

School Attendance Makes a Difference

Your high expectations make a positive difference in your child's academic success. Another basic yet important way to make a difference in your child's education is to make sure he or she attends school regularly and on time.



Children don't do as well in school when they frequently miss part of or an entire school day. You can help your child succeed in school by understanding how schools define absences. You can also help by learning ways to support your child's school attendance.

Unexcused Absences

An *unexcused absence* is when children miss school for reasons not accepted by the school. Some reasons for an unexcused absence are:

- Staying home to take care of or visit with family members
- Missing the school bus
- Working at a job
- Sleeping too late

Schools have different definitions for unexcused absences. Look in your school's handbook to find its policy on unexcused absences.

Late Arrival

Schools expect children to be in school by the official start time. They also expect children to stay until the day ends. Being tardy means coming late to school after the school day officially starts. Schools have different definitions and policies for tardiness. But, all schools count multiple late arrivals toward an unexcused absence. Look in your school's handbook to find its policy on late arrivals.

Excused Absences

Schools know children have valid reasons to be absent. This is called an *excused absence*. Parents must tell the school when their child is going to be absent. This makes it an excused absence. Some reasons for an excused absence are:

- Child's illness or injury
- Family emergency
- Death of a family member
- Doctor or dental appointments that cannot be scheduled before or after school hours
- Religious holidays

Schools have different definitions for excused absences. Look in your school's handbook to find its policy on excused absences.

When your child is absent with a valid reason:

- Contact the school office or the attendance line on the day of the absence. Contact the school as early as possible. Give your child's name, grade level, and reason for the absence. Tell the school when you think your child will return.
- Contact your child's classroom teacher for homework assignments. Make arrangements to pick up needed books or supplies if possible. You can also have a sibling or friend bring your child's homework home.

When your child returns to school:

- Write a note that explains your child's absence.

Attendance and Truancy

Minnesota has laws on school attendance and truancy. *Truancy* means being absent from school without permission or a valid reason. A child can become truant if he or she has multiple unexcused absences.

Children in Minnesota must regularly attend school from age 7 until age 16. A child ages 16 to 17 may legally withdraw from or drop out of school. Their parents must meet with school personnel. Parents must then give written permission for the child to be legally withdrawn also. A child is considered truant if these rules are not met.

Schools must keep a record of the number of times a child is truant. The number of times a child is truant has different definitions. Different truancy definitions result in different consequences for the truancy.



Continuing Truancy

Continuing truancy is defined differently in elementary school than in middle and high school.

- *Elementary school:* absent three or more days without an excused absence
- *Middle school, junior high school, high school:* absent for one or more class periods on three or more days in the school year without an excused absence

Schools must notify parents immediately when a child becomes truant multiple times. A school's attendance policy may also apply to summer school. Check with your child's school to learn about its summer attendance policy if your child is required to attend summer school.

Habitual Truancy

Habitual truancy is defined differently in elementary school than in middle and high school.

- *Elementary school:* absent seven or more days without an excused absence
- *Middle school, junior high school, or high school:* absent for one or more class periods on seven or more days in the school year without an excused absence

Minnesota law says that habitual truancy can have different consequences.

What are the possible consequences of habitual truancy?

- The child and parents may be required to go to an attendance review board meeting. The meeting may be with the school or a community mediation program.
- The child may have to go to juvenile court.
- The child's driver's license may be taken away, delayed, or restricted.
- Parents may be found guilty of a misdemeanor.
- Parents may be charged with educational neglect or face a Child In Need of Protective Services petition, which says a child is in need of protection or services.

What happens when the authorities find students who are truant?

A police or probation officer may take the child to:

- the child's home. Parents are responsible for the care of their child.
- the child's school. The school is responsible for the care of the child.
- a truancy service center.

A student who is habitually truant may need to go to juvenile court. Authorities may believe the child needs protection and services.

What Can Parents Do about Truancy?

If you are concerned about your child's school attendance, you can do the following:

Talk to the school staff

Teachers, principals, counselors, or social workers may be able to help you understand why your child is truant. Share concerns about difficulties with peer groups or home as well.

Ask what help is available

The school or district may offer extra programs and services, such as tutoring or alternative settings. These services may help your child with attendance.

Speak with professionals

Community programs, school social workers, family counselors, and therapists can all offer insight and support.

If your child has an IEP (Individualized Education Program) for special education, discuss the potential of having an altered school day with your child's IEP team.

Connect with family members, friends, and significant adults

Talk to other adults you trust. They may have information or ideas that can help. Significant adults in your child's life, such as coaches or faith leaders, may also act as an additional support for your child.

Watch your child's attendance

- Request your child's attendance records from your child's school.
- Ask the school to contact you immediately if your child is absent without a valid excuse.
- Check in with your child's teachers regularly to see how your child is doing.

Strategies for Parents to Encourage School Attendance

1. Let your child know that your family values education. Tell your child you believe he or she can make academic progress.
2. Insist your child goes to school on time every day.
3. Talk with your child about school. Listen to your child's concerns. Ask how you can help.
4. Support your child's efforts in completing and turning in homework, studying, and working on academic skills and responsibilities.
5. Help your child discover personal interests and strengths. Connect those interests and strengths to what your child is doing in school.
6. Discuss concerns with your child's teacher. Work together on a plan to support your child's school success.
7. Ask the school for additional assessments or special services that may help your child. Request referrals to community programs, mediation, or counseling services. These services can help your child with attendance.
8. Get to know your child's friends and their families.



About PACER Center

PACER Center is a parent center for families of children and young adults with and without disabilities. It is based on a parents-helping-parents philosophy.

PACER Center provides workshops, publications, and other resources to help families make decisions about education, employment, health, vocational training, and other services for their child or young adult, and can help solve school-related problems.

**Do you have more questions about truancy?
Call PACER Center at 952-838-9000**

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Truancy

**A Family Guide
to Understanding and
Seeking Help for Truancy**

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