



# PLANNING FOR STUDENT ABSENCES

# Proactive Planning for Necessary Absences

School attendance plays a huge role in your child's school success! Children who frequently miss school are often at risk for academic failure and poor social-emotional functioning due to missing out on important instructions and/or having disconnected peer relationships. It is understood that children with complex health needs will require necessary medical appointments that may interfere with the school day. It is also commonly understood that these students may be kept home if they are exhibiting even mild signs of illness and/or if classroom peers are exhibiting signs of illness. When absences are unavoidable, you can help your student continue to thrive by having some proactive plans in place.

## Excused absences

An excused absence is a valid reason for a child to miss school. They generally include illness or injury requiring treatment or rest, or medical, dental, counseling appointments that cannot be scheduled before or after school. The definition of an excused absence may differ by school district. Please refer to your school or district handbook to understand the specific criteria for your child's school. It is important to note that some schools have a limit on parent-excused absences. In this case, be prepared to submit a verification letter from your child's health care provider. Always request that this letter be kept on file.

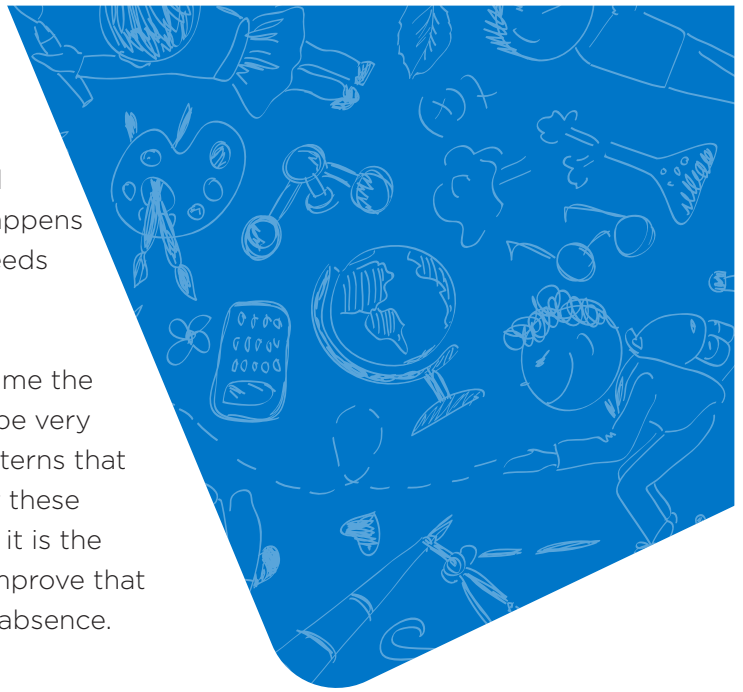
When an absence is necessary and unavoidable...

- Begin the school year with open communication about your child's needs with an explanation that they may have necessary, possibly extended, absences.
- Clearly express your interest in setting up a proactive plan for your child to receive assignments and materials before their absence, or to catch up on lessons and schoolwork immediately following their absence (this could include picking up daily work/having work delivered by a classmate, assigning a classroom note taker, having lessons recorded with an audio or audio-visual device, utilizing a tutor, etc.).
- Promptly communicate when the child will be missing school by calling the main office or appropriate contact number and stating your child's name, grade, homeroom teacher, the reason for their absence, and when you anticipate your child will return to school (remember to submit proper documentation when necessary).
- In the event of frequent or extended absences, check in with your child's teacher on a regular basis to ensure they are keeping up with their peers, and request that the teacher let you know immediately if they have any concerns about your child's ability to do so.



## Unexcused absences

In some cases there is a very fine line between a valid excuse and an unexcused absence or truancy. This happens often with older students who have chronic health needs but who tend to use this as an excuse to get out of a variety of school requirements (e.g. testing, reports, presentations or assignments). Most schools will assume the best and excuse these absences, but parents should be very proactive in looking for any common themes and patterns that might be an underlying (and non-medical) reason for these absences. In the case of several unexcused absences, it is the school's job to establish policies and procedures to improve that student's attendance, regardless of the nature of the absence.



## Effects of chronic absences

Chronic school absences — although often excused for students with complex health needs — undeniably affect the ability to be successful in school. Chronic absenteeism is when a student misses ten percent or more of the school year (roughly 15-18 days per year). Many parents/guardians believe that schools should focus on the reasons why school was missed, however the effects of absenteeism are based on how much school is missed, regardless of the reason why.

There is a huge misconception that when a child misses a lesson, he or she will be able to catch up simply by reading the assigned chapter at home, reviewing the notes that were shared, or completing the assigned worksheet. There are several reasons why that doesn't work.

**Academics:** In most cases, core curriculum is built upon progression of mastery. When a student misses these lessons, they are not only missing the specific content and material, but they are also missing peer questions, examples, explanations, guided practice, class discussions, etc. It is in the engagement with the material and in the connections that are made that true learning and retention generally happens.

**Social-emotional functioning:** School attendance is very closely linked to a child's feeling of belonging by being part of a classroom, team, or group. It is also directly linked to a child's self-confidence and overall feeling of educational achievement. Students who frequently miss school tend to require more specialized services in order to support their academic needs, and they often report a greater feeling of alienation from their peers and teachers.

**Behavior:** Behavioral disruptions are a classic sign of a child who is struggling to keep up with the class. Often these disruptions are due to the child losing attention or motivation because they are not able to make sense of the lesson. In many cases the child does not mean to be disruptive, but has simply lost focus on the assigned task and turned their attention to something else. In other cases, disruptive behavior is simply a way to seek attention (particularly from peers). For a child who has not yet made strong relationships with their peers, it is understandable that they'd want to attract attention.