

Effective Truancy Interventions

Compiled by the Children's Law Center

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Truancy is a complex issue with many different factors contributing to a child's absence in school. As a result, effective interventions for truancy must be specific and tailored to the individual child and family. A thorough assessment should be done with the child and guardian to determine the underlying causes of truancy. It is important to remember that these causes are often personal and at times may be uncomfortable for the student to discuss. As a result, professionals should think of the assessment as a process which may require several meetings and discussions before the family is able to disclose the factors contributing to the truancy. Once a comprehensive assessment has been conducted, the following interventions may be considered.

Please note: Most of these interventions are written for school personnel. However, it is possible that many of the interventions could be provided by other agencies, such as DJJ or DSS caseworkers, counselors, or non-profit organizations.

Initial Interventions from School

Early & Positive Guardian Contact:

- At the beginning of the year:
 - o Attendance personnel reviews prior year's student attendance and identifies students at-risk for truancy in the coming school year.
 - o School staff makes a phone call to the guardian of at-risk student just prior to new school year. Introduces self; offers contact info and assistance for upcoming school year.
 - o If no attendance problems the first few weeks of term, calls guardian back to praise them and ask them to please share what they are doing right, reiterating to the guardian that they are part of the solution and give positive reinforcement.
- Throughout the year:
 - o Contact the guardian to share successes that the child has experienced. Often, guardians are only contacted when there is a problem. Sharing positive stories will increase the guardian's sense of connectedness to the school and diminish an adversarial relationship.

Sign-In Log:

- Using a sign-in log is an initial intervention requiring a student to sign in to the attendance office daily.
- This allows attendance personnel to lay eyes on student and give encouragement or support for their school day. This also gives student the opportunity to talk about any issues or current needs.
- As an alternative, students may be given the option of signing in later in the day to prevent being tardy to the first class.

Credit Recovery:

- Students need to feel successful and see that their school attendance is meaningful. Having the ability to obtain credits is crucial to this. Consider opportunities for truant students to recover credits. Volunteer tutors may assist with this.

Cultural Competency:

- Ensure that staff have been trained on cultural diversity and competency so that all families feel understood and welcomed.
- Ask families about their culture, background, and perspectives on education.
- Build relationships with extended family members who may serve in a caregiving role and utilize them with interventions, as necessary.
- Understand that LGBT youth have higher rates of truancy and assist them in identifying allies within the school.

Education Staff Interventions:

- Remind teachers that teacher-student relationships can contribute to students' drive to attend school. Encourage positive teacher-student relationship with all students.
- Incentivize teachers to accurately submit class attendance data daily. Incentives may include certificates, the option to wear jeans to school, or relief from lunch duty.
- Make classroom teachers aware of interventions that are occurring related to truancy so they can reinforce these behaviors and interventions in their classrooms.
- Teachers can increase success in the classroom by promoting learning that is relevant to the students and the world they live in and utilize various forms of technology.
- Teachers can facilitate engagement by modeling "learning" for the students, which shows that they, too, are learners.

Create a Healthy Environment:

- Reduce the need for absences from school due to health complications by creating a healthy, sterile environment for children to thrive in. Work collaboratively with school nurse to be aware of students with health issues.
- Implement an aggressive hand washing program (largely important for elementary-aged students): provide instruction on proper hygiene and hand washing by the classroom teacher, include an age-appropriate video on the importance of hand washing and/or handouts to students with age-appropriate activities with a hand-washing focus.

- Improve the quality of school ventilation: this can help improve student respiratory health. The U.S Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) provides resources to schools and districts that have problems related to indoor air quality.
- Asthma is one of the leading predictors of student absences. Educate students with asthma on the importance of respiratory health, what asthma is, and the importance of using medications. Ensure the school has maintenance medications for asthma accessible to students on a daily basis.
- Examples of health-related programs:
 - Creating an Asthma-Friendly School: www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/asthma/creatingafs/index.htm
 - Healthy Schools, Healthy People – It’s a Snap- <http://www.itsasnap.org>
 - Indoor Air Quality Tools for Schools (EPA)- <http://www.epa.gov/iaq/schools>

Intensive Interventions

Class Tracker:

- This intervention may be used for students when the sign-in log was not an effective deterrent to truancy.
- Student has folder with class tracker attendance log.
 - o Teacher signs off on student’s attendance in each period, gives student a rating on the day’s class performance, and may leave comments.
 - o Guardian signs off each night that they have seen the class tracker.
 - o Truancy liaison reviews tracker and signs off on it the following morning.
 - o Process repeats daily for a pre-determined period of time, or until student shows significant improvement.

