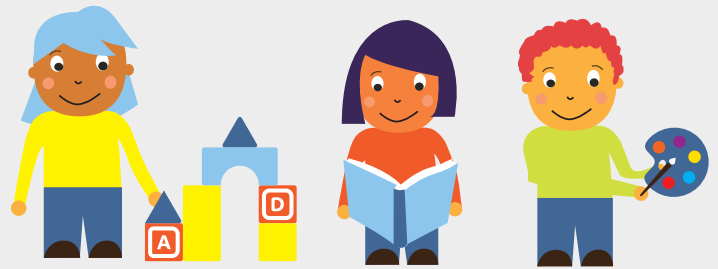


# EARLY AND OFTEN

## Showing Up in Preschool Matters

March 2016



Preschool is the ideal time to introduce children and families to the importance of consistent on-time attendance and to encourage strong attendance habits. Educators, policymakers, researchers and families agree: Early education is vital to a child's 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.

It turns out that attendance matters as early as preschool in high quality programs. [Research shows](#) that preschoolers who miss 10 percent or more of the school year – in excused or unexcused absences – arrive at kindergarten with lower levels of school readiness. Especially, if they are chronically absent for more than one year, they are less likely to read proficiently by the end of third grade, and more likely to be retained.

Absenteeism affects all children but its impact intensifies among children whose families lack the resources to make up for lost time. Read this [research summary](#) for more detail.

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 a broken down car.

Surveys and focus groups reveal that despite an overall appreciation of attendance and its relationship to academic achievement, two misperceptions consistently surface.

### MISPERCEPTION: Absences only matter if they occur several days in a row.

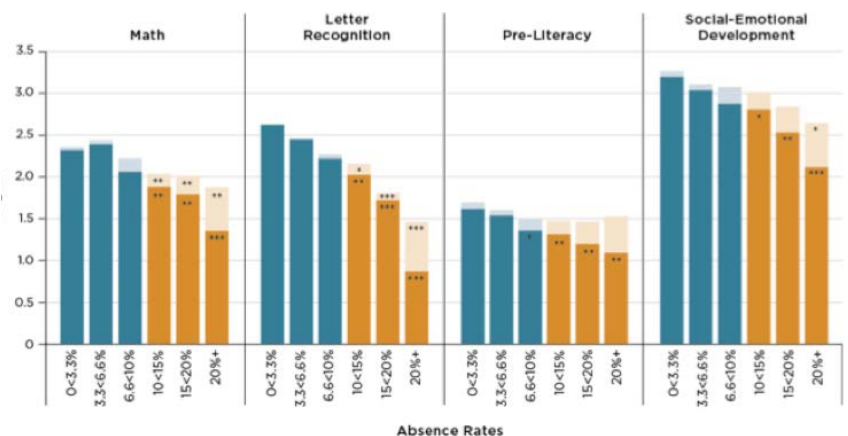
Few recognize the cumulative effect of a day here and a day there of absence, but research tells us the impact is profound.

### MISPERCEPTION: Absences only matter from first grade forward.

There is growing evidence that preschool education is important to school readiness and to reading on grade level by grade 3, a pivot in children's success in school.

The goal of the Early and Often toolkit is to help high quality preschools engage families so that they get their children to attend preschool every day possible. Programs are also more likely to be successful when they use attendance data and create a team to plan and implement the work.

### Students with lower preschool attendance have lower kindergarten readiness scores on all subtests





## Engaging Families

Especially when children are young, engaging their families is critical to promoting good attendance. Warm welcomes, solid information about classroom activities and 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.

Here are six key steps for engaging families. Click on the linked titles for details, tools and templates.

### 1. Welcome, involve and support families.

A warm welcome every day in a clean, well-kept facility invites families to participate in their children's education. Preschools can also help families connect to other families and to community resources that can help.

### 2. Help families keep students healthy.

Given the role that illness plays in absenteeism, preschool staff members have an important role in connecting families to health services, ensuring plans are in place for managing chronic conditions and helping families understand when a student should or should not stay home sick.

### 3. Use large gatherings to introduce the importance of preschool attendance and the need to monitor absences.

Preschool 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 about why attendance is important.

