

for
**Early Childhood
Educators**

Why Attendance Matters



The Attendance Imperative: Attending school regularly is essential to students gaining the academic and social skills they need to succeed. Reducing absenteeism is a simple, cost-effective, but often overlooked strategy for improving academic performance. Starting as early as preschool and kindergarten, chronic absence—missing 10 percent of the academic year—can leave third graders unable to read proficiently, sixth graders struggling with coursework and high school students off track for graduation. Chronic absence is especially problematic among students living in poverty who are most likely to have poor attendance over multiple years and least likely to have the resources to make up for the lost time in the classroom. In some communities, chronic absence affects more than one out of four children.

Unfortunately, many schools and communities don't realize the extent of the problem because districts don't look at all the right data. They're paying attention to how many students show up every day and how many skip school, but not how many miss so much school in excused and unexcused absences that they're at risk academically.

The good news is chronic absence can be significantly reduced when schools, families and community partners work together to monitor data, nurture a habit of regular attendance and address hurdles that keep children from getting to school every day such as lack of access to health care, unhealthy environmental conditions, unreliable transportation, housing instability or the lack of safe paths to school.

Why should early childhood educators care? Promoting attendance is in keeping with the goal of partnering with families to prepare children for success in kindergarten and beyond. Consider the following:

- **Regular attendance ensures children benefit from participating in quality early education:** Research shows that students who miss too many days of preschool have weaker literacy and numeracy skills entering kindergarten. This is especially true for children from low-income families, who gain the most when they attend but lose out more when they are absent.
- **A habit of attendance is a school readiness skill:** An important role of early education programs is helping children to develop important social-emotional skills, including forming a habit of attendance. Children who are chronically absent in preschool are far more likely to be chronically absent in later grades.
- **Good attendance is a measure of parent engagement:** Attendance improves when families understand what their children are learning while they are in a program as well as feel welcome and supported. Early childhood educators can use attendance to assess how well they are doing with engaging and supporting families and their children.

How early education providers can make a difference:

Motivate regular attendance

- **Engage parents:** Use parent orientation materials, meetings and daily interactions with parents to make sure parents understand what children are learning in your program and convey what they miss if they are



absent. Encourage families to share and exchange effective strategies for getting children up, ready, and out the door in a timely manner every day.

- **Engage children in enriching activities:** Make sure your program offers the kind of fun learning environments that make young children want to come every day.
- **Use age appropriate strategies to convey attendance matters:** Stress attendance by, for example, rewarding young children with stickers and praise when they show up on time. Let the children track their own attendance by marking off if they show up on time every day on simple, fun, worksheets as they enter the classroom.

Offer extra support to families with chronically absent children

- **Reach out to families facing attendance challenges:** Rather than remove children who don't attend regularly, reach out to families to find out why and offer as much support as possible. Connect them to available community resources and develop [action plans](#) outlining steps that everyone will take to support better attendance.
- **Partner with community resources to address common attendance challenges:** If multiple families face the same challenge, for example, the lack of a safe path to school, asthma or lack of access to health or dental care, identify a community partner who can help organize a programmatic response.

Develop systems for supporting improved attendance

- **Improve the accuracy of attendance records:** Ensure staff record attendance every day and take the time to periodically review data to monitor for accuracy.
- **Produce reports on chronic absence:** If possible, begin creating reports that detect which and how many children are missing 10% or more of preschool in order to identify how much poor attendance is a challenge and identify families in need of extra assistance.
- **Engage program managers in developing site based strategies for improving attendance:** Ensure program managers have an opportunity to review data on chronic absence and are encouraged to work with their staff to develop strategies for improving attendance that reflect their own program strengths and realities.
- **Partner with schools and districts:** Develop partnerships with nearby schools to address common barriers to attendance and jointly convey the importance of regular attendance to families. As appropriate, work together to improve attendance for families facing especially challenging barriers to getting to school and preschool.
- **Partner with local schools:** Support a successful transition into kindergarten by providing families with registration information, conducting a site visit to the local schools, or by hosting a kindergarten evening with to talk about what happens in kindergarten, what children will be learning and why coming to school every day is paramount to their success.

Tackling chronic absence is a smart strategy for early education providers working to build good habits and skills among our youngest students. Attendance is a simple, common sense metric easily understood by parents. And it's a winnable strategy.





Why Attendance Matters in Early Education Programs

Study after study confirms the value of high-quality early childhood experience for developing the cognitive, social and emotional skills that children need to succeed in kindergarten. But unless children attend these programs on a regular basis, they are not likely to benefit fully. And unless we pay attention to attendance even among young children, we are missing the opportunity to use early educational experiences to build an essential skill: showing up on time, every day to school and eventually work.

Too often, attendance in the early years is an afterthought. Instructors don't always believe they can or should do anything about absences because preschool, and in most states, kindergarten are not mandatory. Likewise, too few parents understand the value of regular attendance in preschool or kindergarten for laying a foundation for their children's future success. But a growing body of research and practitioner experience shows that paying attention to attendance for our youngest children is essential.

Why does attendance matter for young students?

✓ **Absenteeism starts early.**

One in 10 kindergarten and first grade students misses 10 percent of the school year in excused and unexcused absences; in some cities, the number is as high as one in four.ⁱ The limited data on preschool attendance show even greater rates of chronic absenteeism.

