

EXERCISE: TAKING ACTION ON ATTENDANCE: HOW PARENTS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE AT HOME

Time: 20-25 minutes

Purpose:

The purpose of this activity is to help parents see how their choices affect whether their children are in school on time, every day for the entire day (what educators call “time on task”). Time on task matters for a child’s learning and success. Through this activity, parents will know what they can do to support their children in getting to school on time, every day.

STEP A: BUILD KNOWLEDGE (2 minutes)

Use a short PowerPoint presentation, the Attendance Works video or the parent handout to talk about why attendance matters.

Ask: How many of you think that it’s important for your child to have good attendance? (raise hands)

Say: Today, we will take some time to think about how we can help our children get to school every day.

School attendance is essential beginning in kindergarten. Sometimes we don’t think that it is as important as good attendance in the upper grades because kindergarten is not mandatory in many states. But it is important to build a healthy habit of daily school attendance right from the beginning. Did you know:

- » Starting in kindergarten, too many absences can cause some children to fall behind in school.
- » How many absences are too many? Chronic absence is defined as 18 days a year—or just 2 days a month.
- » Missing 10 percent or about 18 days of the school year in kindergarten can lower achievement in 1st grade and, for some students, through 5th grade.
- » Students can still fall behind if they keep missing just a day or two every few weeks.

STEP B: PREPARATION AND ACTIVITY (5 minutes)

Instructions:

The goal is to get to the finish line. Use a photo of a school as the finish line.

Mark a line for the starting point. Make sure there is enough room behind the start line as some participants will move backward rather than forward.

Ask for four (4) volunteers and give each participant one of the four (4) scenarios below. If you have the chance, recruit the volunteers in advance and ask if they feel comfortable reading aloud to the rest of the group. They will each become one of the four children for the activity.

Have participants form a single line standing shoulder to shoulder. Allow space in front and behind the participants to move forward or backward. When participants are lined up and ready, read the script below.

Share with audience:

This is the story of four children (pick four names being mindful of cultural sensitivities). They all started kindergarten last fall and it is now February of their first full year in elementary school.

Listen as each one tells you about themselves and what their parents do—or don't do—to help them get to school every day. (Prompt each one to read clearly and loudly.)

Share with the four volunteers:

I will ask you a series of questions. If your answer is YES, take one step forward. If your answer is NO, take one step back. If you're not sure, don't move forward or backward.

Let's begin!

Ask each participant the following questions:

- » Do your parents help you get to school on time every day?
- » Have your parents established a regular bed time and morning routine?
- » Do your parents schedule doctors' or dentists' appointments during non-school hours?
- » Did your parents make sure you got all your shots before school started?
- » Does your family have a back-up plan for times that they cannot get you to school?
- » Does your family go on vacation only during official school holidays?
- » Have your parents, with the help of school staff, developed a plan to address chronic health conditions like asthma that might make it hard for you to go to school?
- » Do your parents notice when you missed school because you were anxious and complained of a stomach ache so stayed home even though you weren't really ill?
- » Does your family track and monitor how many days of school or preschool you've missed?

STEP C: DIALOGUE (5-10 minutes)

Instructions:

Say: Let's stop now and take a look at where each child ended up and talk about how the choices their parents made affected their child's school attendance.

- » Ask the group to reflect on this question: (You may choose to answer this question together as a large group or ask people to talk in pairs depending on how many participants you have. The point is to help the group identify positive or negative steps parents take.)
- » What did the parents do that resulted in their child taking positive steps forward or taking steps backward?
- » Ask parents who were role playing:
How did you feel when you moved forward or backward? (Be prepared for participants to answer as if they are one of children they are playing or from their own perspective and experience. Either one is ok.)
- » Ask the entire group:
Based on this activity, what are some ideas you have about things you can do as a parent to help your child have better attendance?

Say: The previous activity gives us a clear picture of how different things that a parent can impact – from daily routines, scheduling choices and health issues — have an effect on attendance and school success.

STEP D: PROVIDE ADDITIONAL RESOURCES (5 minutes)

Hand out Attendance Works flyer and review What You Can Do section (You can ask each person to read one bullet point. If someone has already suggested that idea, affirm them for doing so.)

- » Set a regular bedtime and morning routine.
- » Lay out clothes and pack backpacks the night before.
- » Find out what day school starts and make sure your child has the required shots.
- » Introduce your child to her teachers and classmates before school starts to help her transition.
- » Don't let your child stay home unless she is truly sick. Keep in mind complaints of a stomach ache or headache can be a sign of anxiety and not a reason to stay home.
- » If your child seems anxious about going to school, talk to teachers, school counselors, or other parents for advice on how to make her feel comfortable and excited about learning.
- » Develop some backup plans for getting to school if something comes up. Call on a family member, a neighbor or another parent.
- » Avoid medical appointments and extended trips when school is in session.

STEP E: STEPS TO SUCCESS ACTION PLAN (5 MINUTES)

Instructions:

Ask each parent to write an Attendance Action plan, listing at least one step that they will take to help their child succeed in school.

Ask if one or two parents would be willing to share one step they plan to take.

Thank participants and encourage them to put their Action plan up somewhere like the fridge where it will help them remember what they have resolved to do.

Taking Action on Attendance is an adaptation of an exercise called Steps to Success developed by Abriendo Puertas/ Opening Doors for its parent leadership training curriculum. To learn more about the Abriendo Puertas curriculum, go to <http://abriendopuertasopeningdoors.org/index.php>. Attendance Works wishes to thank and acknowledge Abriendo Puertas for supporting the development of Taking Action on Attendance.