

# Letting young children skip school can have long-term consequences

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Curry School Dean Robert Pianta and his colleagues followed 1,300 children from birth through high school, examining trends in school attendance. Credit: University of Virginia

A trip to Disney World. A few days over at Grandma's house (over the

course of a year) to bake cookies. Letting your kid stay home because, well, it suits your schedule better.

And then there are the actual sick days.

At the end of the day, it equates to a lot of time not spent in the classroom and a lot of missed learning.

How many days off are too many for your [child](#)?

For an answer, UVA Today turned to Robert C. Pianta, dean of the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education and Human Development, who, along with fellow researchers, followed 1,300 children from birth through [high school](#), examining trends in [school attendance](#).

**Q. A lot of parents seem to operate under the assumption that missing school days when their children are young really isn't that big of a deal. But the study you were involved with seems to indicate otherwise.**

A. The study indicates that missing [school](#) consistently can have longer-term effects even when any given absence doesn't seem to have any impact. Missing school days can create patterns of how parents and students handle concerns a student may be having at school, or can signal a students' disengagement from the goals of school—that in turn may contribute to some of the negative impacts on achievement and adjustment that we reported in the paper.

**Q. What were the specific findings of the study?**

A. The findings showed primarily that missing 10 or more days of school in a given year and across years can add up in ways that have negative impacts on students' achievement and social adjustment by eighth and ninth grade. In a small number of cases of students who consistently miss more than 10 days of school year after year, this totals up to missing almost a year of school by the time they are in high school.

We also learned that the habits and patterns of school absences form early—that most children who miss a lot of school start doing so early, and it's those early patterns of a greater number of absences that seem most concerning in terms of their negative consequences.

**Q. Is there a general guideline for parents to follow in terms of their children missing school days? How much, in your opinion, is too much?**

A. It can be tricky for parents to handle their child's request to stay home from school or to make a decision about when their child is simply "too sick" to go to school. Importantly, schools have guidelines that can help on some illness questions, and parents should ask at their child's school what those guidelines might be. Typically they involve fever, etc. Clearly if a child is exhibiting any of these signs of illness, then they should stay home.

But short of those signs—and sometimes they are not easy to detect—parents should be firm in sending their child to school; at least to err on the side of encouraging and expecting attendance.

The tougher situations for parents are when a child might say they don't want to attend school because they are bored or don't like it for some, often unspecified reason. Again, parents need to encourage and expect attendance, even in these cases, and then listen for their child's reactions.

Our results suggest that parents might want to make sure these requests don't start a pattern of staying away from school or signal to the child that this is their choice. Rather, parents should see these requests as signals of their child's distress about school and should engage quickly with teachers, school support personnel, school leaders, in working to understand why their child may be feeling this way about school.

Could it be that the work is too boring, or too hard, and the child needs a different academic challenge? Or might it be that the child is being bullied or otherwise victimized and needs support? These can be sensitive and nuanced discussions that require parents and educators to work as a team in the child's best interests, and for parents and educators to listen to the child's perspectives and respond sensitively.

## **Q. How should a parent go about broaching these discussions?**

A. Importantly, in these instances, parents need to convey a sense of safety and security to their child, that whatever the reason, you are here to listen and to understand. This can be trickier as children head into middle school and high school when their own sense of autonomy is really important and they don't want their parents knowing everything or solving their problems.

I always think it's important for parents to connect with teachers, to find someone in the school who knows their son or daughter and who can speak in an informed way about what's going on at school, and to use that information to better understand their child and problem-solve some options—giving their child some control in that process. Listening, actively and with a view to understanding the child's perspective, could not be more important. And when the underlying problem seems serious, working with school authorities directly may be useful.

## **Q. Are there circumstances in which you think it's OK to let your child play hooky?**

A. I really don't think there are too many circumstances in which it's OK for a parent to let a child "play hooky," at least from the conventional understanding of that term as a day off.

I do think that many parents may have opportunities to arrange some sort of outside-of-school experience for their child that can have real value and may require missing a day or so. In those instances it is important for [parents](#) to work with their child's teacher to make sure the child keeps up with school assignments.

Provided by University of Virginia

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