

Being in school matters:

Your guide to tackling
low attendance

Volume 2

Expanded & updated September 2024



Contents

Executive summary	2
Why attendance is important	3
What's impacting attendance rates?	4
Addressing the attendance crisis	7
How to initiate sustainable change	8
Case study: Masfield Primary School	10
Practical suggestions for use in schools	11
The difference you can make	14
Transforming communities	15
Be part of the movement	16
References	18

Executive summary

Attendance is critical for a multitude of reasons that stretch far beyond simply getting good grades. From the social skills that children and young people develop, to the routines and responsibilities of daily life in school. These important aspects of education help children to feel happy and fulfilled and to become emotionally resilient adults of the future.

“We must address this crisis and get children and young people back into school so that they have the support and tools to thrive.”

Unfortunately, attendance continues to be a challenge across the UK. The absence rate for the academic year 2023/2024 was 7.2%¹, far higher than pre-pandemic levels of between 4 and 5%². This can partly be attributed to a culture shift, which has seen a dramatic increase in remote working, making it far easier for pupils to stay at home, and the cost-of-living crisis has only added an additional barrier.



Absence hits the most vulnerable children and young people the hardest. Pupils on SEN support and Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) are more likely to be persistently or severely absent³.

Mental health is a major factor contributing to absence rates, with just over 1 out of every 10 severely absent pupils having a diagnosed social, emotional, and mental health need⁴. Mental health is a growing challenge, with on average 5 children in every classroom having a probable mental health problem⁵.

Schools provide both physical and emotional safety, so we must strive to support the most vulnerable children in society, removing barriers to attending school and learning.

Dame Rachel de Souza, The Children's Commissioner for England, described the issue of attendance as “the biggest problem” currently facing schools and policymakers. We must address this crisis and get children and young people back into school so that they have the support and tools to thrive.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Anna Smee'.

Anna Smee,
Managing Director

Why attendance is important

Socialisation

When children and young people spend time in social settings away from their primary caregivers, they build their social network and skills. This allows their sense of self and identity to grow and to be tested out in lots of different scenarios. School provides us with one of those opportunities for safe exploration. In school, pupils get a sense of who they are, and how that identity sits alongside everyone else. It helps them to develop a sense of sympathy and empathy, and to become both independent and interdependent.

Resilience

Attending school helps pupils to become resilient. Everyone experiences days where they feel like they don't want to do something, but having to overcome those initial feelings builds the resilience to continue trying. A school environment also builds resilience because answers aren't always quickly available like they may be at home. Schools help our children and young people to learn to stick at something for a little bit longer. Resilience is also developed through the ups and downs of relationships with peers.

Physical and emotional safety

Unfortunately, not every young person has an idyllic home life. School provides the ability for adults to check in on their safety. It's also a place where the pupils can feel safe and connected, where they can share their problems with their peers and feel emotionally supported.

Having needs met

At school, the basic needs of a child or young person are met. They are warm, dry, fed and have someone there to look after them.

Attainment

Good attendance has a strong correlation with attainment. Young people that achieve good grades and pick up the skills to concentrate and engage with their learning are more likely to be able to support themselves as adults and contribute to society.



What's impacting attendance rates?

Absence rates have continued to remain much higher than pre-pandemic levels. A cultural shift post-Covid is partly responsible, as well as the cost-of-living crisis. This is particularly true for low-income or disadvantaged families.

Additional factors include young people's mental health and those with special educational needs or disabilities. Gaining an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) is increasingly difficult. While Children and Young People's Mental Health Service (CYPMHS) are flooded with waiting lists of more than two years in some regions.

There is also a growing polarisation of thought about what good education looks like. Parents and carers may hold different views to educators, and this can set them at odds with each other.

7.2%

overall absence rate
for the academic year 2023/24¹



20.7%

persistent absence rate
for the academic year 2023/24¹



Severe absence

142,487

pupils
were severely absent in Autumn 2023.

