share concerns about missing children.
- ✚ **Access:** [Keeping Children Safe in Education \(KCSIE\)](#)



National Agencies and Organisations

Department for Education (DfE)

- ✚ **Role:** Sets policy, publishes guidance, and monitors local authority compliance on CME.
- ✚ **Website:** <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education>

Ofsted

- ✚ **Role:** Inspects local authority arrangements for identifying and supporting CME.
- ✚ **Website:** <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted>

Local Safeguarding Partnerships (LSPs)

- ✚ **Role:** Coordinate inter-agency safeguarding responses and ensure CME is included in local strategies.
- ✚ **Find your local partnership:** [Find your local safeguarding partnership](#)

Children's Commissioner for England

- ✚ **Role:** Advocates for children's rights; has published reports highlighting gaps in CME tracking and data.
- ✚ **Website:** <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/>

NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children)

- ✚ **Role:** Provides safeguarding resources and training on identifying and responding to children at risk.
- ✚ **Helpline:** 0808 800 5000
- ✚ **Website:** <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/>

Barnardo's

- ✚ **Role:** Supports children at risk of exploitation, neglect, or disengagement from education.
- ✚ **Website:** <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/>

The Children's Society

- ✚ **Role:** Provides direct support for children missing education due to exploitation, migration, or instability.
- ✚ **Website:** <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/>

CHILDREN MISSING EDUCATION

SAFEGUARDING CONCERNS



UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN MISSING EDUCATION

Children missing education are those not registered at a school or receiving suitable education otherwise. These children face increased risks to their well-being and development.

WHY CHILDREN GO MISSING FROM EDUCATION

Reasons include family circumstances, bullying, unmet special educational needs, or parents withdrawing children to educate them at home.



IMPLICATIONS FOR SAFEGUARDING

Missing education can expose children to neglect, exploitation, and other forms of significant harm due to the lack of regular oversight by schools and authorities.

STATUTORY DUTIES

Local authorities have legal duties to identify, track, and support children missing education, ensuring a response that prioritizes their safety and educational needs.

