

advice to adults about school absence

MEET ABSENCE SAFELY



CHANGEFACTORY

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Changefactory Knowledge Centre
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The photos are of participants from advice collection

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ABOUT THE ADVICE COLLECTION

The advice collection MEET ABSENCE SAFELY was conducted September-November 2022. Experiences and advice was collected from 120 young people aged 13-19 with the average age 16 years.

Why Changefactory would conduct an advice collection on school absence:

1. Contribute to a better knowledge base directly from pupils, about how adults at school safely can meet children who are away from school a little or a lot
2. Contribute to the assignment that The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (Udir) received from Ministry of Education and Research (KD) in 2022, to prepare a knowledge overview, measures and to propose regulatory change, would contain advice directly from pupils

The participants

The young people in the in-depth study lived in Vadsø, Tromsø, Harstad, Bodø, Fosen, Malvik, Trondheim, Bergen, Øygarden, Oslo, Lunner, Drammen, Sarpsborg, Indre Østfold, Tønsberg, Larvik, Ullensaker, Porsgrunn, Haugesund, Tysvær, Strand, Stavanger, Sandnes, Risør and Kristiansand.

16% of them have been absent from school almost every day
21% of them have been absent a lot from one or more subjects
23% of them have arrived late to class often
34% of them have been absent from school a few days a month
53% of them have been absent from school for a few days every six months

Invitation

The young people who were invited to the advice collection are pupils, and half of them are also pros in Changefactory. The young people have, ahead of sessions, received information about what the advice collection is about, why Changefactory conducts the advice collection, what will happen with the answers they give, that to participate is completely voluntarily, that they answer what they want to answer and that the advice collection is anonymous. In addition, the young people have received contact information to one or more of the facilitators in order to ask questions or get more information.

Consent

The young people who have participated in the advice collection have given consent to participate. When the young person has been under the age of 16, their carer has also given consent. The young people in the photos in the advice collection have consented to their use.

About the method

The advice collection has been carried out with use of the Changemethod. This is a participant research method, to obtain in-depth knowledge of use in change work and equal collaboration with children and young people. It has been developed based on Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) and is built on responses from children and young people about how participating in an advice collection can feel safe. The change method consists of a set of values, working principles and a number of concrete tools, to collect knowledge directly from children and young people. The tools are creative and visual, to help make it safe, fun and useful for many different children and young people.

Qualitative and quantitative approaches

The advice collection has been carried out with both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The qualitative has been most important, to bring out different experiences and experiences, and to ensure in-depth understanding of what the young people express.

Conducting the sessions

The sessions were carried out in larger and smaller groups. The same facilitators participated in as many sessions as possible. The facilitators tried, to the extent possible, to make the location for the sessions to be pleasant, and to avoid major disturbances. The sessions started with the facilitators and the young people getting to know each other a little. This was adapted based on whether they knew each other from before. Then the facilitators again provided information about why the advice collection is carried out, that it is voluntary to participate and that the young people themselves choose what they want to answer. The facilitators emphasised that the transcripts were anonymised, and that the transcript would be verbatim what the young people say.

Main topics in the advice collection

To tell the real reasons

To talk about the reasons

Help to get to school

Contact with pupils who are absent from school

Contact with adults at home when pupils are absent from school

Method tools used

Green/red/yellow light: the young people could hold up a colour to answer quantitative questions (yes/no/other)

Question form: the young people filled in, or crossed off, different questions

Audio recording: the young people could take audio recordings and make a "podcast", if they did not want to write down their answers

Heart barometer: the young people could hang post-it notes with advice on a barometer that goes from lighter to darker colours.

The lightest colour was "somewhat important", the middle colour was "important" and the darkest colour was "most important"

To-do list/recipe: the young people could write a to-do list, or recipe, for what adults at school have to remember when they are going to help young people who often are absent

Summary of the knowledge

The experiences and advice were systematised. The answers which were repeated the most from the young people, were summarised as knowledge from children and young people. The knowledge from children and young people is not connected to theory. The language used is as similar as possible to what the young people have used.

