



Attendance Is a Health Indicator

Why should health professionals treat school attendance as a vital sign?

THREE MOVES FOR THIS WEEK



Ask at every visit

Cost: \$0

How many school days has your child missed this month?



Write return notes well

Cost: \$0

Give clear return-to-school guidance, not open-ended rest.



Connect to the nurse

Cost: \$0

With consent, coordinate with the school nurse.

CLINICIAN QUESTIONS

1. How many school days has your child missed lately?
2. What usually happens on those days?
3. Is anything about school making your child feel unwell?
4. May I connect with the school nurse to help?

CLASSIFY BEFORE YOU CONSEQUENCE

Refusal

Somatic complaints on school mornings may signal anxiety.

Withdrawal

Caregiver illness keeps children home to help.

Avoidance

Untreated conditions make school feel unsafe.

Chronic medical

Documented conditions need a plan, not a letter.

AVOID THESE MISSTEPS

- ✗ Long open-ended excuse notes without a return plan
- ✗ Assuming all illness absence is unavoidable
- ✗ Sharing information without consent

HOW YOU WILL KNOW IT WORKS

Leading: Visits that ask about school days missed

Lagging: Health-related chronic absence

Evidence: Allison, Attisha & AAP Council on School Health (2019), Pediatrics 143(2); Attendance as a Vital Sign: Kaiser Permanente, Johns Hopkins Center for School Health, Attendance Works (Aug 2026); OECD report on long-term student absence (causes reported); CDC NCHS Data Brief No. 498 (2024): health-related chronic absence, 2022.



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