### 4. Use one-on-one conversations to reinforce the importance of attendance and identify particular challenges.

These can include phone calls, letters and parent-teacher conferences. Home visits are good for establishing relationships, but don't dwell on attendance expectations in the initial home visit unless asked.

### 5. Continue messaging and recognition events all year long.

Attendance messaging doesn't stop after the first month of preschool. Too many times we've seen classrooms start strong and then absences start to add up as the holidays arrive and winter illnesses set in. Develop monthly themes for messaging and recognize students and families for progress throughout the year.

### 6. Prepare students and families for kindergarten transition.

A child's transition into kindergarten sets the tone for her educational experience for many years to come. Preschool programs can help prepare children and families for this important step and use the process to raise awareness about attendance.

## Who Can Make a Difference?

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

**Families:** When they understand that preschool absences matter, feel welcome and respected, value their children's attendance and seek help 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 messaging and provide resources to help families overcome barriers to attendance.



## Engaging Children

Parents are motivated when their actions make their children happy. Engaging preschool children in tracking their own attendance motivates children and helps make attendance important to families. When getting to class on time every day becomes important to the children, parents respond.

Perfectly Punctual, a program specifically designed for the early education setting, has aligned with Attendance Works to provide strategies and materials free of charge. Feel free to download these materials or use the ideas to develop your own themes. For young children, a mascot can be a very important ally.

- » [Perfectly Punctual User's Manual](#)
- » [Punctual Pete mascot](#)

**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 preschoolers and their families – a dose of playfulness.

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

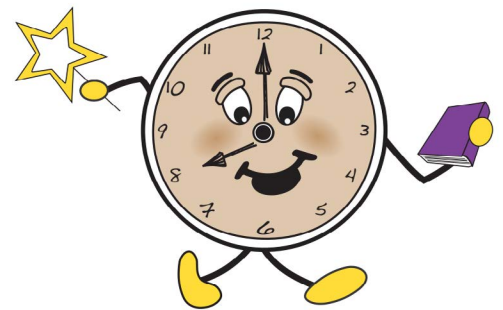
Children become invested in their attendance when they track it themselves daily and bring the scorecard home at the end of each week. Perfectly Punctual has developed scorecards to help with tracking weekly attendance. You can download them for free or create your own.

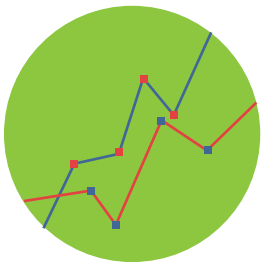
### 4. Recognize children and families for good and improved attendance on special occasions.

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. The Punctual Pete mascot can be a good friend to children as they learn how to improve their attendance.



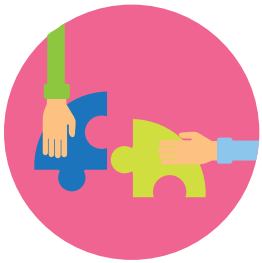


## Using Attendance Data

While it is helpful to encourage families and children to track absences, early education programs and their staff ideally can use the data they maintain on attendance to identify when students are starting to miss too much preschool 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 sophistication around data. Access to and policy on preschool attendance data vary widely.

The most important thing about the data is not how you get it, but how you use it. Review the data at least once a month and compare months. When you spot problem patterns, look for further data. Is there any information about the reasons for the absences? Are any particular classrooms or groups of children most affected? Has anyone reached out to families to express concern and see what help might be needed? Remember the habits formed in preschool can set a long-term trajectory. Help make it a positive one that leads to success in elementary school and beyond!



## Organizing a Team

Attendance is the result of 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 have worked together to develop a plan for intervening with students, including systems for monitoring data and reaching out to families.

**Step 1:** Create an attendance team that can review attendance and develop a plan that builds on strengths, identifies challenges and sets priorities for messaging and action. Make sure to establish a schedule for regular meetings.

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

**Step 3:** Create a working plan that engages students and families in the importance of preschool attendance. Ask the team to assess any weaknesses in your current program. Determine a set of procedures for recording attendance and a plan for how your program will reach out to families. This should include the form of communication that works best: phone calls, meetings, etc. As you develop your plan, limit your immediate objectives to three, so that you can focus on them.

**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 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/>

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