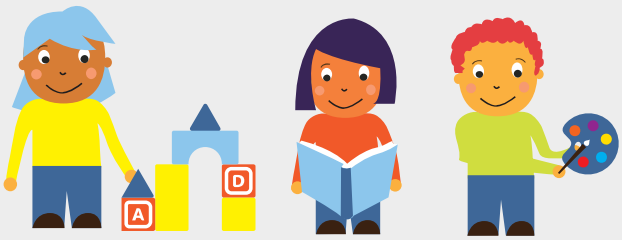
EARLY AND OFTEN

Showing Up in Preschool Matters 2.0

February 2018



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Educators, policymakers, researchers and families agree: Early education is vital to a child's academic success. A high-quality preschool program can build early literacy and math skills, as well as develop the social and emotional foundation children need to persist in school. But preschoolers – whether in Head Start, public pre-kindergarten or in a private program – only receive the full effect of these benefits if they show up for class regularly.

Research shows that preschoolers who miss 10 percent or more of the school year (or just 2 days per month) – in excused or unexcused absences – arrive at kindergarten with lower levels of school readiness. Chronic absence – especially if it persists from preschool into the early grades – is a proven early warning that children are off track for reading proficiently by the end of third grade, a pivotal point for children's success in school.

Absenteeism affects all children but its impact intensifies among children whose families lack the resources to make up for lost time. Read what research tells us in this summary.

Many, if not most, of the missed days in preschool are excused absences called in by parents. Some are clearly unavoidable: Young children get sick, especially when they first start school. Other absences occur because families face real barriers, whether it's a chronic health problem, a sudden move to a new home or transportation challenges such as a broken-down car.

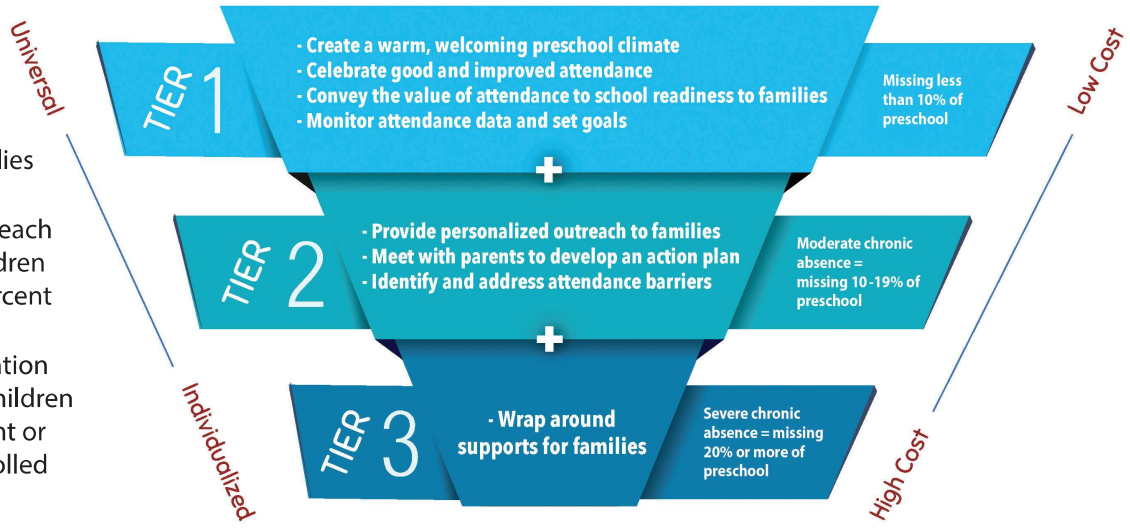
Our strategies recognize that getting children to school every day on time is contingent on engaging families, and helping them understand the importance of regular attendance and how missing too many days impacts their child's success.

We've found that a three-tiered system of intervention can make addressing chronic absence more manageable:

Tier 1 – Awareness and prevention for all children and families all year round

Tier 2 – Personalized outreach to families of children missing 10-19 percent of days enrolled

Tier 3 – Targeted intervention with families of children missing 20 percent or more of days enrolled



Throughout this toolkit you'll find strategies and resources to help you address each tier, from prevention and awareness to early intervention activities that help educators address challenges faced by families with students missing 10 percent or more of the school year.



Engaging Families

Especially when children are young, engaging their families is critical to promoting good attendance. Warm welcomes, solid information about classroom activities, constructive problem-solving and recognition are the core strategies for engaging families. Positive family practices that promote good attendance developed during the preschool years can lay a foundation for what happens in kindergarten and beyond.

Start with Tier 1, universal strategies that support prevention and awareness by engaging families. Click on the linked titles for details, tools and templates for 4 key strategies.

1. **Create a welcoming environment.** Nothing beats a smile as a welcome mat. Greeting children and parents at the door with a smile and a word of welcome at the start of the day, and a similar farewell at dismissal is powerful.

2. **Help families keep students healthy.** Illness plays a significant role in young children's attendance. Helping families understand when to send a child to preschool or keep them home and manage chronic conditions can empower families.

3. **Use large gatherings to introduce the importance of preschool attendance and monitoring absences.** School orientations, back-to-school nights, parent workshops and other family events provide important opportunities for directors and teachers to raise awareness and engage families in dialogue and activities about why attendance is important.

4. **Celebrate to promote attendance improvements.** Recognize good and improved attendance on a predictable routine. Acknowledge the child more frequently, and honor the parents or caregivers.

