

TALKING TO PARENTS ABOUT SCHOOL ATTENDANCE DURING THE MEDICAL VISIT

School attendance is very important for your patients' overall health. As trusted members of the community, you can create a culture of good attendance that supports the work of families and schools. Parents all want what is best for their kids, but may not understand the importance of regular attendance. The *medical home* can support students' success in the early years to lay a foundation for high school graduation, college, and beyond.

What is Chronic Absenteeism?

Chronic Absenteeism is defined as missing 10% or more of school days (just 2-3 days per month) or 18 or more days per year. Often parents and schools are unaware of when missed school days add up. Both excused and unexcused absences contribute to chronic absenteeism and student learning.

In NYC, more than **20%** of students are chronically absent.¹ This rate may be higher in your community.

Why is Chronic Absenteeism important?

SHORT TERM: Students who are chronically absent in preschool, kindergarten and first grade are less likely to be at the appropriate reading level by 3rd grade and four times more likely to dropout of high school than proficient readers. Students who are chronically absent for any year in high school are 7 times less likely to graduate from high school.

LONG TERM: Adults with fewer years of education have a shorter life expectancy, are more likely to participate in unhealthy social behaviors like smoking, and have higher rates of metabolic disorders like diabetes and obesity. College graduates live on average 9 years longer than people who have not completed high school. Graduates have healthier work environments, better health insurance, higher incomes, and more benefits.²

What Can You Do?

Well child visits are a great time for early intervention for chronic absenteeism. Emphasizing good attendance in Pre-K and kindergarten is especially important!

1. Ask about the number of days that your patient has missed school that month as a routine part of the medical examination. Remember 2 days = chronically absent!
2. If the patient is chronically absent or at risk of chronic absenteeism, explore why this is happening with the parent or caregiver and develop a plan to address these concerns.

¹ New York City Department of Education - <https://tools.nycenet.edu/dashboard/>

² <https://www.rwjf.org/en/library/research/2016/09/the-relationship-between-school-attendance-and-health.html>

Link between Attendance and Health Barriers to Learning

- **Mental Health and Behavior:** Mental Health and behavior issues often disrupt focus and attention in the classroom. Sometimes, the fear of being bullied or low self-esteem may keep students home from school. Conditions like ADHD may cause students to miss school or be late because of lack of sleep. Additionally, students who are exposed to traumatic events are at risk of missing more days of school.
- **Uncontrolled Asthma:** students with uncontrolled asthma are often kept home for several days at a time when they experience symptoms. According to the CDC (2013), 13.8 million school days are missed due to asthma.³ Symptoms can contribute to severe illness that leads to hospitalization. Parents can often be fearsome at the first signs of asthma and keep kids home in cold weather to prevent something worse coming on.
- **Vision Problems:** students with uncorrected vision or vision deficiencies have trouble reading, seeing the board, and may get frequent headaches. These students are at increased risk of losing focus in the classroom and becoming disengaged with schools as they grow older. Vision problems can also contribute to social and emotional behaviors, contributing to additional days of schools missed.
- **Dental Pain:** Dental caries (tooth decay) are the single most common chronic childhood disease.⁴ Students with untreated dental issues can miss several days of school when the issue starts to cause pain. Untreated infections can escalate, requiring consultation visits, surgery, and recovery, keeping kids out of school even longer.
- **Hunger:** Students who are exposed to food insecurity and malnutrition are at risk of missing more days of school. These students may have more physical health issues, causing them to become sick more often. Additionally, food insecurity could cause or exacerbate mental health issues, leading to more missed days.
- **Hearing Problems:** Students who have trouble hearing may have trouble building language skills. Hearing problems may cause children to be unfocused in the classroom. Studies have shown that of elementary school-aged children with hearing loss, 37% had to repeat at least one grade.⁵
- **Lead Exposure:** Lead Exposure can have a severe impact on a child's cognitive development. Students who over a long period of time may not be able to focus in the classroom and may have behavioral issues. Long-term lead exposure has been linked to greater absenteeism and higher rates of high school dropout.⁶

³ https://www.cdc.gov/asthma/asthma_stats/missing_days.htm

⁴ <http://www.mychildrensteeth.org/assets/2/7/ECCstats.pdf>

⁵ Bess, F.H., Dodd-Murphy, J., & Parker, R.A. (1998). Children with minimal sensorineural hearing loss: Prevalence, educational performance, and functional status. *Ear and Hearing*, 19, 339-354.

⁶ AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS Committee on Environmental Health. Lead Exposure in Children: Prevention, Detection, and Management. *Pediatrics* 2005;116;1036. Available at: <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/116/4/1036.full.html>