

Special points of interest:

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- Missing a day here or there may not seem like a problem. But, absences add up quickly. And, these missed school days can have a big impact on your child's learning and overall health.
- Children who are chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade are less likely to read on grade level by the third grade.
- When our children feel fear, anxiety, or anger, they need our help to learn how to cope.



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Keeping Kids Physically and Emotionally Healthy to Maintain School Attendance

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Chronic Absenteeism: What Parents Need to Know

How many days has your child been absent from school over the past 4 weeks? Was it just one sick day or two? What about the day he left early for the dentist? Or the days you took off to extend a vacation? It's hard to always keep track. Missing a day here or there may not seem like a problem. But, absences add up quickly. And, these missed school days can have a big impact on your child's learning and overall health.

Missing two days a month—excused or unexcused—can add up to a child being considered chronically absent. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) encourages parents to reduce unnecessary absences, learn about attendance policies where they live, and prioritize getting their kids to school on time, every day.

What is chronic absenteeism?

Chronic absenteeism means missing too much school—for any reason—excused or unexcused. Experts and a growing number of states define chronic absenteeism as missing 10% (or around 18 days) during a school year). Chronic absenteeism affects as many as 6.5 million students nationwide. That's 13% of our total student population! You may think this is just high school students skipping school. But in fact, this problem starts early. At least 10% of kindergarten and first-grade students miss a month or more of the school year. Chronic absenteeism becomes more common in middle school, and about 19% of all high school students are chronically absent.

Students are chronically absent for many reasons. There are some reasons for absenteeism that cannot be avoided. Life happens. Common illness causing high fevers and fatigue happen. But, if your child is missing many days of school, or a few days every single month, it's important to consider the reason for the absenteeism.

A nationwide study found that kids with ADHD, autism, or developmental delays are twice as likely to be chronically absent compared to kids without these conditions. Children with common chronic illnesses, such as asthma and type 1-diabetes, miss more school when they are having more symptoms. Mental health conditions, like anxiety or depression, are common reasons for absences. Up to 5% of children have school-related anxiety and may create reasons why they should not go or outright refuse to attend school. Add it all up, and this creates a lot of empty desks and missed school time.



Don't underestimate the harm of these school absences. Missing just two days a month of school—for any reason— can be a problem for kids in a number of ways. Children who are chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade are less likely to read on grade level by the third grade. For older students, being chronically absent is strongly associated with failing at school—even more than low grades or test scores. When absences add up, these students are more likely to be suspended and **drop out** of high school. Chronic absenteeism is also linked with teen substance use, as well as poor health as adults.

Here are 10 practical tips to getting your child to school on time, every day:

- 1) **Set attendance goals with your child and track your child's attendance on a calendar.** Try offering small rewards for not missing any school, such as a later bedtime on weekends.
- 2) **Help your child get a good night's sleep.** A lack of sleep is associated with lower school achievement starting in middle school, as well as higher numbers of missed school and tardiness. Most younger children need 10-12 hours per night and adolescents (13-18 years of age) need 8-10 hours per night.
- 3) **Prep the night before to streamline your morning.** Lay out your child's clothes. Pack backpacks and lunches. Develop back-up plans for getting to school if something comes up like a missed bus or an early meeting. Have a family member, a neighbor, or another trusted adult on standby to take your child to school should you ever need help.
- 4) **Try to schedule dental or medical appointments before or after school hours.** If children have to miss school for medical appointments, have them return immediately afterward so they do not miss the entire day.
- 5) **Schedule extended trips during school breaks.** This helps your child stay caught up in school learning and sets the expectation for your child to be in school during the school year. Even in elementary school, missing a week of classes can set your child behind on learning.
- 6) **Don't let your child stay home unless he or she is truly sick.** Reasons to keep your child home from school include a temperature greater than 101 degrees, vomiting, diarrhea, a hacking cough, or a toothache. Keep in mind, complaints of frequent stomachaches or headaches can be a sign of anxiety and may not be a reason to stay home.
- 7) **Talk with your child about the reasons why he or she does not want to go to school.** School-related anxiety can lead to school avoidance. Talk to your child about their symptoms and try to get them to talk about any emotional struggles they may be having. If you are concerned about your child's mental health, talk with your pediatrician, your child's teacher, or school counselor.
- 8) **If your child has a chronic health issue such as asthma, allergies, or seizures, talk with your pediatrician about developing a school action plan.** Meet with and get to know the nurse at your child's school. If you need guidance and documentation for an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 Plan, ask for help from your child's school.
- 9) **Follow the rules.** Be sure you know what your school's requirements are for when your child will be absent or late. If we want our children to follow rules, we must lead by example. Cross your t's and dot your i's when it comes to these procedures.
- 10) **Keep track of your child's attendance and investigate reasons when the days missed add up.** Look into why your child is absent. Think about your child's mood. Has she been spending time by herself lately? Is his chronic condition starting to be more problematic? Is this school refusal? You know your child best.

Helping Children Cope with “Big Feelings”

When our children cannot self-regulate their emotions, school attendance may suffer. Children can have the same big feelings that we do. The difference for adults, though, is that we have more life experience to know how to deal with difficult emotions. When our children feel fear, anxiety, or anger, they need our help to learn how to cope. Here are some tips:

Name the feeling(s)

Help your child figure out which feeling they are having/were having. Putting a name to it can help validate their experience. Having a feelings poster or reading children’s books about feelings can be helpful to identify their own feeling.

Normalize the feeling(s)

It can be confusing for a child who’s feelings take over and lead to behaviors they may not usually have. Explain that all people have these feelings sometimes, and we all have to learn how to manage them.

Talk about the brain

Our brains and our bodies are connected, and our brains send out signals when we experience certain “big feelings.” Explain that we have a part of our brain (thinking brain) that’s in charge of making decisions, thinking things through, and managing our emotions. Explain that another part of our brain (emotional brain) is in charge of important things like breathing, digesting food, and holds onto big feelings like anger or anxiety; this part of our brain also reacts to any threats, and can make us feel like we need to run (flight), fight back, or freeze. Sometimes this part of our brain overreacts, and we need to try strategies to calm it down.

(For a full script of the brain conversation, visit <https://imperfectfamilies.com/what-anxious-and-angry-kids-need-to-know-about-their-brain/>).



Healthy Children Learn Better



Upcoming Events:

January 17, 2020:

Shortened Day

January 20, 2020:

School Closed—Martin Luther King Day

Next Issue:

February 3, 2020