THANK YOU TO THE YOUNG PEOPLE

A THOUSAND MILLION THANKS TO EVERYONE

WHO GAVE ANSWERS IN THIS ADVICE

COLLECTION! THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME AND

ENERGY TO HELP NORWAY UNDERSTAND MORE

ABOUT WHAT ABSENCE CAN BE ABOUT AND HOW

ADULTS IN SCHOOL CAN MEET ABSENCE SAFELY.

FINDINGS FROM THE ADVICE COLLECTION

Pupils tell the real reasons for their absence, to one/several adults in school

74 out of 120 most often
99 out of 120 sometimes
35 out of 120 usually not
17 out of 120 rarely or never

One/several adults in school talk with the pupil about their reasons for being absent

40 out of 120 most often
72 out of 120 sometimes
52 out of 120 usually not
31 out of 120 rarely or never

One/several adults in school wants to help the pupil to attend school more

37 out of 120 have experienced it
12 out of 37 were asked if the help helped them or not
10 out of 37 were allowed to help decide how the help would be
62 out of 120 have not experienced it

One/several adults in school have contacted them when the pupil is away

45 out of 120 most often
47 out of 120 usually not

Pupils get information before adults in school contacts adults at home

23 out of 120 have experienced it
73 out of 120 have not experienced it

Pupils get information after adults in school has contacted adults at home

34 out of 120 have experienced it
52 out of 120 have not experienced it



PUPILS HAVE
HUMAN
RIGHTS

PUPILS HAVE HUMAN RIGHTS

Since 2015, Changefactory has carried out more than 10 surveys on the topic of school. Pupils around the country have shared experiences and advice. An answer that has been repeated is that when something has to be determined for a pupil, it must be done in collaboration with the pupil. Then, the chance is much greater that what is decided will be correct for that pupil. When asked about what is needed for pupils to experience collaboration with adults, many answer that they need to know enough, get to talk to someone they trust or bring someone they can trust into conversations. Many also answer that they need to know what will happen further, with what they share. Although many pupils do not know their rights, there are a lot of similarities between what pupils say, and the rights they have when something is to be decided.

Pupils under the age of 18 have rights in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Pupils over the age of 18 have rights under other human rights conventions and according to special laws. Many of the rights according to the special laws apply both to pupils under and over 18 years.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child applies to all children up to the age of 18, in all systems, such as in school, kindergarten and in the support systems. The Convention was incorporated into Norwegian law in 2003, through the Human Rights Act section 2. Some of the rights in the Convention on the Rights of the Child have been included in Norwegian special laws and some have been included in article 104 of the Norwegian Constitution. The Convention on the Rights of the Child must be used together with the special laws. The Education Act is one of the important special laws for children. If The Education Act says something different from the Convention on the Rights of the Child, what is stated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child will carry the most weight.

Children have procedural rights according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child

The Convention on the Rights of the Child gives children some procedural rights. These are rights that describe how children should be met, in all actions and decisions that concern them, so that adults can assess what is in the best interest of the child. Procedural rights include the child's right to information, to speak freely, the right to respect for privacy and that these rights are secured, before the best interests of the child are assessed. These rights are now reflected in the new Child Welfare Act §§ 1-3 and 1-4.

The procedural rights apply both to children who have little, a lot or almost no absence from school. In all actions and decisions affecting children, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration. Actions and decisions affecting children who are absent from school can be, for example, when parents or other guardians are notified of the absence, when other services are contacted based on absence or if adults think there are grounds for making exceptions to the duty of confidentiality, and make a report to the Child Protection System.

The child's opinion must be a central element in the assessment of what is in the best interests of the child. The child must receive enough information, as a prerequisite for the child to be able to express themselves freely and safely. An assessment of the best interests of the child CANNOT be made without the child first receiving sufficient and understandable information, and having been able to express their opinions freely and safely.

In addition, the child's right to privacy must be ensured, in that the child before conversations, gets to know what information from the child can be used for and who can access this information. If an adult considers sharing something the child has said or done, the child must, as a starting point, get information about this and have a say about the sharing, in a way that is safe for the child. The adult must then assess whether it would be in the child's best interests to share.

The state has a duty to ensure that the employees in schools and services who work with children and young people, know about children's procedural rights and know how to respect and secure them practice.