This is a huge
increase from
60,244
pupils in
Autumn 2020³.



x 507

142,487 – the number of children
and young people that were severely
absent (out of school more than in)
equates to a staggering
507 primary schools³.

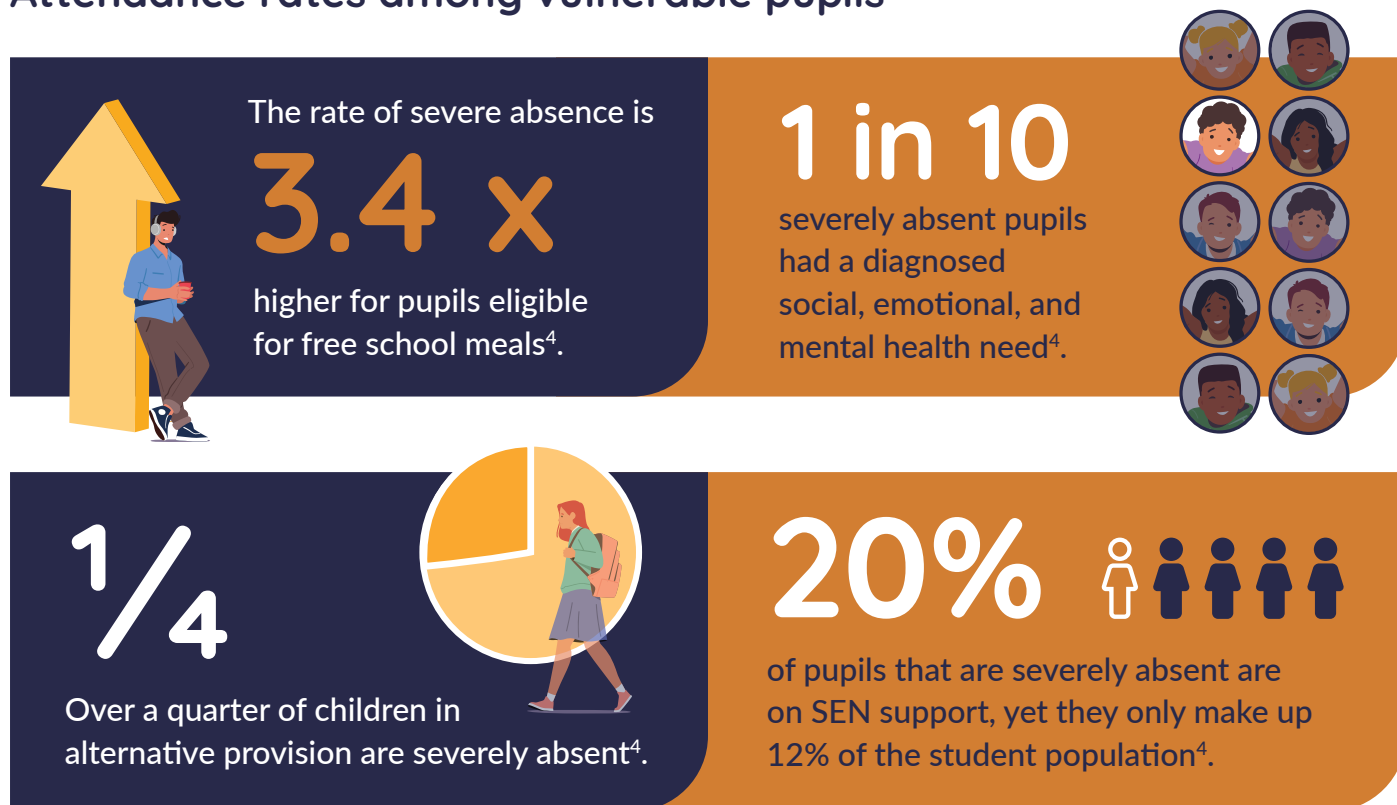
Vulnerable children and young people in our society are impacted the most. The number of pupils missing more than 50% of lessons is the equivalent of 507 primary schools³. Unfortunately, 20% of these are pupils on SEN support, even though they only make up 12% of all pupils in England⁴. The rate of severe absence is 3.4 times higher for pupils eligible for free school meals⁴. These statistics start to paint a picture of the type of pupils that make up the 142,487 severely absent young people.

