



Advancing Student Success By Reducing Chronic Absence

# A Relational Framework for Identifying the Root Cause of Your Mentee's Absences

## A Step-By-Step Guide

This framework provides a set of principles for establishing a relationship with your mentee's family over time. The principles can help you to organize a caring conversation with a family about their child's attendance using a sequential approach to the conversation.

As a Success Mentor of an elementary school student it is essential to build a trusting relationship with your mentee's parent/guardian to fully support your mentee's improved attendance. This relationship with your mentee's parent will help you and the parents learn how to work as partners and best support their child. While your initial conversations with your mentee's parent may serve as a way for you to get to know each other, integrating the topic of attendance into your conversations is a great way to educate parents on its importance and discuss it in a non-threatening way.

The following framework can help guide your interaction with your mentee's parents/guardians. Regardless of the topics covered, the suggestions for questions to ask and issues to cover are by no means exhaustive. As you get to know your mentee's family, it's important to note that starting by discussing a student's attendance problem won't work. Your first priority as you learn about and get to know your mentee and his or her family should be just that – to get to know them. Establish yourself as a caring adult in the young person's life who is there to help them achieve their goals for their child – including being at school. Youth and their parents should understand that you are there to support the full picture of their child's success, part of which is checking in with them regularly and showing them that their presence at school matters. The suggestions related specifically to attendance are marked in a blue box.

### 1. Learn

Learn something about your student's family. After introducing yourself to your mentee's parents/guardians, ask them what their vision is for their child's future. What things do they want their child to accomplish in life? What things do they want their child to accomplish this year? What is their child most interested in? What should you know as their child's Success Mentor that will help their child succeed in school?

### 2. Share

Share the positive things you have observed so far about the child. This can be things you have noticed that are academic or social. Share information about the Success Mentor strategy and how you will be checking in with their child regularly to help ensure that the school year is going well. Describe your hope for their child this year.

**Explain that one of your goals is helping all the students with whom you are working to acquire a good habit of attendance to ensure that they benefit from the learning opportunities in the classroom. Make sure parents are aware of any activities you are planning to acknowledge good attendance.**

### 3. Inform

Be specific when you inform the parents/guardians about their child's positive developments with respect to attendance and academics. Parents need to know that you are sincere and that you have taken the time to think about their child. For example, have you noticed that your mentee has made a real commitment to getting to school on time or is more interested in being in school every day? Has your mentee joined an afterschool club or engaged in an enrichment activity that is helping him become more interested in coming to school?

Review your mentee's attendance data with parents. Prior to meeting with your mentee's parents/guardians, review the mentee's attendance data in order to determine how you want to have that conversation. Here are three possible scenarios:

- 1. Satisfactory Attendance:** In this case, a student has missed less than one day a month or less than nine days during the school year. Congratulate the parents and the student for their persistence and acknowledge that their attendance is an important step toward academic success.
- 2. At-Risk Attendance:** In this situation a student has missed 5-9% of the school year (more than one day each month). Let the parents know that you are very concerned about attendance since it is easy for absences to add up. If possible, offer concrete examples of what a child might have missed in the classroom due to their absence.
- 3. Chronic Absence:** This is the situation if a student has missed 10% or more of school (two or more days a month). If a child has been chronically absent, let the parents know that their child has missed so many days of school that he/she is academically at risk. If possible, offer concrete examples of what a child might have missed in the classroom due to their absence.

When you talk about the issue of attendance, remember that parents may not be aware of the importance of regular attendance in the early grades and the impact it has on their child's learning as early as pre-kindergarten and kindergarten. Share a copy of the parent flier (available in multiple languages) and be ready to walk through the key points. It is also important to avoid any statements that could be interpreted as passing judgment. Show sincere care and concern for the child and family first – express a genuine desire to know and understand what's going on – and then present the information you have about what's been missed in the context of the child and family's stated goals. Remember – youth, parents and families won't value the information you share unless they feel that you truly care for and respect them, so prioritize the trust and respect-building process as you get to know the family before addressing attendance issues directly. Be specific with parents about what their child is missing when they don't make it to school. For example, if a student frequently is absent on Fridays, inform parents of the lessons and activities that their child is consistently missing.

**Remember to encourage students and families to reach for their hopes and dreams. Reinforce the idea that regular school attendance enables students to succeed.**

### 4. Discuss

Talk with parents/guardians about the challenges they face when supporting their child and point out the strengths they can build upon and use with their student. Make sure the parents are informed about the strategies and approaches they can use at home and the resources available to them if they would like additional help.

**How can parents stay connected?** Let the parents know how to keep track of their child's progress. Discuss how they can get in touch with you if there is a question or concern and when they should expect to hear back. Are there ways to find out how their child is doing on a regular basis (e.g. progress reports, notes home)? Does this particular family need more consistent contact?

**If a child has been chronically absent**, be prepared to spend some time finding out what might be making it difficult for the student to get to school and what supports might make it easier for the family to get the child to school. You might ask a colleague, such as an attendance liaison or school social worker, to join in one or more of these talks, and to help identify supports for the family, especially if a child has been missing a significant number of days.

**What makes it hard for parents to get their child to school every day?** What can they do to address these issues? Listen to parents and try to get a clear understanding of the barriers they face. Try to begin your response by highlighting a strength, or something positive you heard about them. For example, if a parent is struggling to get their child to wake up on time even with an alarm clock, point out that it's great that they have an alarm clock. Then offer suggestions for how they can manage these issues. If their child is sick often, recommend that they still come to school unless they have a fever, and promise to call home if the child gets worse throughout the day. You can also involve the school nurse to consult if you are concerned there are more serious, unmanaged health issues that are keeping your mentee out of school. If the parents are having problems getting their child to school on time, work through adjustments they could make in their daily routine. Help parents do the problem-solving that they often don't have time for.

Some families face serious situations and barriers that are beyond the scope of what you as a mentor can help solve, such as community violence, illness in the family, and trauma. Don't avoid having conversations with these families about these serious challenges, and be ready to connect these families to a social worker or other community resource.

## 5. Ask and Arrive at a Plan

Ask the parents/guardians if there is anything you can do to support a partnership between home and school. Ask them if they have additional questions or comments. Let the parents know what you need from them. Don't be afraid to be clear about your expectation that the parents will support their child's regular attendance. Make sure to follow through on your promises to the family.

Consider using the Attendance Works [Student Success Plan](#) to guide a conversation with parents about creating a plan to get their child to school. Before the end of the discussion, review the agreements that have been made. What have you and the mentor agreed to do? What has the parent/guardian agreed to do? Set a timeline to check in. Encourage parent-initiated contact. You should explain what this means and offer suggestions about how to reach you.

## Differentiated Support: Tailoring Relational Family Strategies to Each Student

When it comes to attendance, the conversations you'll have will be very different if the child is missing a couple days every month (chronic absence) versus if the child has severe attendance problems and is missing weeks of school. Even though the challenges and solutions will vary significantly for these different families, always start the conversation in the same way: learn about the hopes and goals of the parent, and share your vision for helping their child succeed. Doing so will help build a relationship of trust, which is vital regardless of the child's situation. When it comes down to reviewing the child's progress and attendance data, congratulate, encourage, and problem-solve as appropriate. For families with particular challenges, it might be helpful to invite a social worker or the school attendance liaison to join the discussions for additional support.

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