

SHOULD WE REALLY BE TAKING SCHOOL MUMS TO COURT?

Last year, over 18,000 parents faced convictions for their children missing school – over 70 per cent of them women. But the reasons behind ‘school refusal’ are often complex...

When mum-of-four Pippa* found herself in the dock at her local magistrates’ court last summer – facing a possible three-month jail sentence – she couldn’t believe things had got that far. Her crime? Failing to get her daughter Chelsea, 16, to attend school.

Pippa, who is unable to work due to health issues, insists that what she needed wasn’t a fine, a criminal record or the threat of prison time, but more support. ‘I understand that as a parent I’ve got to take some responsibility,’ says Pippa, 53. ‘But I didn’t want Chelsea to miss out on any



Mum Pippa was taken to court



Pippa and Chelsea – who refused point blank to go to school

of her education. After some bad luck as a family, things spiralled and I just didn’t know how to fix them.’

In 2023, there were 21,163 prosecutions and 18,061 convictions for truancy, with 70% of these against women. Of the 145 people sent to prison for a truancy conviction since 2010, 83% were also women.

DISADVANTAGES

Amy Dennison is a Service Manager for Criminal Justice Services at Advance, a national charity supporting women and girls who have experienced domestic abuse and those who are in contact with the criminal justice system. She says, ‘We’re coming across women who have been criminalised

for truancy and ended up in court far more than we should. Sometimes women are in domestic abuse situations and finding it difficult to get their children to school as a result. We’re also coming across “school refusal” with women where their children have experienced mental health issues or are neurodivergent.

‘Sometimes you’re talking about 14 or 15-year-olds with mental health problems who are lashing out and being violent towards their parents. There isn’t a woman we’ve worked with who hasn’t experienced some sort of trauma. Seeing any woman with a truancy conviction feels wrong. There will be parents who are attending every

meeting and doing everything they physically can and still getting convicted, which seems desperately unfair.

‘Advance is calling on the Government to decriminalise truancy and to put more support measures in place for families. Yes, there are parents who don’t place education as a high priority, but instead of perpetuating the cycle of this style of parenting, we should be looking to break it and to show parents how to support their kids back into school. If you instead send a mum to prison or land them with a fine or conviction that leaves them in financial difficulty or unable to work, what’s that going to do to the child?’



Parents can only do so much

‘I COULDN’T PHYSICALLY DRAG HER TO SCHOOL...’

For Pippa, it was a period of homelessness that sparked her daughter’s issues with school attendance. She says, ‘Out of all my kids, Chelsea was always the one who loved school the most. She liked maths and English and was really excited to move up to her local secondary school with all her friends.

ATTENDANCE

‘But that summer, the home we’d rented for 10 years was suddenly sold and we were faced with eviction. We had to declare ourselves homeless and the emergency housing the council put us in was in a different county. By the time we made it back to our hometown, Chelsea had lost her place at her preferred school.

‘She was kept back from starting at the alternative school we were offered until after the October half-term, which meant the other children were already three months ahead in their lessons and Chelsea felt embarrassed having to constantly ask for

help. Friendship groups had already formed too.

‘Before long, her sunny personality was changing and she’d have regular meltdowns before school, resulting in us being late. She’d then get sent home for the whole day as a punishment.

‘She started acting out more and more, getting sent home for other small things like wearing the wrong shoes or forgetting her tie. It wasn’t long before she was saying there was no point going in the first place...’

Towards the end of Year 7, it was suggested Chelsea go

into a unit for kids who were struggling with mainstream school then, when Covid hit, her lessons moved online. But when schools re-opened, the unit closed and she was put back in her old mainstream school for Year 10.

STRUGGLING

‘Her unit had only had six children,’ says Pippa. ‘Chelsea wasn’t used to classes of 30 kids and walking around a massive school anymore and she found it completely overwhelming. She gets UTIs and when the teachers refused to let her

go to the toilet in class, she’d go anyway. She believed she was treated more harshly for misdemeanours that other children got let off for.

‘Before long, she was point-blank refusing to get out of bed on school mornings. I’d have her breakfast made, her uniform ready, her bus money on the side – but I couldn’t physically drag her to school.

‘Social workers and liaison officers would come round – even the police – who’d troop into Chelsea’s bedroom in the morning and tell her she needed to go into school, but when she said no, they’d just leave. I wanted Chelsea to be in school, learning. But if the police couldn’t get her there, I don’t know what they expected me to do.’

FINES

Although Pippa attended meetings at Chelsea’s school, she says they weren’t offered any practical solutions. Instead, she received her first fine for truancy when Chelsea was 14. Before long, further accumulated fines had hit £2,000 and she had to go to court.

Pippa says, ‘I was sentenced to a year’s probation and 20 Rehabilitation Activity Days. On top of that, I was also ordered to pay another £250 in costs. The one positive seemed to be when the judge ordered that Chelsea should get extra help with getting through college over the next year.

‘But just a week later, Chelsea’s “early help” worker said he was being taken off her case due to her age. She really wants to work in a nursery, but with no GCSEs she’s struggling to get onto local childcare courses. It breaks my heart to think what this is doing to her future.’

● Advance has written an open letter, calling for the Government to remove the criminal offence of truancy and fund and embed support services for children and their families. Sign it here: advancecharity.org.uk/notgoingbacktoschool-open-letter/



Some children are struggling and need more support

BY DEBORAH RISELEY *NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED. PICTURES GETTY IMAGES, ALAMY



Amy Dennison of Advance says women should not be criminalised for truancy