

# Can Teachers Have Tattoos? What Does the Law Say?

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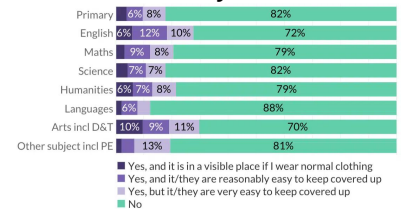


For years, teachers have refrained from having tattoos or kept them covered during work hours because they are perceived by many to be unprofessional. In reality, tattooing has been practised since Neolithic times as a spiritual and religious act. Today, many people still choose their tattoos for sentimental, symbolic, spiritual or religious reasons. So why is a teacher with visible tattoos so offensive to some people? And can teachers have tattoos on display, or are school leaders legally allowed to demand their staff cover up?

### Teachers with Tattoos: What's the Problem?

From fellow teaching staff and school leaders, to parents and carers of school children, visible tattoos on a teacher can cause significant upset and judgement. In a recent Teacher Tapp

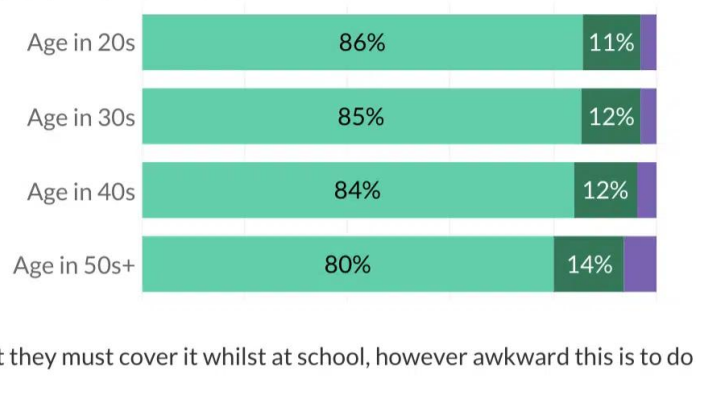
survey, 18% of primary school teachers polled admitted to having tattoos but only 4% said



So why is body art such a contentious issue? For some, it may simply be a case of snobbery and an assumption that tattoos signify a person of a lower class and culture. Other people may have a more justifiable objection to body art – perhaps the tattoo in question is explicit and not appropriate for young people to see. There also may well be a generational factor at play. Tattoos are now commonplace, with many celebrities, such as David Beckham, openly sporting extravagant designs. Students are used to seeing tattoos on people they respect and admire and may be less likely to make negative judgements about an individual based on their body art. However, for parents who grew up when tattoos were less commonplace, body art on professionals is a newer concept and possibly harder to understand and accept. Amongst teaching staff, there seems to be little difference in attitudes to visible tattoos between the age groups. A Teacher Tapp survey showed only 2% fewer teachers in their 40s felt that an individual with a visible tattoo on their hand should be allowed to become a

**In your opinion, should somebody who has a visible tattoo on their hand be allowed to become a teacher?**

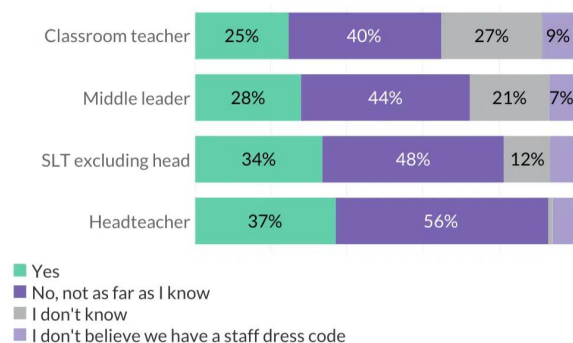
they had a tattoo which is visible wh



## What Does the Law Say?

Under the [Equality Act 2010](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/154/section/109), employers are not allowed to discriminate against staff based on certain protected characteristics, which include age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion and belief, sex, and sexual orientation. Apart from religious markings, body art is not a protected characteristic under the act. This means that school leaders – and all employers – are allowed to make hiring decisions based on the presence of visible tattoos. They are also perfectly within their rights to implement a dress code that stipulates that tattoos must be covered up on school premises. In certain circumstances, employers could legally dismiss a member of staff for not covering visible tattoos, especially if they are deemed to be upsetting students and their families. However, these decisions should be based on the law and the needs of the organisation, not

Does your staff dress code include guidance on staff tattoos?



A dress code policy should be clearly communicated to staff – how can you abide by rules you don't know exist? Our recent survey revealed that few teachers outside the senior leadership team had any idea if tattoos were mentioned in the school's dress code. 27% of classroom teachers responded, "I don't know" when asked, "Does your staff dress code include guidance on staff tattoos?" – in contrast to 0% of head teachers and only 12% of the SLT responding likewise.

## Could Tattoos on Teachers Lead to Positive Learning Experiences?

In today's world of gang violence, terrorist acts and fighting between cultures, it is more important than ever that schools teach children to understand and value differences as much as how to read or add numbers together. Young people spend a significant part of their lives at school. It is where they are educated in all aspects of life – and academic studies are just one part of their learning experience. If teachers are told to cover up tattoos and conform to a certain stereotype of what a teacher should look like, what message are we sending to students – that everybody must look the same? Children must also learn to behave differently in certain settings. For most adults, how we behave at home is different from how we behave at work. This is an essential social skill – one that we must consistently practice to succeed in life. Part of a teacher's role is encouraging their pupils to respect differences and cultivate that ability to react appropriately in different circumstances. When it comes to teacher's opinions about whether tattoos should be hidden at work, opinion is divided – and there is no right answer. That being said, there are other [potential positives](#) of allowing teaching staff to display their tattoos with pride. Body art often has a meaning and can be a great discussion starter. A religious tattoo could trigger a debate on a topic that may otherwise be hard to broach. The simple fact that teachers have tattoos is a topic for debate in itself – as this blog demonstrates! The law is clear that employers can make decisions about staffing based on tattoos and they are perfectly within their rights to ask teachers to keep body art covered at work. In reality, many schools and school leaders will adopt a flexible, common-sense approach that takes into consideration the needs of its staff, pupils and their families. If a teacher has an explicit tattoo that is not appropriate for a school setting, they will likely be asked to cover it, while a visible yet discreet and "inoffensive" tattoo may be allowed. Likewise, most teachers will make their own judgements about what is professional and appropriate for their workplace. Can teachers have tattoos? Absolutely. Do they need to keep them covered at school? The law says that's entirely up to the school leaders.

Interested in more insights from teachers? [Download the Teacher Tapp app](#) for daily surveys on what's happening in schools across the country.