Children as a group have the right to express themselves

In the case of actions that affect several children, what is in the best interests of this group shall be a fundamental consideration. To assess the best interests of the group, children and young people must be able to express themselves as a group. This must be taken into account in the decision (UN Children's Committee General Comment No. 12 section 73).

The UN Children's Committee writes in general comment no. 14 section 91:

When the interests of a large number of children are at stake, the state institutions must find ways to hear the views of a representative sample of children, and take due account of their opinions when planning measures or making legislation decisions that directly or indirectly concern the group, in order to ensure that all groups of children are covered.

Pupils at a school or in a municipality therefore have the right to speak out, for example when new measures are planned that will concern them. The pupils must be included throughout the process. There should be "an active exchange of views between children and adults (General Comment No. 12 paragraphs 12-13 and 122). When UDIR, on behalf of the Ministry of Education, is to assess and prepare proposals for regulatory changes in absence from school, pupils as a group must be included in the process.

All pupils have the right to confidentiality

All pupils have rights according to the Education Act. Teachers have a duty of confidentiality about pupils' "personal conditions," cf. Education Act section 15-1, cf. § 13. Pupils' absence and what pupils share with teachers about the reasons for the absence is part of pupils' "personal relationships". That means teachers first and foremost have a duty of confidentiality about this and must not share information about pupils' absences to others unless the pupils themselves consent to it.

According to the education regulations, parents must be notified in writing when the child is under 18 years of age if the pupil is at risk of not getting a final grade. Nevertheless, in many cases it is considered as important to share information about pupils' absences more often than this, such as in parent-teacher conferences.

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, art. 16 and ECHR art. 8 all pupils have the right to respect for one's privacy. This right becomes especially important when it comes to sharing information about pupils' absence. The sharing of information about pupils must have a basis in law and be necessary. If it applies to pupils under the age of 18, the decision must be made in the best interests of the child. When information about a pupil is shared with parents, other adults or services without the pupil first being informed, the pupil can easily lose trust in the adult. The trust pupils have to their teachers can be decisive for it to feel safe enough to tell about the reasons for absence from school.

KNOWLEDGE FROM CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

EXPERIENCES



REASONS FOR ABSENCE

Pupils have reasons why they are away from school. The reasons can be, among other things, how they thrive in school, how things are going for them in subjects, how the adults at school treat the pupils and things that happen outside the school. It may vary how serious the reasons are, but only the pupil knows their reasons.

Pupils can be away from school almost every day, a lot absent in one or more subjects, arriving late to classes often, being away a few days a month or a few days every six months. Regardless of whether pupils are a little or a lot away from school, the reasons may be important.

Adults in school may have a desire to help pupils to have less absence. This can be for various reasons, such as that they see that the pupil is doing worse at school, or that they are afraid that the pupil will have too much absence to get graded in a subject. Then it is important that the adults understand that it is not the absence in itself, but the reason for the absence, they must help the pupils with.

What absence can be about

Summarised experiences from 120 young people aged 13-19

Answers that were repeated the most about what absence can be about were other pupils or the class environment, little motivation, things that happen outside school and adults in school.

Other pupils or the classroom environment

- harassment or bullying
- unsafe class environment
- pupils have no one to be with
- pupils are afraid of what other pupils think of them

Little motivation

- boring content in the lessons or learning methods
- pupils are tired of school for various reasons
- pupils feel they are not good enough
- pupils are tired of specific subjects

Things that happen outside of school

- pupils go through something difficult
- things that happen in the family
- things that happen in help services

Adults at school

- teachers treat pupils badly
- teachers treat pupils differently
- pupils notice that adults look down on them

QUOTES

I didn't have any friends in the last year of school so then I didn't bother.

Could be a reason that you don't manage enough things for tests, maths, can make you dread it properly.

Often in gym there was body insecurities and high expectations and being treated differently.

The energy can disappear. Could also be because you have had absences, people judge you, which turns into more and more absences, no point in showing up at school because you are so behind that you don't manage to understand anything.

It's the same old, answering questions, submissions.

Lots of demands to do this and that and either you get proof that you suck or that you are good enough.

She gets mad very quickly. Then I don't really want to be at school or to pay attention.

The family may be the reason, family issues.