Why do we want children and young people in schools? The data is clear. It gives them the best possible start in life, and it keeps them safe – something they all deserve.

Impact on attainment



Attendance rates among vulnerable pupils



A woman with blonde hair, wearing a green sleeveless top and dark trousers, is sitting on a blue step and talking to a young girl with dark curly hair. The girl is wearing a white school shirt and dark skirt. They are in a classroom with colorful artwork on the wall and a blue cushioned bench in the background.

“At Thrive, we understand that behaviour is communicating an unmet need. Low attendance is often a symptom of something else that might be going on.”

Viv Trask-Hall,
Thrive’s Head of Innovation

Addressing the attendance crisis

Children and young people begin life with a hunger for learning. Over time, some face greater obstacles than others. Eventually, a proportion may disengage from learning and begin to opt out of attending school.

Disengagement may be due to learning difficulties (diagnosed and undiagnosed), social factors (dysfunctional or impoverished family life that is exhausting and hard to overcome), neurodiversity (these young people think differently and may struggle to adjust to a traditional school timetable) or other causes.

Whatever the reason, these children and young people are unable to turn things around without peer and adult role models alongside them to show them that things can be different. Responding with consequences that don't address the underlying cause of the problem may elicit a short-term change (e.g., the pupil attends school for one day rather than risk exclusion) but they won't bring about long-term behaviour change (e.g., the pupil may still be late or absent the following week).

Multiple factors have combined to exacerbate absenteeism in recent years and our response needs to reflect this.

“There is no silver bullet when it comes to improving attendance. However, if we look at what’s behind the behaviour, we can put practical strategies in place to support reengagement.”

Viv Trask-Hall.

Thrive’s Head of Innovation.



How to initiate sustainable change

Advocate for your children and young people

Whether you're working with teenagers or toddlers, behaviour communicates an unmet need and absence can be a symptom of that. Building strong relationships and getting to know pupils well means you'll be better equipped to remove any barriers, and to help and guide them. Time invested in building secure relationships now, will reap rewards in the long term.



Deep down, we all wish to be noticed and appreciated. Find out what they are good at and play to those strengths. Ask questions and take the time to discover something each child or young person would like to talk about to make them feel valued. Over time, this builds trust, and they will be more likely to pay attention to your instructions. Hold in mind that your relationship with them may be the one thing that motivates them to get out of bed and face the day's challenges – family disputes, bullying, frustration at being unable to engage in learning, etc. The welcoming environment you provide will breed feelings of security.

Seek out and embrace new ways of doing things



Thrive training equips participants to understand the underlying factors behind children and young people's behaviour, including attachment theory, trauma and neuroscience. This insight prompts a different way of thinking about school and classroom management. Participants learn practical approaches to understanding and responding to the underlying causes of absenteeism, leading to long-term, sustainable improvements.

Thrive offers a series of [standalone short courses](#) that you can 'click to buy'. In addition, Thrive-Online includes introductory training for all staff, including school leadership, teaching staff and playtime supervisors. This learning can be extended through participation in one of our short courses and then by becoming a Thrive Licensed Practitioner.

[Become a Thrive Licensed Practitioner >](#)

