

ESRI Research Bulletin

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Reasons for persistent absenteeism among Irish primary school pupils

***Merike Darmody, Maeve Thornton, Selina McCoy**

Existing international research shows that students with poor attendance records are found to be at a disadvantage both academically and socially. They are more at risk of academic underperformance and early school leaving and can also miss out on social interactions with peers. Patterns of non-attendance often get established earlier in a student's educational career and can be a habit-forming behaviour with a likelihood of continuing into second-level education. Although an important policy issue, there has been dearth in research on school absenteeism among young children in the Irish context. The national longitudinal study Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) enabled us for the first time to explore the factors influencing school attendance at primary school level in Ireland.

The study focused on persistent absenteeism of more than 20 days in the last academic year and examined three sets of influences, identified by international research, on attendance: parent/family environment, child characteristics and school context, with the parent/family context exerting the biggest influence in this instance.

At the family level, findings showed that children of mothers whose native language was other than English or Irish were more likely to have a poor attendance record. However, when language was held constant the children of immigrant mothers actually had better attendance record than those of non-immigrants. The findings seemed to indicate that language barriers may be associated with poor attendance patterns rather than immigrant status per se. Parental engagement with the child's schooling (in terms of providing access to children's books in the home, or attending parent-teacher meetings) was also associated with school attendance. Furthermore, children whose parent or parents were unemployed were more than three times more likely than those in the highest social group to have a poor school attendance record. An important new finding was the effect of maternal depression. Children living with a mother who was depressed had an increased likelihood of having a poor attendance record. In addition, children who witnessed parental conflict were almost twice as likely to be persistent absentees. These findings further highlight the importance of the family environment in terms of child outcomes, and are especially pertinent because

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factors such as depression and parental conflict can often be 'hidden' to those outside the family. It was also notable that family 'environment' factors, including depression and conflict, had as much of an impact on attendance as socioeconomic variables (social class and mother's education).

In terms of the child's own characteristics, having Special Educational Needs or a chronic illness posed higher risks in terms of children's school attendance, while victims of bullying (as reported by the primary caregiver) were also significantly more likely to experience attendance problems than children who had not been bullied. Emotional and behavioural difficulties were rated by the teacher using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), and although the current literature often does not make a distinction between the two, we found that having emotional difficulties (e.g., has many worries; is often unhappy) was associated with increased levels of absenteeism, while having behavioural difficulties (e.g., often fights with other children; often lies or cheats) was not. This highlights the importance of exploring these constructs separately, as they affect children in different ways, and are often highly gendered. Finally, children who reported liking school were less likely to be persistent absentees, highlighting the importance of pupil engagement even at this early stage of the school career.

School related factors accounted for a much smaller proportion of the variation in attendance. While the gender of the child was not associated with persistent absenteeism in this analysis, children attending single sex boys' schools were about twice as likely to have attendance issues compared to pupils attending single sex girls' schools. Persistent absenteeism was also more common among children attending schools where principals reported that the number of teachers was inadequate.

This exploratory work shows that absenteeism is influenced by many and varied factors and while it is important to engage both families and schools to find a satisfactory solution to child's absenteeism, it is also essential to take account of the child's own characteristics. In short, it is important to deal with persistent absenteeism as a multi-dimensional issue and devise interventions appropriate to each individual case. Enhancing current knowledge of the factors associated with absenteeism will enable better targeting of restricted resources.

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