Basic Needs Support:

- Support for students who are at-risk or truant due to poverty or familial instability because they do not have resources for proper hygiene.
- School provides place for students to shower before school and drop off/pick up clothes in need of laundering.
- Assists students with purchasing clothes, school supplies, and food.
- The school may collect donations for a “clothes closet” at the school, where donated clothing items can be reserved for students to “shop”.
- Dentist offices and hotels may be able to donate toothbrushes, soap, shampoo, and other basic needs. Local churches may be able to assist with a basic needs drive. Consider asking a Laundromat service for vouchers for needy families.

Rise & Shine:

- Early-morning intervention for students whose sleep patterns, home instability, tardiness, or transportation issues put them at-risk for truancy or contribute to their truancy.

- School or other agency caseworker provides morning wake-up call to student.
- School provides ride to alternative school. May address at district level by providing bus transportation either to alternative school or provide a bus from the regularly assigned school to the alternative school. May also consider partnering with community businesses, such as a taxi service for kids.

Increasing School Connectedness:

- For many students, having a sense of belonging can improve their attendance, as they do not fit in socially.
- Assist the child in identifying their interests, then joining a related club or organization.
- Find alternative ways the student can feel connected to the school, such as through assisting a teacher or working with a mentor. For example, a child who is interested in technology may assist with audiovisual needs and set up for school assemblies. A student interested in sports can help with keeping stats for a sports team. Ideally, find a mentor with similar interests as the student.
- Create student support groups, which allow students to make connections with other students outside of the classroom setting. These meetings could be held over lunch in the school attendance office or before school with breakfast provided. Use this as a time to talk with the youth and make positive connections.

Incentive Programs:

- Connect with local businesses (Target, Best Buy, Frankie’s Fun Park, etc.) to provide gift cards or vouchers for at-risk or truant students who attend school daily for a predetermined amount of time.

Counseling Needs and Coordinating with DMH:

- Many youth have underlying behavioral or emotional problems which may contribute to truancy.
- If possible, utilize a school-based counselor who is able to meet with the youth and family at school. This increases the connectedness to the school and ensures that the counselor is familiar with school dynamics.
- Have families sign release of information forms that allow the school and counselor to share information regarding the student and their needs, while maintaining any confidentiality needed between the student and counselor for an effective therapeutic relationship.

Coordinating with DJJ:

- Utilize existing county DJJ programs prior to truancy petition, such as:
 - o Girls Circle
 - o Family Solutions
 - o Teen After School Center sites
- Encourage DJJ caseworkers to make visits and meet with the family at school instead of the DJJ office, which shows coordination between the school and DJJ and reinforces the importance of the child being at school.

Coordinating with DSS:

- If concerns arise regarding possible abuse or neglect situations, contact DSS immediately.
- For students under the age of 12, consider coordinating with DSS to provide services targeted to guardians, such as parenting workshops, connecting guardians to treatment services, and developing an intervention plan that provides positive support to guardians.
- Encourage DSS caseworkers to make visits and meet with the family at school instead of the DSS office, which shows coordination between the school and DJJ and reinforces the importance of the child being at school.

Follow-ups

- Once a child has made improvements, utilize the following strategies to support continued success
 - o Have the student write an essay about the changes they have made and how it will improve their future. Praise them for the essay and share it with other education staff, probation officers, and counselors as appropriate.
 - o Graduation Coach: Assign students a “coach,” which may be a school employee or community volunteer who will check in with them periodically and ensure that they are staying on track.
 - o Every six weeks, send a letter to the students’ guardian that recognizes the improvements they have made and praises their success.

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