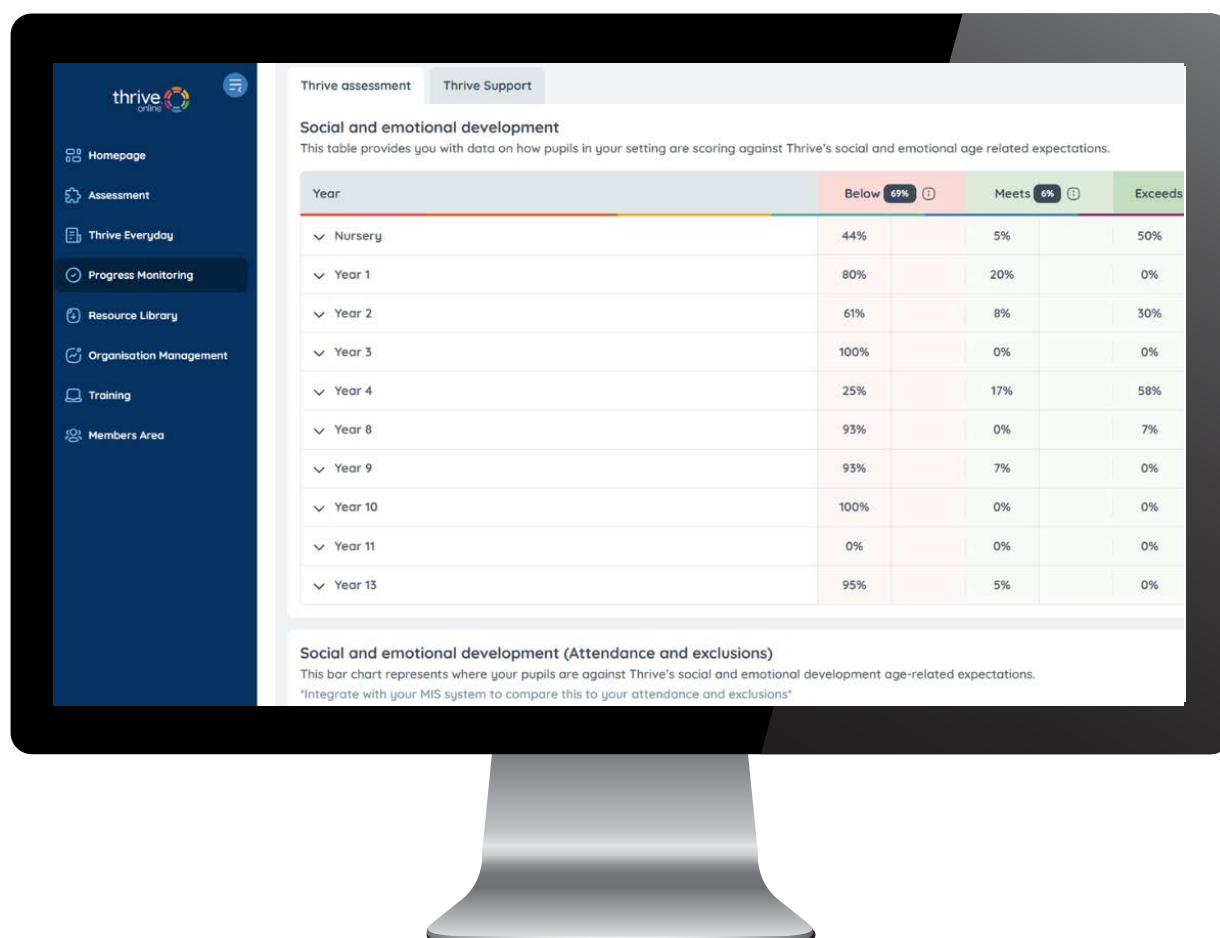
Adopt a systematic approach

In a busy school environment, it's easy for good intentions to be overtaken by the reality of juggling competing priorities. Adopting a system like Thrive-Online will enable everyone in your school to identify which pupils have the greatest need, plan interventions to support them, and track progress. Staff can log in at any time to check how a pupil, group or class are getting on.



Thrive-Online includes thousands of strategies and activities for school staff to use in real-life situations. Once you've completed some short questions, it will recommend the most relevant approach for you to take with that class, group or pupil. Depending on the age and stage of the pupils being assessed, and the challenge you are seeking to overcome, you will see different strategies and activities.

If a pupil is regularly absent, carrying out a Thrive-Online assessment will help you identify the underlying issues and select strategies and activities to tackle the problem in an evidence-informed, systematic way. Consistency and repetition are critical as you build a trusting relationship with the pupil and work together to encourage them through the school gates and improve engagement with their learning.



