



Guide for Parents
and Caregivers:
supporting your child with

**school
attendance
concerns**



If you're reading this, you're likely the parent or caregiver of a child who struggles with regular school attendance. You may have received phone calls and emails from your child's school and lots of advice on increasing their attendance. There is no 'one size fits all' solution for supporting your child. This guide aims to help you rethink your child's challenges and understand your options.

Understanding School Attendance Concerns

While most kids miss school from time to time, school attendance concerns can show up in different ways, such as being late, leaving school early, or missing school frequently or chronically. Children miss school for many different reasons, such as:

- **Mental health problems** (e.g., symptoms of mental health issues that are getting in the way of daily life)
- **Learning disabilities** (e.g., stress related to learning issues)
- **Lagging skills** (e.g., organization, self-regulation)
- **Environmental factors** (e.g., sleep issues, relationship challenges, transportation access, etc.)

Why School Attendance Matters

Evidence shows that missing school, even in the early years, can have long-term negative consequences.

Consistent attendance is important for:

- **Academic success:** Regular attendance can help children keep up with important lessons and stay on track with their classmates.
- **Social development:** Going to school regularly can help children develop social skills, make friends, and feel part of the community.
- **Emotional well-being:** Attending school regularly can boost a child's self-esteem and reduce worries about falling behind.
- **Future opportunities:** Good attendance habits formed early can lead to successful high school graduation and are associated with better social, health and job outcomes later in life.



It's important to remember that school attendance isn't just about getting your child to school. Regular attendance alone doesn't always lead to better outcomes. If your child is having attendance problems, it might mean they need help or support with other issues. Understanding and addressing these underlying issues can make a big difference in helping your child succeed.

Attendance Impacts the Whole Family

Parents and caregivers often feel more urgency about getting children back to school than the children do. This urgency can come from worries about your child's future, pressure from the school, or stress about missing work. Dealing with your child's school attendance can affect your emotions, causing anxiety or frustration. It can also impact your finances if you get calls from the school or can't go to work. This situation can strain your relationship with your child and cause tension in your family, especially if you and your partner handle it differently or if other children at home are affected.

What Can I Do?

Addressing School Attendance Concerns

Each child's situation is unique, but finding solutions often involves:

- Recognizing that your child is *having* a hard time, not *giving* you a hard time.
- Prioritizing your relationship with your child, letting them know you're on their team. Your child should feel supported and understood, not judged or punished.
- Identifying the specific challenges your child faces. Give them space to talk about what is getting in the way of regular school attendance and listen to them without judgment.

- Working together with your child to address these challenges.
- Maintaining hope and optimism. Believe in your child's ability to overcome these challenges and convey that belief to them.
- Collaborating with school staff and other professionals. Building a support network can give you and your child the resources needed to succeed.
- Setting realistic and clear expectations and celebrating any successes together, no matter how small they may seem.
- Taking care of your own well-being. Supporting a child with attendance issues can be stressful; ensure you also look after your mental and physical health.

Conventional vs. Collaborative Approaches to Helping Your Child Attend School

Many of us use conventional parenting methods because that's what we learned growing up. This usually means parents and caregivers set the rules, and children must obey or face consequences. You might feel pressured by the school, friends, or family to show you are in control. You may even feel ineffective if your child won't go to school. If you feel this way, take a moment to remember that your child is having a hard time, not giving you a hard time.

Conventional parenting assumes kids aren't trying hard enough. With this mindset, parents and caregivers often focus on making their child go to school, using punishments or rewards. But there's another way. Approaches like Collaborative Problem Solving (ThinkKids.org) assume that if your child could attend school, they would. If they can't, something is getting in the way. This could include concerns such as:

- Needing help with routines
- Struggling with social anxiety or social challenges
- Having a hard time learning

- Losing energy due to late-night screen time
- Or a combination of these and other issues

Keep in mind that children and teens aren't always aware of or able to express what's getting in the way of school attendance. It's the adult's job to have the conversation, help the child or teen explore what might be happening, provide lots of empathy, and support them in putting solutions into action to improve school attendance.

Key Insights

Relationship First

By focusing on the relationship, you can't go wrong. This doesn't mean lowering your expectations about school attendance or being a pushover. Instead, it's about understanding your child's perspective, sharing your concerns (e.g., their future, academic success, socialization), and finding solutions together. This approach is different from conventional methods like intimidation or using rewards and punishments, which often don't solve the underlying issues or help the child develop skills.

