

Child Protection Update 2015 – Module 2



CHILD PROTECTION
UPDATE 2015

Module 2

- Educational neglect
- Working collaboratively with other agencies

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Slide 1

Facilitator notes

Allow 45 minutes for this session.

Prepare handouts:

- Case study
 - 1 copy per participant
 - Same case study for primary and secondary schools
- Case study facilitator notes
 - 1 copy only for facilitator/s.

Throughout this module, the term 'parent' should be read to be inclusive of carers.

Attending school regularly is important

- Schools play a vital role in children's overall development and wellbeing
- This is recognised in NSW by law that has made school compulsory since 1880
- The law requires children and young people of compulsory school age to attend school each day it is open for the instruction of that child or young person.

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Facilitator notes

Schools are important in children's development as they provide:

- safe environments
- routines and structures
- trusted and supportive relationships
- ongoing opportunities for positive social, emotional, psychological as well as cognitive development
- knowledge, concepts and behaviours that can assist with future employment opportunities.

Schools can counteract vulnerability in children and young people by providing a context for:

- the modelling of pro-social values and behaviours
- promotion of pro-social values and behaviours through expectations and policies
- the learning of general life skills.

Schools contribute to the safety of children and young people by providing opportunities for adults to identify and respond to any issues that may be impacting on their development, health, safety, welfare or wellbeing.

Some parents may be unaware of the benefits of regular school attendance and of the impact of poor attendance.

Many parents are also unaware that when their children and young people don't attend school regularly, it is a form of child neglect.

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Facilitator notes

Following the Wood Inquiry, the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998* was amended in January 2010 to include educational neglect as a risk of harm circumstance, which warrants a report to Family and Community Services when it is significant.

Regular attendance at school is fundamental to student learning. Students who attend school regularly are more likely to achieve educational success, and increase their career and life options. Student attendance has been identified as an important aspect of a student's wellbeing and failure to receive an education is recognised as a circumstance that puts them at risk of significant harm.

A pilot project where schools and local services worked together to respond to educational neglect was run in two education areas during 2013-2014. A low level of awareness about the importance of regular school attendance was found in many families as well as in some local family services.

When information about the project was circulated, including information about educational neglect, there was a general improvement in the attendance of many students including those not involved in the project.

One family was approached to be part of the project because their son's attendance had dropped below 50%. The family was provided with information about educational neglect and the project and, although they refused to be involved, their son's attendance rose to 90% and six months later was still improved.

What is educational neglect?

- constant lateness for school
- irregular or inconsistent attendance at school
- continually missing school, with or without explanations
- increasing truancy
- developing a dislike for school and a reluctance to attend, with inadequate parent follow up
- excessive absences inappropriately attributed to illness or disability.

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Facilitator notes

Educational neglect can occur when a parent or other carer is unable or unwilling to arrange for a child or young person to receive an education – which is a requirement under Section 22 of the Education Act 1990.

Under child protection legislation a child or young person, of compulsory school age (between their 6th and 17th birthdays), may experience educational neglect when they are:

- not enrolled in a school (or participating in other options allowable under the Education Act)

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- habitually absent from school.

A student is considered to be habitually absent when they have regular or extended absences without explanation (despite follow up from the school).

They may have explanations provided by parents which are not accepted by the principal.

There may be truancy that is ongoing and not resolved.

Excessive absences may be attributed to illness or disability, with inadequate liaison with the school so an alternative or adjusted education program can be provided.

There may also be continual missing of school because of illness of a parent, caring for family member, or attending various medical appointments.

Such absences may not in the best interests of the child or young person in the long term.

What is my role?

- Ensure the class roll is marked daily and accurately as it is a record for identifying problems early on and a record that can help substantiate educational neglect.
- Implement a broad range of strategies within the school to try to improve attendance, where problems are identified.
- Emphasis to parents the importance of regular attendance and, if helpful, provide the [information sheet](#) (available in 35 languages).

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It is acknowledged that most staff are already undertaking this role well.

