



# School Attendance, Truancy & 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 (<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhsr/nhsr118.pdf>) found that kids with ADHD (/English/health-issues/conditions/adhd/Pages/Your-Child-At-School.aspx), 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 (/English/health-issues/conditions/allergies-asthma/Pages/Asthma-Management-at-School.aspx) and type 1 diabetes (/English/health-issues/conditions/chronic/Pages/Diabetes-Mellitus-Type-1-Diabetes.aspx), miss more school when they are having more symptoms.
- Mental health conditions, like anxiety or depression (/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Childhood-Depression-What-Parents-Can-Do-To-Help.aspx), are common reasons for absences.

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- Up to 5% of children have school-related anxiety (</English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/School-Avoidance.aspx>) 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 (</English/ages-stages/teen/school/Pages/When-a-Teen-Wants-to-Drop-Out.aspx>) of high school. Chronic absenteeism is also linked with teen substance use, as well as poor health as adults.

## What makes a student "truant"?

While chronic absenteeism measures total absences, including excused and unexcused, truancy measures only unexcused absences. The number of unexcused absences it takes for a student to be considered a "truant" differs by state. **Read your school district policies and state codes on attendance.** You need to stay well-informed on how many absences are allowed, and what count as excused and unexcused absences.

**Take any warning you receive seriously. Why? The consequences of too many absences are serious not only for students, but also for parents!** Schools handle minor truancy with warning letters, parent-teacher conferences, and other means. However, in some states, parents can be fined when their kids miss too much school.

## 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. Check how many hours your child needs here (</English/healthy-living/sleep/Pages/Healthy-Sleep-Habits-How-Many-Hours-Does-Your-Child-Need.aspx>).
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. *See School Avoidance: Tips for Concerned Parents* (</English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/School-Avoidance.aspx>).
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 have with issues like bullying (</English/safety-prevention/at-play/Pages/Bullies-Beat-Down-Self-Esteem.aspx>), fear of failure (</English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Understanding-Childhood-Fears-and-Anxieties.aspx>), or actual physical harm (</English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/What-to-Know-about-Child-Abuse.aspx>). If you are concerned about your child's mental health, talk with your pediatrician, your child's teacher, or school counselor.

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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 (<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/137/6/e20160852>). If you need guidance and documentation for an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 Plan, ask for your pediatrician's help accessing services at school (</English/tips-tools/ask-the-pediatrician/Pages/My-child-is-receiving-special-education-in-school.aspx>).
9. **Follow the rules.** Be sure you know what your school's requirements are for when your child will be absent or late. If you are supposed to call, email, or provide a doctor's note after a certain number of days out, then do it. 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.

## Additional Information & Resources

- Is Your Preschooler Ready for Kindergarten? (</english/ages-stages/preschool/pages/is-your-child-ready-for-school.aspx>)
- 5 Secrets to a Smarter Baby: School Readiness Can Start Now (</english/ages-stages/baby/pages/the-secret-to-a-smarter-baby.aspx>)
- AttendanceWorks.org (<http://www.attendanceworks.org/>)
- HealthySchoolsCampaign.org (<https://healthyschoolscampaign.org/>)
- Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (<https://www.ed.gov/essa>) - a new law where states measure school performance in terms of both traditional academic metrics and at least one measure of "school quality and student success" that goes beyond academic outcomes. One of the options for a non-academic measure is chronic absenteeism; about ¾ states have submitted ESSA plans using chronic absenteeism as their non-academic measure. Learn more here. (<https://www.future-ed.org/whos-in-chronic-absenteeism-under-the-every-student-succeeds-act/>)

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