I had no one to be with because everyone just shut me out. So that turned into me not wanting to go to school and said I was having headaches to my mum and stayed home.

It was very boring, everything is boring, that's why I didn't go to school.

The first thing the teacher said was that it was important that everyone was mentally present. But it doesn't feel like they totally get it. They are just concerned with us being physically present. They said mentally present, they mean physically present. Being in school, that's good enough. Doesn't mean that that's good enough for you.

Didn't dare go when I was bullied.

Don't get along well with the teachers, so I didn't bother to be there in class.

You do not get a doctor's note for heartache and must come to school with tears in your eyes.

KNOWLEDGE FROM CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

ADVICE



WHEN PUPILS ARE ABSENT

Contact with the pupil

When pupils are away from school, adults in school often contact them. For the pupil to feel safe being contacted, it must be by an adult they feel safe with. They must also be contacted in a way that feels safe for the pupil.

Advice from 120 young people aged 13-19

Who can contact the pupil

Examples of who the adult can be

- someone the pupil knows well
- someone the pupil feels safe with
- someone who is good at talking about things
- someone the pupil trusts

Examples of adults who can contact the pupil

- contact teacher
- environmental worker/talking person
- public health nurse
- advisor

How the pupil should be contacted

Message (text or school platform)

- it feels safe
- it is an easy way to get in touch with the pupil
- the pupil gets time to think about what they want to answer
- the pupil can answer when it suits them

Call

- it feels safe
- it is an easy way to get in touch with the pupil

Social Media

- it feels safe
- it is an easy way to get in touch with the pupil
- the pupil gets time to think about what they want to answer
- the pupil can answer when it suits them

What adults can write or say to the pupil

- write or say nice things
- ask about the reason why the pupil is absent, before you mark an absence
- say that it is fine to talk about it later, and make an agreement when you can talk
- do not pressure or stress the pupil about returning to school
- do not scold or be strict with the pupil

What adults cannot do

Contact others before you have contacted the pupil

- bad or hurtful things can happen at home
- the pupil may lose trust in the adults at school
- it's not certain that the pupil wants friends to know

Go to the pupil's home

- it can feel uncomfortable
- it can feel unsafe

Contact with adults at home

When pupils are away from school, adults in school may wish to contact adults at home. For it to feel safe for the pupil, the adult in school must talk to the pupil first and agree with the pupil how they will contact the adults at home.

Advice from 120 young people aged 13-19

Talk to the pupil first

- find out the reason why the pupil has been absent before you contact the adults at home
- talk to the pupil about that you are thinking of contacting adults at home
- explain why you are thinking of contacting them
- ask the pupil what they think about this
- tell them what you are thinking of saying
- if the pupil does not want you to contact adults at home, you have to respect that and try to find out why they say no

Why you must talk to the pupil first

- remember that it can feel scary if you contact adults at home before you have spoken to the pupil
- remember that stupid or bad things can happen if you don't
- remember that the pupil may lose trust in the adults at school if you don't
- remember that the pupil may feel left out if you don't

Agree on what you can say

- ask the pupil what they think is okay for you to say
- make an agreement on whether the pupil wants to help to tell adults at home

Make an agreement on who and when

- remember that adults at home can be different and react differently
- ask the pupil which of the adults at home you can contact
- make an agreement with the pupil when it might be wise to contact them
- contact the adult at home that the pupil wants

What you must do when you contact the adults at home

- talk or write in kind ways about the pupil
- keep the agreements you have made with the pupil
- speak in a kind voice
- ask what the adults at home think

WHEN PUPILS RETURN

Pupils may be late or absent for a shorter or longer time. For it to feel safe for the pupil to come back to school, the adults there must welcome the pupil in a kind and safe way.