Strategies implemented directly with students, on a day to day basis, by teachers – are the most effective for preventing potential attendance problems.

They can also prevent problems getting worse and more difficult to resolve.

Other effective strategies include:

- trying to contact parents on the same day or the following day of an unexplained absence
- alerting the principal, or the staff member responsible for monitoring attendance, as soon as a student's attendance becomes a concern.

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There is a continuum of processes to be implemented when attendance is of concern:

1. Make contact with parents or carers, discuss the issue of attendance, and provide appropriate assistance to encourage regular attendance of the child or young person
2. When parents or carers are resistant or avoidant, substantial efforts should be made by the school and/or other education staff to make contact with them.

(continued next slide...)

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Facilitator notes

Making contact and providing appropriate assistance, for some students and for some parents, will involve more than one or two phone calls and a letter.

The Educational Neglect Pilot project found that for families dealing with lots of issues, approaching them more than once resulted in more successful engagement. Schools found that, if a family declined involvement and the student's attendance did not improve in the next month or so, it was worthwhile to approach them again.

This is consistent with evidence that an ongoing multimodal response is needed to engage hard to reach families. (Engaging hard-to-reach families and children - Occasional Paper No. 26 Australian Institute for Family Studies, 2010.

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Continuum of processes:

3. School staff, including learning support teams, should implement all the processes outlined in policy and procedures - until it is clear they will not be effective
4. Refer to education staff outside the school eg. the home school liaison officer or the Aboriginal student liaison officer
5. If attendance issues persist they are then escalated for action by senior officers within the education system.

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Pose the question: What processes and strategies do we have in our school for addressing non-attendance issues?

Allow a few minutes for responses from the large group.

Responses may include:

- phone calls home
- sending letters to the family
- ask the home school liaison officer or Aboriginal student liaison officer to interview the student or make contact with the parents
- interview the parent
- interview the student
- establish a positive attendance program
- reward attendance
- set up a teacher mentor or a peer buddy
- develop an individual education plan
- establish an alternative school program
- monitor attendance
- develop an attendance contract
- intervene if there are bullying problems
- address any social issues
- establish additional support for Aboriginal student via relevant Aboriginal community groups

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- modify school curricular
 - enlist the help of peers or siblings
 - seek parent's permission to contact the medical practitioner to discuss any current medical conditions
 - give responsibility and/or a leadership opportunity to the student
 - focus on any student needs impacting on engagement e.g. breakfast, clothing, hygiene, medical care, emotional support (grief and loss, resilience building)
 - implement alternative programs to avoid off task behaviours, teach alternate behaviours
 - interagency liaison: Police, Health, Family and Community Services, including ADHC and Housing
 - involve local support agencies such as New Horizons, CentaCare, Barnados
 - try daily wake up / check up calls for 5 days
 - referral to the school counsellor.

Finish the slide by reinforcing that, if attendance issues persist, escalation as part of the home school liaison program can include:

- Educational Services Teams arranging conferences conducted by an 'Authorised Convenor'
 - compulsory schooling conference undertakings (which may also be obtained with parents independently of conferencing)
 - compulsory schooling orders
 - prosecution in the Local Court.
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Regardless of whether there are legal actions taking place

- the school continues to have child protection responsibilities in responding to concerns about students and identifying issues impacting on attendance
- the Mandatory Reporter Guide can assist in making decisions where issues are identified and there are safety, welfare or wellbeing concerns.

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Facilitator notes

Educational neglect can be a marker for family distress and the need for support.

As part of their child protection role, school staff have an ongoing responsibility to identify and respond to family issues impacting on attendance.

Truancy may signal families experiencing difficulties in managing children and young people, and keeping them safe. It may also indicate a family's unwillingness or incapacity to adequately supervise children or young people.

It may indicate issues for individual children and young people, such as physical or mental health issues, that families are struggling with.

Where there are frequent absences being explained as due to illness, discussion should occur with parents regarding the health care needs of the student and medical certificates sought. Where appropriate, contact should be made with medical professionals and strategies developed to address the student's learning and support needs.