Pleo Parent Tip: When my children were younger, I pressured them to get to school on time and finish assignments. When one child had attendance problems, I pushed hard to get them back to school. This led to shouting and a damaged relationship without solving the problem. What helped was learning a more collaborative approach that involved patience, understanding, and going at my child's pace. My now-adult child tells me that he wished I had been more understanding instead of pressuring him.

Empathy Over Blame

Understand that if your child could attend school, they would. When a child struggles with school attendance, it's easy to blame them or just expect them to do better. Successful problem-solving requires both you and your child to be calm and connected. Conversations filled with empathy and curiosity are more effective than criticizing, blaming, or offering unsolicited advice.

Pleo Parent Tip: You may feel ashamed about your child's attendance, or you may even blame yourself. Parenting is one of the most challenging jobs, and parents are doing their best under difficult circumstances. Just like children, parents are continually learning and growing. Recognize your efforts and give yourself grace as you navigate these challenges.

It may not be a quick fix

The root causes of school attendance problems aren't always obvious and can take time to resolve, especially if they've been present for a while. As a parent or caregiver, you might feel anxious about your child's inability to attend school and want to 'fix' the problem quickly. Although this is natural, it can be counterproductive by adding pressure to the situation, making it harder to find the best solution.

When considering solutions, think about their impact on your relationship with your child, their self-esteem, and the rest of the family. The best solution, which might not be the quickest, will address both your concerns and your child's concerns. Remember that it may take small steps to achieve full attendance.

As your child grows and matures, it is important to recognize that what worked when they were 4 years old may no longer work at 14 years old. Similarly, what worked with one of your children may not work with another. You may need to learn new strategies and adjust your parenting approach accordingly.

Navigating advice

During this journey, you may receive advice from 'experts' that doesn't align with your beliefs or parenting style. This doesn't mean they are wrong – it may simply be an approach you are not comfortable with. It also doesn't mean they are right – that is for you to decide. It is often wise to listen to the rationale for those approaches, be open to learning about their proven effectiveness, and then decide if they feel right for you.

Pleo Parent Tip: Try seeing this as a small part of your child's life story. Remember that there are many ways to become a successful adult; school is only one part of this path. Many kids don't hit milestones at the same rate as others, but they can still thrive.

Finding the Right Resources for Support

Your child may overcome their attendance challenges with your support but might also need additional help from school or community services. This section will provide tips and resources to help you seek assistance and navigate these services effectively.

Working with the School

The school can be one of your best allies in getting your child back to school or attending on a more regular basis.

Your first and best option is to engage directly with your child's teacher, as they may have valuable insights into what challenges your child is facing. Together, you can produce a plan to re-engage your child. The goal is to identify the challenges your child is facing and come up with solutions to solve them in a sustainable manner.

If working with the teacher is not successful, it may be because more resources are required. In such cases, remember that all schools have resource or learning support teachers and access to mental health staff, including social workers and psychologists. These staff members can be valuable resources in resolving school attendance problems. They can support you, your child, and your child's teacher in understanding and implementing solutions that you develop together.

Collaboration is key. Approach discussions with the teacher respectfully and with curiosity. The goal for everyone is to find a solution that works for your child, the school, and your family.

Help from Attendance Counsellors

Every school board in Ontario has at least one Attendance Counsellor. These professionals, sometimes called Social Workers or Engagement Consultants, help students who have trouble attending school.

If your child has difficulty attending school regularly, the school might suggest an Attendance Counsellor. This can feel intrusive, especially if they visit your home. Remember, the school wants to help your child and your family.

Attendance Counsellors work to improve student attendance, well-being, and mental health. They meet with students at school, visit homes if needed, and connect families with helpful programs and resources. They build relationships, support students, help them return to school, and work with community agencies.

The goal is not to punish. Attendance Counsellors do not judge your parenting or blame you for attendance problems. They are there to support you and your child, finding the best solutions for your child's needs. Working together with the school and Counsellor can help your child reconnect with school and succeed.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

What are the options for assessments and accommodations?

Most accommodations can be put in place without a psychoeducational assessment (or another type of assessment, such as a mental health assessment/diagnosis). However, the school staff may recommend a psychoeducational assessment (or another type of assessment) if they need more information to understand and support your child. This can be a valuable tool to help you understand your child's unique strengths and challenges concerning their learning, social-emotional functioning, peers, and current environment. The assessment provider will be able to help you, and the school develop potential accommodations or recommend strategies and resources to help your child succeed at school.