Targeted strategies for when absences reach 10 percent or more

Tiers 2 and 3 personalize and intensify the use of information, strategies and materials provided in Tier 1. Educators, family outreach and health staff, in partnership with parents and caregivers, problem-solve around issues that impede good attendance with individual students. Click on the linked titles for details.

1. **Tier 2 - Reaching out to families when absences reach 10 -19 percent**
   Use Tier 2 strategies to support, nurture and encourage good attendance when absences begin to add up. The earlier the intervention, the more likely a positive outcome.

2. **Tier 3 - Engaging families when children's absence is 20 percent or greater.** Preschool teachers and family outreach staff are not expected to address the complex needs that arise on their own. Instead, help vulnerable students and their families tap into resources and supports offered in the community that address attendance barriers.



Who Can Make a Difference?

Children: When they get excited about coming to their preschool every day and convey that enthusiasm to their parents and caregivers.

Families: When they understand that preschool absences matter, feel welcome and respected, understand the value of their children's attendance and feel secure sharing challenges with program staff as needed to overcome barriers.

Staff: When they create a positive first school experience and build attendance messaging, tracking, problem-solving and celebrating into preschool routines.

Community: When partners reinforce positive attendance messaging and provide resources to help families overcome barriers.



Engaging Children

Engaging young children in tracking their own attendance motivates children and helps make attendance important to families. Parents are motivated when their actions make their children happy.

Perfectly Punctual, a program specifically designed for preschool settings, provides strategies and materials free of charge. Download these bilingual materials or use the ideas to develop your own themes. For young children, a mascot can be an important ally.

- » Perfectly Punctual User's Manual
- » Punctual Pete mascot

The universal activities in this section fall under Tier 1: Each has elements to make children aware of the importance of strong attendance, with the goal of preventing or reducing chronic absence. Here are four effective strategies for engaging children. Click on each heading for more information.

1. Greet children and families warmly by name every day.

The power of a smile is amazing. Be sure every child and family starts and ends each day with warm greetings from the teacher and staff.

2. Establish classroom routines that emphasize attendance and notice absences.

Building new habits requires visibility, repetition, recognition, data – and especially for young children and their families – a dose of playfulness.

3. Engage children in tracking their own attendance using daily scorecards.

Children become invested in their attendance when they track it themselves daily and bring the scorecard home at the end of each week. Perfectly Punctual has developed scorecards to help with tracking weekly attendance. You can download them or create your own.

4. Recognize children and families for good and improved attendance on special occasions.

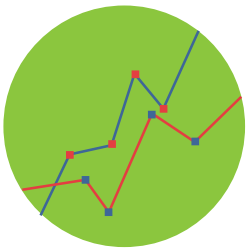
Consider holding the events just before or after holidays to ensure families don't extend vacations.

Perfectly Punctual and Punctual Pete

Perfectly Punctual offers a variety of materials including scorecards, button and sticker designs, and a mascot. The Leaders Guide gives specific directions and best practices information.







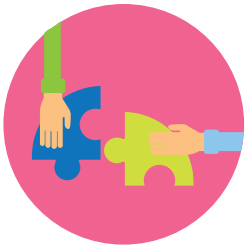
Using Attendance Tiers and Data

While it is helpful to encourage families and children to track absences, preschool programs and their staff can use the data they maintain on attendance to identify when students are starting to miss too much school so they can intervene as early as possible.

What works to secure and then regularly review data varies depending upon the program or center's capacity to use data. Access to and policies on preschool attendance data vary widely. Learn about free data tools available through Attendance Works and which information management systems now offer chronic absence reports.

Use attendance data to determine how many children in your program fall into each of the three tiers of intervention to understand what needs to be put in place to support improved attendance.

The most important thing about the data is not how you get it, but how you use it. Segmenting the absence data into tiers allows you to see where your biggest challenges are and where the opportunities for celebration lie. Once you have a sense of the overall situation, you may want to analyze the information further to see if there are concentrations in certain classrooms, or in demographic groupings or neighborhood clusters that offer clues to problem-solving.



Organizing a Team

Improving Attendance is not one person's job, but the cumulative effect of everyone's efforts. Carrying out this work is best supported by a team of staff who work together to develop a plan for building a culture of attendance, intervening with individual students, maintaining systems for monitoring data and reaching out to families

Step 1: Create an attendance team that can monitor attendance, develop a plan and take action. Make sure to establish a schedule for regular meetings.

Step 2: Orient the team to research chronic absence and best practices for reducing absenteeism.

Step 3: As a team, assess strengths and weakness in current practice and then create a plan for taking action that includes activities for engaging families in supporting attendance throughout the year.

Step 4: Engage teachers, social workers and parents in a conversation about the barriers and challenges that families face in your program. Identify community partners who can help with issues beyond the schoolyard.

Preschools can develop a culture that values attendance by:

- Welcoming and engaging children and families as they enter school.
- Providing high visibility for attendance through messaging and engagement.
- Recognizing children and families weekly, monthly and at special events.
- Noticing when absences, particularly those for health reason, are adding up, and addressing the issue in a supportive manner.

Attendance Works

Attendance Works is a national organization dedicated to improving the policy, practice and research around attendance. Its website offers materials, studies, and success stories about reducing chronic absence. Sign up to receive updates at: http://www.attendanceworks.org/
This document is just a summary, for the full toolkit with links to many more resources, visit: http://www.attendanceworks.org/tools/for-early-care-providers/early-education-toolkit/

Production of Early and Often was made possible by the generous support of The Henry and Marilyn Taub Foundation, The Kenneth Rainin Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation