

ADVICE & GUIDANCE

Guidance on authorised absence in schools

There is some debate about what ‘exceptional circumstances’ means when deciding whether to grant absence for students during term time. We believe it is valuable to have some guiding principles to back schools in their decisions and provide consistency. This guidance has no statutory authority and is not imposed upon schools.

1. The decision to authorise absence is at the head teacher’s discretion based on their assessment of the situation. Circumstances vary from school to school and so there can be no absolute rules on this subject.
2. Term times are for education. This is the priority. Children and families have 175 days off school to spend time together, including weekends and school holidays. Heads will rightly prioritise attendance. The default school policy should be that absences will not be granted during term time and will only be authorised in exceptional circumstances.
3. If an event can reasonably be scheduled outside of term time then it would not be normal to authorise absence.
4. Absence during term time for holidays/vacations is therefore not considered an exceptional circumstance.
5. Absences to visit family members are also not normally granted during term time if they could be scheduled for holiday periods or outside school hours. Children may however need time to visit seriously ill relatives.
6. Absence for a bereavement of a close family member is usually considered an exceptional circumstance but for the funeral service only, not extended leave.
7. Absences for important religious observances are often taken into account but only for the ceremony and travelling time, not extended leave. This is intended for one off situations rather than regular or recurring events.
8. Schools may wish to take the needs of the families of service personnel into account if they are returning from long operational tours that prevent contact during scheduled holiday time.
9. Schools have a duty to make reasonable adjustments for students with special educational needs or disabilities.
10. Families may need time together to recover from trauma or crisis.

11. It is acceptable to take a student's previous record of attendance into account when making decisions.
12. It is important to note that head teachers can determine the length of the authorised absence as well as whether absence is authorised at all.

Any examples provided are illustrative rather than exhaustive. The fundamental principles for defining 'exceptional' are rare, significant, unavoidable and short. And by 'unavoidable' we mean an event that could not reasonably be scheduled at another time.

Background

The education (pupil registration) (England) (amendment) regulations 2013, which came into force on 1 September 2013, removed references to family holidays and extended leave as well as the notional threshold of ten school days. The amendments made clear that head teachers may not grant any leave of absence during term time unless 'exceptional circumstances' exist. The regulations also stated that head teachers should determine the number of school days a child can be away from school if leave is granted for 'exceptional circumstances'.

The DfE advice on school attendance (November 2013) should also be considered and read in conjunction with the 2013 regulations.

We believe the guidelines in this document to be compatible with the above policy. They clarify the definition of external circumstances; they do not change it.

Ofsted have confirmed that their focus is on whether recurrent absence is being addressed; only if there is an issue with this will they look more deeply into why the school has authorised absence. Concern about inspection should not govern schools' decisions in this area. Head teachers are under pressure to meet overall absence thresholds however.

Variations to term time

Where schools serve communities whose patterns of work create a regular barrier to attendance and family life schools could consider changes to term times. Where this involves changes to compulsory terms, we strongly recommend this is co-ordinated across schools and local authorities in an area.

Some schools have adopted flexible term patterns, with the same overall number of days of study but some discretion to families under certain conditions.