[Book a Thrive-Online demo >](#)

CASE STUDY

Masefield Primary School:

From attainment struggles to top 3% in the country

About Masefield

Masefield Primary School in Bolton, part of BASE Academy Trust, introduced Thrive in 2021 to address challenges with academic achievement, disruptive behaviour, and an increasing number of children struggling socially and emotionally.

Embedding Thrive

Thrive is fully integrated into Masefield's practice, policies and curriculum. All staff are Thrive trained and pupils' social and emotional needs are reviewed and supported using Thrive-Online. 'The Nest' provides a dedicated space for Thrive support and families attend regular coffee mornings.

"We ensure all pupils receive an excellent education delivered by experts and Thrive supports us to ensure pupils have the foundations to learn."

Andy Done. Head of School,
Masefield Primary School.

Remarkable results

Masefield now ranks in the top 3% nationally for reading, writing, and maths, with happier, more resilient pupils. The school's success earned recognition from the Minister for Schools and the prestigious Thrive School of Excellence award. Parent feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with 100% recommending the school.



Inspired by Masefield?

Discover how Thrive can transform your school. Watch the full case study video.

[Watch the video >](#)

Practical suggestions for use in schools

Advocating for children and young people, embracing new ways of doing things and adopting a systematic approach will stand you in good stead to begin tackling low attendance and encouraging pupils through the school gates. For additional guidance, help yourself to a selection of our tried-and-tested practical tips below.

1

Aside from providing a genuinely warm welcome at the gates or when pupils first enter the classroom at the start of the day, consider offering an alternative entrance for those who are particularly struggling. Any concerns (e.g., regarding uniform) should be reserved for once pupils are inside the building and settled.

3

Consider tweaking the timetable for some young people so they are arriving to a subject they enjoy. This boosts confidence and supports the rebuilding of relationships.

2

Use transition objects or toys to support young people to feel connected to an adult they trust throughout the day. This could be something you've made together, like a bracelet, a keyring or a fiddle object.

4

Create a moment of check-out at the end of the school day to help the child or young person know what they will be doing the next day, build excitement, reassure worries and most importantly, let them know that you are looking forward to seeing them in the morning.

5

Nominate a single point of contact (e.g., a Thrive Licensed Practitioner) to work one-to-one with those pupils with low attendance. They can seek to understand the underlying factors causing absenteeism and then develop a re-integration plan collaboratively.

6

Notice and provide additional support for those young people with additional responsibilities away from the classroom. For example, they may be caring for a relative or dropping younger siblings at other settings before bringing themselves to school. This can have a detrimental impact on attendance and punctuality.



7

Have a plan for those children or young people arriving late. No one likes to arrive part-way through a lesson. For an already anxious young person, this may make them choose to avoid school altogether. Provide a place where they can go to settle in and work on something before joining their peers at the beginning of the next lesson.

10

Encourage pupils to arrive on the premises before school starts by providing incentives such as a canteen that offers breakfast and a place to socialise with friends. This reduces lateness and the possibility of them going elsewhere to socialise before school starts, running the risk of not attending at all. A breakfast club could be part-funded by The National School Breakfast Programme (NSBP).

8

Reach out to local youth workers to understand what is happening in pupils' lives and collaborate to tackle challenges. Youth workers often chat to children and young people on the street in the evenings and will know who is staying out late, not getting enough sleep or a nutritious diet. They can offer support and incentives to change this behaviour (e.g., quad biking in exchange for turning up to youth club for 6 sessions in a row to engage in positive activities and eat a balanced meal). This will lead to better engagement in school the following day and teachers and youth workers can also work together to ensure that homework, projects, or catch-up work gets done.

11

Incorporate a minute of mindful awareness into the beginning and end of each lesson or a weekly gratitude practice into tutor time.

12

Attendance and punctuality are fundamentally about practising routines. Make it simple for pupils to follow them by displaying Now and Next boards, visual timetables in multiple places, regular reminders, reasonable adjustments, and flexibility.

