

The Problem of School Absenteeism: What You Need to Know

By [Kate Kelly](#)

At a Glance

- Kids are considered chronically absent when they miss 10 percent of days in a school year for any reason. That equals 18 days of school.
- Many parents aren't aware of how many days their child is missing or the impact that can have on school success.
- Kids with learning and attention issues are more likely to be chronically absent from school.

Most people agree that kids need to regularly attend school in order to succeed. Yet absenteeism, or being chronically absent, is a growing problem in the United States. And in many ways, it's a hidden one.

Most schools report their overall daily attendance figures. But they don't keep track of how many students are chronically absent or missing more than 10 percent of school for any reason. If a child misses 18 or more days in a school year, he's considered to be chronically absent.

Some school absences are unavoidable. Kids get sick, or there may be a family emergency or other important reason for missing school. But parents may not always realize how much school their child is missing. Missing two days each month doesn't always seem like a lot. But that's all it takes for a child to be considered chronically absent.

Chronic absences keep kids from getting the consistent instruction they need to build on basic skills. For kids with learning and attention issues, there's something else to consider: Frequent absences mean missed opportunities to get help.

Learn more about the problem of school absenteeism.

How Many Kids Frequently Miss School

It's hard to know exactly how many U.S. students are chronically absent. That's because most public schools only report average daily attendance. They count the total number of kids at school each day, but not the number of kids who are frequently absent.

That's beginning to change, however. More states are beginning to look at, and report on, absenteeism. And the data is painting a troubling picture. At least 10 percent of students in the U.S. are chronically absent. Among students in [special education](#), which includes many kids with learning and attention issues, that number is significantly higher.

The Role of Parents in School Absenteeism

Parents often aren't aware of how much school their child is missing over the course of the school year. A missed day here and there may not seem like a big deal compared to missing several days in a row. But a few days every month can quickly add up to a lot of missed school in a year.

Parents may think that if their child does the class work at home, it doesn't matter that he missed the instruction. They may also believe that regular attendance isn't as crucial in the earlier grades. Because of that, parents may be less hesitant to keep their child home from school.

Low-income students are more likely to miss school for other reasons. These include health care issues, unstable housing and transportation problems.

Why Kids Frequently Want to Miss School

Kids may also miss school because they don't want to go. [Being bullied](#) is one common reason kids seek to avoid school. Academic struggles is another. If a child feels like he's constantly failing, that he's different or not as smart as his peers, he may try to get out of going to school.

A negative school environment can also be a factor. It's hard enough for a child who's struggling to [stay motivated](#) to attend school. But if he doesn't feel understood, or is [constantly being disciplined](#), he may start to resist going to school.

These are common experiences for kids with learning and attention issues. That may explain why kids in special education are more likely to be chronically absent.

The Impact of Missing School

Missing school in the early grades can have a snowball effect. It sets kids up to fall behind in the [fundamental reading skills](#) they need in order to move on to more complicated work.

Research shows how great the impact can be. A study in California looked at kids who were chronically absent in both kindergarten and first grade. By the end of third grade, only one in six of them were proficient readers. But of the kids who missed less than 5 percent of school, two-thirds were proficient.

A Rhode Island study looked at kids who were chronically absent in kindergarten. In later grades, they scored 20 percent lower than their peers in reading and math.

For some kids, frequent absences can become a long-term habit. Research shows that kids who are allowed to miss school when they're young are more likely to skip school when they're older. And that can lead to other consequences.

Being chronically absent affects high school graduation rates and the chances for success in college. In a Rhode Island study only 11 percent of high school students with chronic absences made it to their second year of college. That's compared to 51 percent of students who didn't miss that much school.

Kids with learning and attention issues are even more vulnerable to the impact of chronic absences. It can be hard enough for them to master the lessons in school with the support of the teacher or aide. Trying to do it at home can make the work even harder.

Plus, each day of learning builds on the previous day. When kids miss a few days in a row, it can be hard to follow subsequent lessons. And when kids aren't in school, they're missing the opportunities to be identified for [intervention](#) and extra supports.

What Parents Can Do

It's nearly impossible to avoid *all* absences. And missing a few days during the year shouldn't have a lasting impact on your child's learning and progress. Still, it's easy for those days to add up. That's why it's important to keep track of how many days your child is actually missing.

There are also things you can do to help your child want to go to school, or at least not try to avoid it. If your child is struggling and you don't know why, consider [having him evaluated](#). If he has an [IEP](#), make sure all of his [supports and services](#) are in place.

Get tips on [how to respond to your child when he says he doesn't want to go to school](#). And learn more about [the problem of bullying](#) and [how to protect your child from bullying](#).

Key Takeaways

- Completing work at home doesn't make up for missing the instruction and interaction with the teacher.
- When kids with learning and attention issues are absent from school, they may miss opportunities to be identified for intervention and extra services.
- It's important to keep track of how many school days your child misses.

[About the Author](#)

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