



Research Within Reach, Ep. I: Chronic Absenteeism

What do children miss when they miss a day of Head Start?

What's the New Knowledge?

For children to benefit from center-based Head Start, they have to actually be in the classroom.

After all, experiences at Head Start centers include everything from math lessons to peer interaction to nutritious meals. Children who miss school miss a full day's worth of valuable experiences.

While simple in concept, the impact of attendance on development is hard to quantify. However, a [new study](#) in [Child Development](#) looks directly at Head Start children to determine the importance of attendance for low-income children.

Authors Arya Ansari (University of Virginia) and Kelly M. Purtell (The Ohio State University) find that the more days of school that a child misses, the less of the Head Start advantage she gets. For some children, chronic absence carries a significantly higher cost.

The Basics:

Ansari and Purtell used data from the 2009 cohort of the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) to explore the relationship between absences and academic progress. The authors explored three main questions:

- (1) What do absences mean for a child's academic development?
- (2) Do children who start with lower skills suffer more due to absence?
- (3) Can missing school diminish the benefits of being in a high-quality classroom?

Significant research has been done on absenteeism in the K-12 space, but this research is some of the first to examine absenteeism in early childhood. Existing research does show that attendance is related to academic performance. Students who are chronically absent in elementary school have lower academic performance.

Chronic absenteeism is when a student misses at least 10% of days in a school year. In a year with 180 school days, this means missing 18 or more days, or just two per month!

The Results:

What absence looks like in Head Start:

- Head Start students miss an average of 8 school days, or 5.5%, of the year. Chronically absent Head Start students miss an average of 22 school days, or 12%, of the year.

- Some subgroups of children are less likely to be absent or chronically absent, these include: Black children, Latino children, children from households without two parents, children in larger classrooms, children in bilingual classrooms, children in classrooms that operate more hours per week, and children whose teachers had a higher hourly wage.
- Children whose mothers were unemployed or expressed depressive symptoms were more likely to be absent.

The effects of being absent in Head Start:

- Being absent more frequently is associated with smaller gains in literacy and math.
- Children who are chronically absent have even smaller gains in literacy and math. This missing learning is equal to approximately 2 months of learning in math and 3 months of learning in literacy.
- Children who start the year with lower skills suffer more from absences when it comes to language and literacy gains.
- Absences can actually result in a child benefiting less from being in a high-quality classroom when it comes to literacy gains.

The Implications:

- Children who begin with low skills are most in need of classroom attendance and are most affected when they miss school.
- Attendance has a stronger relationship to early learning than classroom quality.
- Chronic absenteeism is absolutely a problem even in the preschool years. Reducing absenteeism in Head Start is important for generating better results and more learning for children. The new Head Start Program Performance Standards put an emphasis on this topic.
- When analyzing the impact of Head Start or the impact of high-quality programming, attention to attendance is critical. Impacts are larger for children who regularly attend school than for those with frequent absences.

The Limitations:

- Absences were parent-reported, rather than taken from actual attendance data. Parents tend to [significantly underestimate](#) how many total days their children missed. However, the authors believe, if anything, this increases the likelihood that they would have gotten null findings and decreases the likelihood that the effects they got are overstated.
- These results are not evidence of cause and effect; they are correlational findings. Attendance and academic learning are both influenced heavily by many factors. This study does *not* allow us to say, "Chronic absenteeism causes less academic learning."

The Methodology:

The Sample:

- FACES is a nationally representative sample of Head Start children. The 2009 study cohort featured 3,349 children who were either 3- or 4-years-old and were first-time Head Start attendees.

- FACES includes surveys of parents and Head Start staff, direct assessment of children's development, and measures of classroom quality.
- Details on the study design of FACES 2009 can be found [here](#).

The Measures:

- *Absenteeism*, as reported by parents.
- *Language, literacy, and math achievement*, measured using the [Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test](#) and [Woodcock-Johnson](#) (Letter Word Identification, Spelling Word, and Applied Problems subscales).
- *Classroom quality*, according to the [CLASS](#).
- *Covariates*, such as race, parental features, and skills at school entry.

The Analysis:

- The authors ran separate regressions to predict language, literacy, and math skills. The four models used: (1) absences on a continuous scale; (2) a dichotomous indicator of chronic absence; (3) an interaction between chronic absence indicator and initial language/literacy/math skill, with absences on a continuous scale; and (4) an interaction between chronic absence indicator and classroom quality, with absences on a continuous scale.
- The authors also used three propensity score models to guard against selection bias. The propensity score models confirmed the results from the regressions.

NHSA is developing a quality improvement toolkit specifically focused on addressing chronic absenteeism in Head Start classrooms. It will include important information about chronic absenteeism, tools to use in your programs, and links to additional resources on the topic. Look out for details coming soon to your inbox, or check our [Current Initiatives](#) page where it will be posted when it goes live.

Does your program have a practice around chronic absence that you'd like to share? Do you have any questions, comments, or new ideas? E-mail vjones@nhsa.org

Looking for research NHSA has covered previously? Please visit <http://www.nhsa.org/content/research-topic>



Our mission is to coalesce, inspire, and support the Head Start field as a leader in early childhood development and education.