9

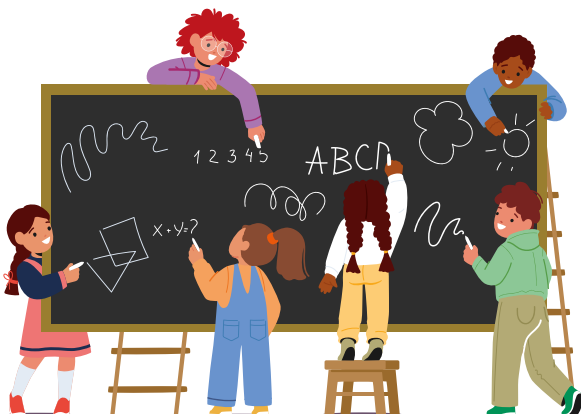
Provide ways for children and young people to record why they are late or their reasons for non-attendance without having to 'explain' in words. This reduces embarrassment and shame and removes another barrier to them getting themselves into school.

13

Initiate open communication and early conversations with parents and carers, or set up a parents' group to offer additional guidance and signposting. Providing a non-judgemental environment will mean they feel able to express concerns openly. So together, you're a partnership working in the best interests of each child or young person.

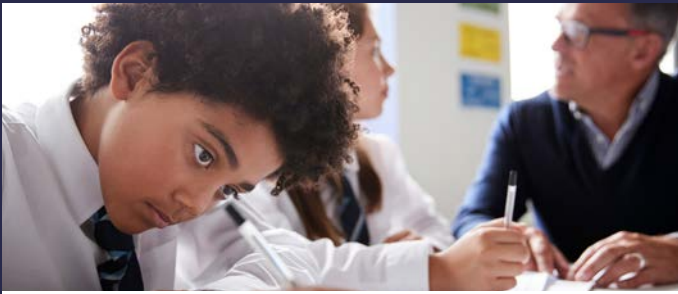
14

Create age-appropriate spaces for pupils. One they can drop into to connect with peers and an additional, dedicated space where they can feel calm, safe, and regulate their emotions with the support of a trusted staff member.



Book a short course

Passionate about removing barriers to learning? Get started by booking onto one of our short courses below.



Positive Behaviour Management

Designed for teachers and support workers in mainstream primary and secondary schools, this course helps you to understand how behaviour is the communication of an unmet need and suggests simple, tried-and-tested strategies for tackling tricky behaviour in the moment.

[Learn more >](#)



Managing Difficult Conversations

Effective communication is vital for building positive working relationships. Yet when difficult conversations crop up, overwhelm often creeps in. This course will give you the skills you need to navigate difficult conversations with more confidence and ease.

[Learn more >](#)



Pupil Wellbeing

Ideal for practitioners working alongside children and young people, this course teaches you how to support your pupils' emotional wellbeing and boost their resilience.

[Learn more >](#)



Leading Emotionally Healthy Schools and Settings

Designed for senior leaders, this training explores how to strategically embed Thrive across a multi-academy trust or individual setting.

[Learn more >](#)

[All Short Courses >](#)

The difference you can make

Together we can help children and young people become more emotionally resilient and better placed to engage with life and learning. We can do this through a whole school approach to wellbeing - proven to improve attendance, behaviour, and attainment.

Leader perspectives



“Thrive has impacted on exclusions. Students that have joined the cohort we have here currently have reduced exclusions by 81% over the time they are here. And a reduction in exclusions obviously has an impact and improvement on attendance”

Ed Stanton. Head of Academy, The Elland Academy

“The biggest difference we’ve observed so far in our journey with Thrive is that **truancy levels have dropped dramatically.** We’ve seen children who used to either leave the site or spend most of the day hiding in the toilets, seek out Thrive Practitioners to have a discussion about why they are having problems.”

Samantha Strange. Personalised Learning Centre Manager, Northfields School and Sports College

“We have had our record SATs results for the last three years, exit data is very strong, **attendance is above the national average,** and we don’t have any fixed term exclusions this year.”

