



Mental Health and School Avoidance:

What parents need to know

School attendance plays an important role in a child's academic success. For some children and teens with anxiety disorders, depression, or other mental health diagnoses, school can become so overwhelming that they may frequently struggle to get to school, stay at school, or be engaged in classroom activities. Children and teens whose mental health needs are not addressed, who do not have appropriate coping mechanisms to manage their feelings, or are not getting support may begin to avoid school. As a result, they may struggle with making educational progress and have difficulties building relationships with peers.

Behavior, Mental Health, and School Avoidance

Parents and educators may see a wide variety in the behaviors used to avoid school. Some of the warning signs of school avoidance that parents may notice include:

- Expressing concerns about what to expect at school or about being away from a parent
- Difficulties starting or finishing school work
- Little or no socialization with peers
- Seeking adult attention frequently

School avoidance behaviors may increase if the child's needs continue to be unmet. Some more severe school avoidance behaviors may include:

- Complaints of feeling ill or becoming sick
- Crying or sadness
- Becoming easily frustrated or quick to anger
- Refusing to leave home, get on the bus, or walk into the school building

These school avoidant behaviors may also impact school attendance. Some children or teens may frequently arrive late to school, go home early, periodically miss full days of school, or be absent for several days or weeks at a time.

It is important for parents and teachers to address school avoidance early because the longer that a child is away from school or the classroom, the more difficult it becomes for them to return successfully.

Here are some things parents can do when a child begins to show school avoidant behaviors:

- Make an appointment with a physician to rule out any illnesses if your child is experiencing physical symptoms
- Talk with your child about the reasons they do not want to go to school. If they can share their reasons, validate their feelings and talk about ways to resolve stressful situations
- Insist your child attend school every day, even if it is for a limited amount of time
- Discuss your child's school avoidance with school staff and ask for support and assistance
- Talk with your child's physician and/or mental health care professional about your concerns and work with them to develop a treatment plan

Minnesota Laws: School Absences and Truancy

Parents should be familiar with school attendance and Minnesota truancy laws if their child's ability to get to school or stay at school is impacted by their mental health diagnosis. All children between the ages of 7 and 17 are required

to regularly attend school, and schools must track student attendance. When a child misses school, it is recorded as either an excused or unexcused absence. Each school district has different definitions of excused absences, but some reasons for an excused absence may include:

- Illness or injury, including conditions that require ongoing treatment for a mental health diagnosis
- Appointments with a physician or mental health professional that cannot be scheduled before or after school
- Family emergencies, including the death or serious illness of an immediate family member

Under Minnesota law, schools may require parents to provide a note from a physician or licensed mental health professional stating that a child cannot attend school. Some school district's attendance policies may limit the number of days that a student can miss without a doctor's note, and may record additional absences as unexcused until that documentation is received. Multiple late arrivals to school or class may also count towards an unexcused absence. In Minnesota, schools are required to drop a student from their attendance roll and consider the student withdrawn from school if their child misses 15 or more consecutive days of school, whether those absences are considered excused or unexcused.

A child may be considered truant if the school records multiple unexcused absences. Schools are required by Minnesota law to notify parents that their child is truant after three unexcused absences in a single school year and must make an effort to resolve the attendance problems. After seven unexcused absences, schools may report the student as truant with the county where the child lives. Parents should check the school's attendance policies and find out if there is a policy in place to notify parents of truancy in a timely way.

Children or teens reported for truancy and their parents may be referred to a school- or community-based truancy diversion program. Older children may be required to go to juvenile court or may have their driver's license taken away, delayed, or restricted. When a child or teen is repeatedly reported for truancy or referred to a truancy diversion program, parents may also be required to appear in court and may be charged with educational neglect or be served with a Child in Need of Protective Services petition.

The truancy system often does not address the underlying needs of a child who is school avoidant. Parents should request to meet with school staff as soon as they notice their child is struggling to get to school to create a plan that supports attendance by addressing the barriers to attending school regularly.

Here are some things parents can do when a child has multiple absences from school:

- Learn and understand the attendance policies for your child's school
- Keep a record of your child's absences, late arrivals, and early departures from school
- Request a copy of your child's attendance records and make sure they are accurate. Contact the school to find out how to have inaccurate attendance records corrected
- Talk to your child's healthcare provider about writing a letter to the school documenting your child's diagnosis and how it impacts their ability to attend school
- Request a meeting with school staff to work on developing a plan to support attendance
- Consider requesting an evaluation to see if your child is eligible for special education services or a 504 plan
- If your child has an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or a 504 plan, request a team meeting to discuss making changes to their educational plan
- If your child has been absent for more than 15 days and has been removed from the school's attendance roll, visit your child's school to re-enroll them, request a meeting as soon as possible to discuss a plan to return your child to school

For a child to experience school success, they need to attend as regularly as possible. When school avoidance impacts attendance, parents will want to work with school staff to try to successfully return their child to school or the classroom.

For more information about how to support your child or youth with mental health, emotional or behavioral needs go to <https://www.PACER.org/cmh>.

See PACER's companion handout, PHP-c269b, Mental Health and School Avoidance: Tips to developing an educational plan for your child.