Advice from 120 young people aged 13-19

Meet the pupil kindly and safely

- say nice things, like hello, nice to see you again, welcome back
- smile at the pupil, be cheerful and pleasant
- show that you notice when the pupil is absent
- do not be strict or scold the pupil

Let the pupil choose

- let the pupil choose which adult they want to talk to, when they return
- remember that pupils can be safe with different adults
- find the adult with whom the pupil feels safe
- do everything you can to ensure safety and trust
- make sure you know the pupil a little before you talk to them about the reasons

Talk to the pupil alone

- meet the pupil alone before or after the lesson
- do not make a big deal out of the pupil's absence
- ask why the pupil has been absent
- ask how the pupil is doing
- respect it if the pupil does not want to tell or wants to wait to tell
- speak kindly and show that you understand that the pupil has a reason for being away

Make it safe to tell

- show that you care
- show that you listen well
- show that you want to understand
- show that you take the pupil seriously
- react in kind ways

Maintain confidentiality

- say that you have a duty of confidentiality and that things will stay between the two of you
- show that you actually keep the duty of confidentiality
- then it will be safer to tell
- remember that there may be some adults at school or at home who are the reason for the absence

Find solutions together with the pupil

- ask the pupil what can help
- do not pressure the pupil
- come up with examples of solutions if the pupil wants that
- make a plan together with the pupil

Review what the pupil has missed

- give information about what the pupil has missed
- do not put focus on the absence
- take things at the pupil's pace
- give the pupil help and find solutions together

NATIONAL GUIDELINES AND MEASURES



NATIONAL GUIDELINES AND MEASURES

Udir will create a knowledge overview and propose measures

The Ministry of Education and Research (KD) gave the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (Udir) a supplementary letter no. 19 to the assignment letter for 2022. They were assigned to:

1. prepare a knowledge overview about high absence of pupils in school
2. investigate and propose measures for better national statistics on absence from school
3. assess and prepare proposals for regulatory changes on absence

The knowledge overview should show what we know about high absence of pupils in primary, secondary and upper secondary school: "about how widespread the problem is, what knowledge base we have that can say something about the problem and the development over time, which systems schools and school owners have in order to catch cases of worrying absence, as well as what we know about the measures that are put in place and what works" (Assignment letter to Udir for 2022 with assignments 2022-027, 4 July 2022). In the overview, Udir was also to put forward recommendations for what we can do nationally to slow down the development and prevalence of high levels of absence in the short and long term.

Udir was also asked to quickly submit proposals for improvements of the system for keeping track of absences in upper secondary school and in 2023 an investigation of various alternatives on how we can get better information about absences in primary and secondary school. Udir is also due in 2023 to submit an assessment of regulatory changes on absence, amendments and recommendations for regulatory changes regarding absence.

The absence limit

The absence limit came as a political response to the problem of school absence. The scheme was given a trial period, which expired in 2019. The scheme was continued, after a selection of principals and teachers recommended this. The main reason for continuation was that the scheme led to less absence.

The scheme also had challenges. The pupils must have a medical certificate from a GP for a valid absence and they must pay for doctor's appointments. Many find it unfair that the 10% limit is the same, even if some study programs have fewer hours in a subject or several hours in the same subject on the same day. Little absence is needed before the 10% limit is reached.

The absence limit has a strong focus on reducing absence. Simultaneously many pupils explain that it feels like the reasons for why they are away from school does not become the focus. The absence limit has reduced absences, but according to pupils it has also contributed to making everyday life more difficult for many of those who already have big enough challenges in their lives.

Notification in cases of high absence

Notification home

Today's absence rules, both at secondary schools and upper secondary schools, say that the school must notify adults at home, if a pupil risks not getting an assessment in a subject. Adults at school can contact those at home, without first considering whether and how it must be done in collaboration with the pupil.

Notification to the Child Protection System

Schools can send a message of concern to the Child Protection System if pupils have a lot or prolonged absences. This can be done with neither pupils nor carers receiving information about it. The pupils are then not guaranteed their right to receive information and to speak out before an action is taken that affects them.

In the autumn of 2022, there was a large focus in the media on how schools send messages of concern too quickly. Both parents and professionals joined the debate about how quickly and in which way the message of concern should be sent, in cases of school absence. The Minister for Children stated that school absences shall not be a sufficient basis for triggering the reporting obligation to the child protection services. Pupils' opinion about what are the challenges associated with the fact that messages of concern are sent because of absence from school, did not appear. Neither did advice pupils have about how this should be done.