✓ **Early attendance can predict attendance in the later years.**

Good attendance is a habit that children need to form. If they don't do so early, attendance suffers later. In Chicago, 80 percent of the children who were chronically absent in kindergarten had been chronically absent in preK.ⁱⁱ An Oregon study found that children who were chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade had the lowest levels of attendance five years later.ⁱⁱⁱ

✓ **Early attendance can help children learn to read.**

Literacy instruction is frontloaded in the early grades, so if children miss too much school, they lag behind classmates in reading. Tulsa preschoolers who attended regularly showed more growth in literacy skills than those who were frequently absent.^{iv} A study of 640 children in California found only 17 percent of students chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade were reading on grade level by third grade. This compares to 64 percent of those who attended regularly.^v

✓ **Poor children are more likely to be chronically absent and more likely to be affected.**

Given the challenges that poverty can create for getting to school, children from low-income families are four times more likely to be chronically absent.^{vi} Unfortunately, because they are more likely to depend upon school to learn to read, the adverse impact on literacy development is 75 percent greater for a poor child than for a middle class peer.^{vii} For poor children, early chronic absence correlates with the worst achievement levels in fifth grade.

What can schools, early childhood programs, and community partners do?

✓ Pay attention to the data

Track attendance data with an eye on how many students are missing too many days, not just how many show up every day. Look for patterns among students and in times of the week or year. In Montgomery County, Md., preK programs based in elementary schools share their data with the principals and are part of the “data chat” on attendance.

✓ Use the data to identify and reach out to at-risk children and their families

Once you know which children are chronically absent, reach out to the families to tell them you are concerned about the situation and offer support. Find out if they face any barriers to attendance, such as illness, transportation problems or housing instability. In Tulsa, preschool providers create Attendance Improvement Action Plans for children with too many absences, part of an effort that has cut the proportion of chronically absent preschoolers by 25 percent. This is an ideal opportunity for collaborating with community agencies that have the staff and resources to support families.

✓ Educate parents about what children learn in the early years and why attendance matters

Make sure parents understand what children are learning in early education programs and kindergarten. Help them understand the need for time in that high-quality learning experience and recognize their responsibility for ensuring regular attendance. Head Start programs in Lee County, Fla., ask parents to sign attendance contracts and use home visits to get to know more about the home environment. Abriendo Puertas builds attendance into games, pledge cards and handouts for its comprehensive 10-week curriculum aimed at increasing the ability of Latino parents to promote the well-being of their young children.

✓ Make children part of the solution

Use incentives and games to encourage children to show up. The Perfectly Punctual Campaign is working with Head Start programs in Baltimore to pilot a strategy that encourages children to fill out attendance cards and honors them weekly for perfect, on-time attendance. In Lee County, Fla., children sing at circle time to those students who are absent and receive monthly certificates.

✓ Increase access to health resources

Especially among young children, health concerns lead to absences. Asthma accounts for an estimated 12.3 million absences nationally each year. Dental problems, colds, even head lice and separation anxiety can also keep children home. At the same time, offering access to health resources can make a significant dent. In Santa Clara, Calif., attendance was higher for low-income children who had health insurance.^{viii} A nurse practitioner in North Carolina found she could make a measurable difference by calling parents to connect them to health resources and, perhaps more importantly, educate them about why they should avoid absences unless absolutely necessary.^{ix}

ⁱ Chang, Hedy; Romero, Mariajose, Present, Engaged and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades, National Center for Children in Poverty: NY: NY, September 2008.

ⁱⁱ Allensworth, E. M., & Easton, J. Q. (2007). What Matters for Staying On-track and Graduating in Chicago Public High Schools: A Close Look at Course Grades, Failures, and Attendance in the Freshman Year, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, Consortium on Chicago School Research. Retrieved November 8, 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ EcoNorthwest, Chronic Absence in Oregon. PowerPoint. February 2, 2012.

^{iv} Community Action Project Tulsa County. Attendance Works Peer Learning Network Webinar. February 27, 2012.

^v Applied Survey Research, Attendance in Early Elementary Grades: Association with Student Characteristics, School Readiness and Third Grade Outcomes. May 2011.

^{vi} Chang & Romero

^{vii} Ready, Douglas D., Socioeconomic Disadvantage, School Attendance, and Early Cognitive Development, The Differential Effects of School Exposure, Sociology of Education, October 2010.

^{viii} Hower & Trenholm, Santa Clara County Children's Health Initiative Improves Children's Health, Mathematica Policy Research. March 2007.

^{ix} Kerr, Jill et al. Does Contact by a Family Nurse Practitioner Decrease Early School Absence? Sage Publishing 2012.



**HELP YOUR CHILD SUCCEED IN SCHOOL:
Build the Habit of Good Attendance Early**
School Success goes hand in hand with good attendance!

DID YOU KNOW?

- Regular attendance is critical in the development of the skills needed for children to succeed in kindergarten.
- Children (even infants/toddlers) can fall behind if they miss just a day or two days every few weeks.
- Missing 10 percent (on or about 18 days) can make it harder to learn to read.
- Absences can affect the whole classroom if the teacher has to help children catch up.
- Being late to school may lead to poor attendance.

Attending school regularly helps children feel better about school—and themselves. Start building this habit now so they learn right away that going to school on time, every day is important. Good attendance will help children do well in high school, college, and at work.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

WHEN DO ABSENCES BECOME A PROBLEM?

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Set a regular bed time and morning routine.• Lay out clothes and pack backpacks the night before.• Don't let your child stay home unless she is truly sick. Keep in mind complaints of stomach ache or headache can be a sign of anxiety and not a reason to stay home.• If your child seems anxious about going to school, talk to teachers, school counselors, or other parents for advice on how to make them feel comfortable and excited about learning.• Develop back-up plans for getting to school if something comes up. Call on a family member, neighbor, or another parent. Discuss your challenges with your Center Manager and Family Support Advocate.• Avoid medical appointments and extended trips when school is in session. | <p>CHRONIC ABSENCE = 18 or more days</p> <p>WARNING SIGNS = 10 to 17 days</p> <p>SATISFACTORY = 9 or fewer absences</p> |
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