Natalie Mancine. Headteacher, Parkside Middle School

“Many of the pupils have previous negative experiences with education resulting in attendance issues, with some not attending for up to two years prior to joining us. We adopted a multi-disciplinary approach to deal with this through the Thrive Approach. **As a result, attendance rates have considerably improved,** with Ofsted praising the improvements the school has achieved as well as noting that pupils now enjoy school.”

Jason Goddard. Director, Enhanced Learning Services



Transforming communities

Parent and pupil perspectives



“Beth started to refuse to go to the farm that she’d initially loved. Of course, she couldn’t keep up the pretense forever. The same old feelings resurfaced in her and in me - the dread. It was happening again. Now what? But that’s when **I felt a glimmer of hope**. Amanda was there and she actually got it. For the first time in 15 years, someone understood. I didn’t hear annoyance in her voice, I didn’t see the look or hear the sigh that said, ‘you’ve just got to show her that you are in charge.’ Instead, I got understanding and support and so did Beth.”

Parent, Tuition Extra

“Guneev was diagnosed with separation anxiety, which was causing her physical vomiting. Through Thrive, I would hand her over to Miss Baggot in the mornings and they worked with Guneev through play and talking to help her process her feelings. Being in a class of 30 children, it was quite difficult for Guneev to get the attention she needed and say, ‘Look I’m really worried about something.’ **Thrive helped her to do that.**”

Shani Boyal. Parent, Hagley Primary School

“I was doing half days and I had to go home at dinnertime because of the fights I was getting into. That wasn’t very fun for me or my mum. I feel quite good about school, **I’m happy to come to school**, I’m happy about the work, I can go to class without being wound up now.”

Lewis. Pupil, Penywaun Primary School

“When I first came here, I was, to be honest, not a good person. I would always get angry. I’d always not go to lessons. But then I got settled down and **they made me feel welcome**, the teachers, and I just calmed down.”

Annie. Pupil, The Elland Academy

I don’t think I’d be here. I think I’d be excluded or permanently excluded. Because if I didn’t have Thrive, **I wouldn’t be able to cope in lessons.**”

Kayden. Pupil, Fortis Academy



Be part of the movement

Are you ready to enhance wellbeing, boost attendance, transform behaviour, and increase pupils' ability to learn? If you've ever wondered whether our Thrive Licensed Practitioner course is right for you, you're in the perfect place to find out.

Why train as a Thrive Licensed Practitioner?

As a Thrive Licensed Practitioner, you'll gain the knowledge and tools needed to implement a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing. Not only does this role empower you to lead your school's mental health and wellbeing efforts, but it also drives your personal and professional development.

Hear from those who've done it

Over 15,000 professionals have become Thrive Licensed Practitioners, making a significant impact on the lives of young people.



"Thrive's principles and practices have helped us to identify individual needs and to **respond accordingly** so that our children feel settled and ready to learn."

Dr. Tim Cook, Headteacher & Thrive Licensed Practitioner



"Thrive training exceeded my expectations and has brought me huge benefits professionally and personally. It's been an amazing journey that has **completely transformed me**."

Samantha Strange, Personalised Learning Centre Manager & Thrive Licensed Practitioner



"The training **ignited a renewed passion** in me and has helped enormously with my professional development. The school has transformed, with improved behaviour, attendance, and staff wellbeing."

Ceri Totty, STF Manager, Teacher & Thrive Lead



Join the movement

Over 795,000 children and young people currently benefit from the Thrive Approach. Begin your journey to becoming a Thrive Licensed Practitioner and help shape the future of those in your care.

Ready to learn more?

Watch a panel of Thrive Licensed Practitioners discuss their experiences and the transformative impact of Thrive in their schools.

[Watch the recording >](#)



To date, over **75,000 educators and support staff** have received Thrive training, ensuring that over **795,000 children and young people** have access to the Thrive Approach – changing lives and improving pupil attendance, behaviour and attainment, as well as staff wellbeing.

Are you ready to join them? Book a Discovery Call with a member of the team to find out how.

[Book a Discovery Call >](#)



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