



Term-Time Holidays & “Exceptional Circumstances” — What it *really* means

In England, schools can only authorise term-time leave if there are **exceptional circumstances**.

But here's the truth that often gets lost:

★ **“Exceptional circumstances” has no legal definition.**

It is **not** defined in law, and it is **not limited** to funerals or military leave (even though some schools imply this).

Each **headteacher** decides what counts as exceptional, and they **must consider each request individually**.

This means:

- There is **no national list** of acceptable reasons
- A head *can* authorise term-time leave for wellbeing, family circumstances, SEND-related needs, or other significant reasons
- A head must look at the **context** — not follow a blanket rule like “we never authorise holidays”

Blanket refusals contradict DfE guidance.



Examples of circumstances schools can authorise

(Not a guarantee — but explicitly allowed as discretionary.)

- Serious family illness
- A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity
- Family crisis or bereavement

- Cultural or religious events
- Child's mental health needs
- SEND-related stress/burnout
- Parents with restricted annual leave (e.g., NHS, military, emergency services)

Your child's emotional wellbeing *can* be part of the decision.



SEND or anxiety changes the picture

For children with:

- School anxiety / EBSA
- Autism
- PDA
- Trauma
- Sensory overload
- Chronic stress

...term-time leave **may legitimately support regulation and recovery**.

A headteacher can authorise this as *an exceptional circumstance* if they believe it benefits the child's wellbeing.

You can also request that absence is coded as:

- **I** (illness/mental health), or
- **C** (authorised other circumstances)

...rather than a holiday code, depending on the situation and evidence.



But what about fines?

If the headteacher does **not** authorise the leave, the local authority *may* issue a fine.

BUT:

- Fines are **not mandatory**
- Local authorities can use **discretion**
- SEND-related circumstances and mental health are valid reasons to *not* issue a fine

And fines cannot be issued if the absence is marked under illness or other authorised circumstances.