

Tips for Working with Your Child's School When Chronic Conditions Cause Absences

School attendance plays an important role in academic success. Children often fall behind in school if 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 supporting your child's school attendance as much as possible.

Excused absence

Schools know children have valid reasons to miss school. This is called an excused absence. Some reasons for an excused absence in Minnesota schools are:

- Child's illness or injury, including conditions that require ongoing treatment for a mental health diagnosis
- Health care, including medical, dental, orthodontic, or counseling appointments that cannot be scheduled before or after school hours

If you expect that your child will have multiple absences for medical appointments or chronic illness, it helps to be proactive and plan ahead as much as possible. Early and frequent communication with the school can prevent problems later on. Here are some ways to start the conversation:

- Reach out to the school nurse. This person can become an advocate and work with you to make sure the absences are excused without problems.
- Talk to teachers about developing a plan so your child can catch up on school work. Some ideas include planning for catch-up lessons, having homework delivered to your home by a fellow student, or arranging to use notes from other students. Whenever possible, plan ahead so that your child can have materials before the absence.
- Look in your school's handbook to find its policy on excused absences, and follow the policy or an alternate written plan you've developed with the school.

Schools have different definitions for excused absences, and these are included in the school district's attendance policy. In general, when your child is absent for a medical reason, contact the school office or attendance line as early as possible on the day of the absence. Give your child's name, grade level, and reason for the absence. Tell the school when you think your child will return. When your child returns to school, write a note that explains your child's absence.

Some schools have a limit on parent-excused absences. If your child exceeds that amount, you may be asked to send a health provider's note verifying the absence. If you have worked out a written plan with the school early in the year, you may not need to provide a note, but make sure you include in the plan information about when a health care provider's note is required.

Many health care providers will write a general letter to the school at the beginning of the school year, when your child changes schools, or at first diagnosis. This letter can be kept on file at school and included in the

Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Section 504 plan¹, if your child has an IEP or Section 504 plan. The letter could explain:

- The diagnosis in general, and what impacts it may have at school
- How often the child will be having doctor's office visits or may be absent for illness
- What accommodations may be helpful

Talk to your child's health care provider so that a standard letter can be sent at the beginning of school.

If your child has an IEP for special education or a Section 504 plan, you can be proactive with educators about absences by discussing:

- The potential of having a modified school day
- The possibility of assigning someone, such as the school nurse, to monitor absences
- The educational impact of the absences and working together to develop a written plan to address that impact
- Accommodations for managing make-up work
- Writing IEP goals and objectives so older children and youth will build skills to keep track of missed lessons and assignments by themselves

If your child does not qualify for an IEP or a Section 504 plan, work with your school to develop an Individual Health Plan to support your child with special health care needs that require frequent absences. The tips above may help too.

Unexcused absence

In some cases, it can be difficult for schools to tell the difference between students who are absent with a valid excuse and students who are truant. This is especially true for frequent absences due to chronic mental and physical health conditions. Additionally, schools have different policies and procedures for recording absences, and sometimes absences with a valid excuse under Minnesota law are still recorded as unexcused.

If a student has multiple unexcused absences, the school is required to try to improve that student's attendance. Sometimes those efforts include notification to parents that the child is truant. A child can become truant under Minnesota law if they have multiple absences that the school does not record as excused. It only takes three unexcused absences in a year for truancy procedures to be instituted. Schools can also consider disenrollment for 15 consecutive days of absences.

Truancy and other school issues can be avoided, however, if you know your school's policies and plan ahead. If your child must often miss school because of a medical condition, being proactive and working with the school can help support your child at school.

¹ A 504 plan is a documented plan the school and parents develop together for providing reasonable accommodations and other services so a child with a disability or special health care need may participate fully in the school setting.