Pupils' right to express themselves in § 9A

§ 9A was evaluated in 2019 (Deloitte, June 2019). In the evaluation it emerged that many schools believed that § 9A had led to more systematic follow-up and increased focus on prevention work. Many also believed that § 9A had contributed to a stronger pupil voice and increased emphasis on the pupil's subjective experience of everyday school life. When the County Governor is on the case, they almost always speak directly with the pupil, the evaluation showed.

The new Education Act will be adopted by the Storting before the summer of 2023. In the proposal for a new Education Act that came up for consultation in 2020, it was proposed to remove today's clarification that the pupil must have a say in the matter. This was done to simplify the law and avoid double regulations. In their consultation input the Children's Ombudsman commented concern that this has in some cases become more emphasised, than consideration for pupils' legal security.

Programme to reduce high absence

Various initiatives and measures are being tried to reduce school absence. One of these is Back2School, a treatment programme being trialled in some municipalities in the 2022/2023 school year. It's a programme where children who are away from school a lot, have to undergo psychological conversation treatment. The goal is to "change the pupils' thinking patterns and unsuitable behaviour so that they can return to school". Through such a strong focus on changing behaviour, the programme breaks with main answers from pupils who are away a lot from the school. Several Storting politicians went out against the programme, with statements in November 2022, that school absence is a system problem, not an individual problem. It's not the pupils there's something wrong with.

national
authorities
must include
knowledge
from children
and young
people when
new initiatives
are made

CHANGEFACTORY KNOWLEDGE CENTRE

Why knowledge directly from children?

Children and young people have to feel that the school, kindergarten, support services, police and legal system are safe and useful for them. Children and young people all over Norway have experiences from meeting these systems and advice on how they can be the best possible. Authorities, professionals and students often lack this knowledge from children and young people, when frameworks and what constitutes good practice are to be determined, nationally and locally. Therefore, it must be brought in to a much greater extent and, together with other knowledge, be part of the knowledge base, in order to develop and ensure the quality of good systems for children and young people.

More than 10 years of collecting knowledge

For more than 10 years, Changefactory (CF) has systematically collected experiences and advice from children and young people about how they experience school, kindergarten, support services, the police and the legal system. In 2017, the Prime Minister opened Changefactory Knowledge Centre, to collect knowledge from children and young people about the public systems. As far as we know, there are few knowledge centres in Europe whose main purpose is to gather and disseminate knowledge directly from children and young people about the systems they are in. CF seeks collaboration with similar organisations.

Participatory and practice-oriented method

In order to collect, systematise and disseminate summarised experiences and advice from children and young people, a participatory and practice-oriented method is used. CF has called it the Changemethod. The Changemethod has been developed in close collaboration with children and young people. It greatly considers that children have the right to express their opinion, in ways that feel safe for them. The method consists of process descriptions and tools that help many diverse children and young people to participate. It's based closely on a participatory method used in action research, called Participatory Learning and Action (PLA).

Safety is most important

The experiences and advice are collected directly from children and young people in sessions or interviews. The sessions are organised with an emphasis on ensuring that they are experienced as safely as possible for the children and young people who participate. The adults who facilitate are, among other things, trained by children to meet children and young people with openness and human warmth. This is based on the main findings from children about what adults have to be like, in order for children to be able to tell honestly.

Experiences and advice are summarised

Experiences and advice from the sessions are documented in transcripts and other written and visual documentation. The data is summarised and systematised. No links are made to theory. Experiences and advice that are repeated by many children and young people in many places in the country, become the main answers. We call this knowledge directly from children.

Children and young people present

The knowledge from children is presented in reports, films, podcasts, books and online. Participants in the qualitative surveys can also be invited, as pros, in communication and professional development. The pros present knowledge directly from children to politicians, national authorities, professionals and students.

Selected publications



Talking safely in school
Advice from 1962 children on what has to be done for children to be able to tell what's most important



Safe in class
Tools for a safe and good learning environment in grade 1.-10.



Angry on the outside, hurting on the inside
Advice from 101 children on how to meet children and young people who are angry and use violence



Ask us, and you'll find out
Advice from 201 children on how to decide extra help in ways that feel helpful



Life skills
Tools for the class LIFE SKILLS, a talking-class where children and young people get to practice putting feelings into words

remember
that we do
the best
we can