Talking with families about support

- if the issues impacting on school attendance are family-related, the school is in a position where they can assist, directly or indirectly
- schools may be in a good position to successfully talk with parents about options for seeking help. Other agencies may not have these 'windows of opportunity'
- the involvement of schools can provide opportunities for some families to receive help earlier, before they reach a breaking point.

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Facilitator notes

The principal can call the Child Wellbeing Unit for advice about services for a family. The Child Wellbeing Unit may have historic or current information about the family and any services they have previously been linked to.

Talking with families about services may involve first sourcing relevant services by word of mouth, in local directories or on the internet.

It can involve making phone calls to discuss the appropriateness and availability of a service and making a referral – by phone or by filling out a form and sending it. It is great to do this while the parent is present.

It is extremely helpful to have a conversation with the parent about the service, and having them agree to give it a try. This is known as a 'warm' referral to a service.

However, this is not always possible. Where you have provided the contact details of a family to a service, so the service can phone the parent and set up an appointment or meeting, this is called 'cold calling'. Some services will not 'cold call' families – they will not contact a family that has not agreed to be contacted.

It is acknowledged that secondary schools experience more challenges in making contact with families. However, schools have a legitimate reason for contacting parents to talk about school issues. Usually other agencies do not have such a 'natural reason'.

Talking with families about support

- this is the role of the principal and can be delegated to other appropriate staff members, particularly those who have the most contact with the student
- if school staff have exhausted all their efforts to resolve attendance issues, to no avail, the case is escalated.

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Facilitator notes

It can take time to build a relationship with families that need support. However, it is worth making the effort with 'hard to reach families' because if a parent is willing to accept support and is involved in any referral process, it increases the chance of engagement with the service.

If members of staff have an existing relationship with a parent, they are in a good position to have the conversation with them about accessing a service. This might not be done straight away. Sometimes talking about the issues, then about seeking support, then suggesting a support service may be the way to a 'warm' referral and readiness for engagement with the service.

Where the school is unable to establish contact with families or resolve attendance the principal can request support by making an application to the Home School Liaison Program. Even when the case is accepted in the Home School Liaison Program, the school should continue with its strategies to support the student's attendance, including liaising with other agencies.

Poor school attendance may be a sign that families are struggling, or of more serious problems

Discussion:

What are some of the issues you are aware of in your students' families that impact on them getting to school regularly?

How can the school respond?

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Facilitator notes

Ask participants to break into smaller groups of two or three people and discuss the questions. Allow 3-4 minutes for the discussion and another 3-4 minutes for volunteers to report back to the larger group.

A pilot project in two education areas during 2013-14 found the issues impacting on school attendance were:

mental health	family violence
financial hardship	disability of parents
family breakdown	transience or unstable accommodation
drug and alcohol	disability of student
chronic health condition of parents	chronic health condition of student

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Facilitator notes

The Mandatory Reporter Guide can assist in making decisions about how serious family problems are and what action to take. As well as a decision tree for habitual absence, other decision trees should be run for any issues identified that are impacting on school attendance, including:

- Carer concern: substance abuse
- Carer concern: mental health
- Carer concern: domestic violence
- Child/young person is a danger to self and/or others
- Neglect: supervision
- Neglect: shelter/environment
- Neglect: food
- Neglect: hygiene/clothing
- Neglect: medical care
- Neglect: mental health care
- Psychological harm

The outcome of the decision tree will determine whether:

- a report should be made to Family and Community Services
- contact should be made with the Child Wellbeing Unit
- contact should be made with local services
- the student and family should be monitored and ongoing processes implemented.

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The school has a role in trying to link families with services when:

- a report to Family and Community Services is **not** required
- a report has been made, but it has been screened out or closed by Family and Community Services.

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Facilitator notes

In situations where a report is screened out or closed, the school has a role to continue to support the student and family and trying to link the family with services.

Note: If the report is screened out contact must be made with the Child Wellbeing Unit.

