

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.