

Little Heath School - Supporting Your Child When School Feels Difficult – Minor illnesses

When Minor Illness Starts Affecting Attendance - Understanding what we often see with teenagers

At Little Heath School we see attendance as a partnership between school and families. Our aim is always to understand what may be making school difficult and to work together to remove barriers wherever possible.

During secondary school it is very common for students to experience frequent minor symptoms, such as: headaches, tiredness, stomach aches, feeling generally unwell

These symptoms can be genuine and uncomfortable. However, they can also appear when young people are run down, stressed, anxious, or lacking sleep.

One of the challenges for families is deciding when a student genuinely needs to rest at home and when it may actually help them to maintain routine and attend school.

Quick Summary – What Often Helps

- **Maintain routine** where possible for mild symptoms
- **Encourage students to try** school and see how they feel
- **Avoid extended time off** after minor illness where possible
- **Talk openly** about **sleep, stress and pressures** that may affect wellbeing
- **Contact school early** if attendance begins to dip

When minor illnesses start adding up

When several days are missed across a term, students sometimes begin to experience:

- falling behind with learning
- worry about catching up
- disrupted routines
- reduced confidence about returning

At this point, attendance can become harder even when the original illness has passed. Our concern here is that students are not only missing out on learning, they're missing friends, events, confidence and importantly, fun!

What often helps young people

Parents often find the following approaches helpful:

- Maintaining routine where possible
- For mild symptoms, many students feel better once they are in school and distracted by lessons and friends.
- Some families use language such as: "Let's try school and see how you feel. If you're really not well, school will contact me." It's important however, that this is not seen by the student as, I can come in and get sent straight home. If they are genuinely too ill to be in school, please keep them at home. Encourage them to come in and if they are too unwell to be in school, one of our first aiders can make the decision with you about whether they are too poorly to stay in school.

Avoiding extended time off after minor illness

Sometimes returning to school quickly can prevent absence becoming harder to overcome later. We don't have to feel 100% to return to school and work.

Talking openly about pressures

Occasionally physical symptoms can be linked to:

- stress about schoolwork
- tiredness
- social pressures
- hormones
- disrupted sleep

Open conversations can help identify whether something else may be contributing. We have found that often parents who discuss their own symptoms with children and normalise coping strategies, make it feel easier for children to cope. For example, saying to a child that you have a headache and have drunk some water, taken a tablet, taken a screen break etc and have been able to manage better, can really help the student to see that it's completely normal not to feel 100% but you can still carry on.

Obviously we are not saying that we want students to be in school when they are unwell, nor do we mean to patronise you, as parents. We just know that some parents haven't had these kinds of conversations, so their children believe that their parents are feeling completely well or without anxiety all of the time!

Changing Mindsets

What's really important is what you do after school... when your son/daughter returns home, ask them to tell you one funny/interesting/good thing that has happened today that they would have missed if they hadn't been to school.

Encourage them to think about funny things they remember from primary school or lower down at LHS and things you remember from your own school days. We really want the students to realise that when they are not in school, they are missing out on great things, so focusing on those things is so important. Getting them to focus on what went well, not the negative is absolutely crucial in changes their mindset about school.

Some people use gratitude journals, or make notes in their phones, anything to help them to see the positives in their day!

Sleep, Phones and School Readiness

Many young people feel more alert at night and struggle more with early mornings.

This biological change can be made more challenging by:

- phones and social media
- late-night gaming
- notifications during the night
- irregular sleep patterns

Many students who struggle with morning attendance are not deliberately avoiding school — they are simply extremely tired.

Signs sleep may be affecting attendance

You might notice:

- difficulty waking up in the morning
- frequent tiredness or headaches
- increased irritability
- feeling unwell in the morning but improving later

Why phones and social media matter

Social media platforms are designed to keep users engaged for long periods.

Many teenagers intend to check their phones briefly but end up scrolling much longer than expected.

Even small changes in bedtime can significantly affect energy and resilience the next day

Approaches families often find helpful

Different families manage this in different ways, but some common approaches include:

- creating a phone charging space outside bedrooms overnight
- Agreeing a time to shut off phone
- limiting notifications during the night
- encouraging consistent sleep routines across the week

WHEN RETURNING TO SCHOOL FEELS DIFFICULT AFTER ABSENCE

Why returning to school can sometimes feel challenging

After several days away from school — even due to genuine illness — some students find that returning feels harder than expected.

This can happen for a number of reasons. Students may worry about:

- catching up on missed work
- feeling behind compared to their peers
- seeing friends again after time away
- explaining their absence
- managing a full school day after time at home

These worries are very common, particularly during the GCSE years when academic pressure can feel higher.

What we often see

Many students report that the anticipation of returning feels more difficult than actually being back in school.

Once they attend, they often find:

- teachers understand when students have been unwell
- work can be caught up gradually
- routines settle quickly again

Maintaining or re-establishing routine can therefore be one of the most important steps in rebuilding confidence.

What can help teenagers return successfully

Parents often find the following approaches helpful:

- Focusing on returning rather than catching up immediately
- It is usually more important for students to rebuild the routine of attending school than to worry about completing all missed work straight away.
- Teachers can support students with catching up once they are back in lessons.

Keeping the return calm and low-pressure

Students often benefit from reassurance that they do not need to have everything “sorted” immediately.

Encouraging them to simply take the day one lesson at a time can help reduce anxiety.

Letting school know if your child feels worried

If your child is concerned about returning, please let us know. Small adjustments or check-ins can often make a big difference in helping students settle back in.

How school can help

If minor illnesses are beginning to affect attendance, we may be able to support through:

- tutor or pastoral check-ins
- helping students catch up with missed work
- monitoring attendance patterns
- identifying any underlying concerns

Please contact us early if you feel attendance is becoming more difficult. Working together early usually makes the biggest difference.

We are here to help and we cannot do something if we do not know about it.