Should you wish to seek an assessment to support your understanding of your child's strengths and needs, you can speak with your child's school about requesting this. If this is not possible through the school or if there is a waitlist, you may consider seeking a private assessment. Please contact one of our Family Peer Supporters if you need assistance with this process.

How much flexibility does the school have?

Each school and school board has different approaches to school attendance problems. However, we know that collaboration is key to supporting your child. In many cases, the child will require some accommodations

to help make the transition back to school more manageable. Accommodations can include:

- Starting late/leaving early
- Having a safe person for the child to connect with at school
- Reducing the number of classes the child participates in
- Gradual re-introduction
- Identifying a safe place the child can attend during breaks or when feeling anxious
- Or any other accommodation identified as a viable support to resolving your child's unmet needs

If your child is facing a challenge that is not immediately visible, such as trauma, a mental health issue, a learning disability, ADHD, or ASD, it is important to inform the school about these specific challenges. Without this information, school staff may not understand the reasons behind your child's absenteeism. Sharing this personal information with the school can help equip the team with the information necessary to support your child's unique situation.

What if my child fails a semester or their year?

Clearly, everyone wants to get their child back to school as soon as possible. However, if you rush into a solution that does not resolve the underlying concern or move at a pace that is too quick for your child, you may soon be back where you started – or worse. Trying to find a quick fix can backfire and lead to more challenges. Rushed or forced solutions can cause your child to be less willing to try fresh solutions in the future. It is much better to take an empathetic, calm, and strategic approach that incorporates discussions with and buy-in from your child. Even though the solution you impose on your child may seem practical and doable, it may not be what your child needs—or can do at this time.

Other Community Resources (Eastern Ontario)

If your child's attendance issues are related to mental health, substance use, or addiction challenges, you may want additional support. These resources can help address the underlying concerns and work with you to create a back-to-school plan that fosters your child's well-being.

1 Call, 1 Click

613-260-2360 1-877-377-7775 1Call1Click.ca

Children, youth and families are always welcome to contact 1Call1Click.ca with questions, big or small, related to mental health, addiction, substance use health and neurodevelopmental health and care.

1 Call, 1 Click can help you identify and connect with services available to your child.

24/7 Crisis Line & Online Crisis Chat

613-260-2360 OR 1-877-377-7775

ysb.ca/services/ysb-mental-health/24-7-crisis-line/

The crisis line offers:

- Supportive listening
- Immediate crisis counselling on the phone or by chat
- Information on resources and service providers in your community
- Referrals to child and youth service providers in your community
- A home-based intervention (in Ottawa only)
- Short-term follow-up service

One Stop Talk

onestoptalk.ca 1-855-416-8255.

One Stop Talk is a free service that immediately connects you to a professional therapist from Ontario's network of community-based child, youth and family mental health agencies across Ontario.

Monday – Friday: 12PM – 8PM EST

Saturday: 12PM – 4PM EST

Kids Help Phone

Call 1-800-668-6868

Text CONNECT to 686868 (texting service is free and available across Canada 24/7)

24/7 e-mental health service offering free, multilingual, and confidential support crisis support.

While the specific resources provided here are for the Ottawa/Eastern Ontario region, they can give you a sense of what to look for you in your own area. Whether you live in Ottawa, or elsewhere in Ontario, we are here to help you find the best resources for your individual needs. Please contact our Family Peer Supporters so that we can provide you links to additional resources specific to your situation. We are all parents who have lived experience supporting a child or youth with a mental health challenge.

There is hope

Things can and do get better.
You are not in this alone.

Pleo's Family Peer Supporters are here to help.

We are open 9am-7pm Monday to Friday.

You can reach us at 613-321-3211
or 855-775-7005 (toll free).

Sincerely,

Your Pleo Family Peer Supporter



OTTAWA-CARLETON
DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD



CANADIAN SCHOOL
ATTENDANCE
PARTNERSHIP

PARTENARIAT
CANADIEN POUR LA
FRÉQUENTATION SCOLAIRE



United Way
East Ontario



we've been there,
we get it
and we can help

pleo.on.ca

613.321.3211 (Ottawa)
1.855.775.7005

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helping
parents of
children facing
mental health
challenges
find their way
forward

This information is offered from a Family Peer Support perspective - Pleo's collective family experience over the past twenty years and collaboration with health, education and social service providers. *It is not meant as a substitute for medical advice.*

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