If a report is closed without being allocated, and concerns still exist that the student is still at risk of significant harm, another report should be made to Family and Community Services (FACS) **if there is new information to provide. If there is no new information, a duplicate report should not be made.** The principal should discuss the current concerns with the **local community services centre** and check whether any intervention or referral is planned by FACS.

If there is not intervention or referral planned and there are serious concerns, the case should be escalated to the next level in FACS – as set out in the *Protecting and Supporting Children and Young People* procedures.

If a report has been made to the Helpline and a caseworker is working with the family, the school has a role to liaise with the caseworker so there is coordination between the interventions being conducted by FACS and Education.

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Working collaboratively with other agencies

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- **Educational neglect** provides a great opportunity for schools to engage with local services and agencies
- it provides a platform for shared interests – the school for improving attendance and agencies for their work with families on the underlying issues causing attendance problems
- both have valuable information to share and complementary roles and skills to enhance the work.

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Facilitator notes

The pilot project confirmed the value of schools working collaboratively with local service providers to respond to poor school attendance.

The objective of the pilot was to identify approaches which improve school attendance based on early intervention and a family case management model involving multiple agencies.

This enabled many of the underlying issues impacting on attendance to be identified and addressed. Important relationships were built between schools and services and joint efforts contributed to improved school attendance and family functioning.

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If parents are uncontactable

- Where parents or carers are not contactable or the relationship between home and the school has broken down, the help of local agencies may be sought
- There may be agencies that are working with, or know the family and will make contact with them.

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Facilitator notes

If you know or become aware that a local agency has contact with a family, you could phone them. They may have information on the issues that are concerning you. They may be able to liaise with the family and assist or mediate regarding the attendance issues.

Other agencies that don't know the family may also be prepared to try to make contact with the parents, particularly if they specialise in the issues affecting the family.

Information about the family can be exchanged under Chapter 16A of the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act when it relates to the safety, welfare or wellbeing of a child or young person, and is to assist the school in providing educational services. Consent is not required.

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Agencies involved in the educational neglect pilot project:

Support services	Assistance provided
Health services including GP	Mental health support
Mental health and counselling services	Family support, e.g. parenting skills, domestic violence support
Disability services	Financial support
Family support services including Brighter Futures; Victim support	Disability and health support
Youth support services	Housing or crisis accommodation
Aboriginal cultural supports	Tutoring
School-based supports	Emotional and behavioural support for students e.g. skills for making friends

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Facilitator notes

Families in the pilot project were referred to services that could assist in addressing underlying issues impacting on school attendance.

Communication and information sharing between schools and services and with families assisted those working with families to better understand each family's issues, to establish better rapport with them and enable a faster provision of services.

Improved communication about each family's progress or issues enhanced each agency's own interaction, or work, with students and family members.

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Schools and agencies' views on working together in the pilot:

I have observed that the involvement of the Family Referral Service and others has concreted professional relationships, resulting in greater appreciation of the advantage of working collaboratively.

The Family Referral Service alerted school to home situation. FACS and Housing were able to coordinate support and keep school informed. Drug and alcohol counselling supported the parent. Once the parent felt the coordinated support her relationships with school improved as "we (the school) were part of the team" - not the "authority on her back."

It was extremely beneficial to know that the area health had been working with the family for a period of time and their willingness to share information enabled the school to support the family better.

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Facilitator notes

The evaluation of the pilot shows the importance of an intervention that links schools with local services, for students and families who need support the school cannot provide.

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Case study

1. What are some of the issues that may be impacting on the children's attendance at school?
2. What school-based strategies and educational services could be utilised to support the regular attendance of the children?
3. What services or agencies in your local community might be able to assist this family?

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Facilitator notes

Allow 15 minutes for this activity.

Distribute handouts. Divide participants into groups. Allow 10 minutes for reading the case study and for participants to discuss each question.

Call upon responses for each question from different groups. Suggested responses are provided on the facilitator note section of the handout.

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