



Mott Poll Report

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Too Sick for School? Parents Weigh Competing Priorities

When children say they don't feel well but do not have serious or contagious symptoms, parents must decide if the child should attend school. The C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health asked a national sample of parents of children in middle and high school about school attendance when children aren't feeling well.

In situations where it's unclear whether their child is sick enough to miss school, 53% of parents say they are most likely to keep their child home just to be safe, 25% would send their child to school and hope for the best, and 19% would let their child decide. Only 4% say they would call the child's healthcare provider for advice.

In making decisions about whether their child is too sick to go to school, parents say they take into account whether their child thinks they can make it through the day (59%), whether their child will pose a risk to teachers or other students (54%), how their child is behaving (39%), if their child has a test or presentation (34%) or after-school activity they want to attend (12%), and whether a parent can stay home with the child (17%). One in five parents (19%) say they consider whether their child needs a mental health day. Parents say their child worries about a negative impact on grades (65%) or missing friends or school activities (61%) if they are absent from school. Most parents (78%) think the amount and timeframe for make-up work is reasonable.

Most parents (91%) report their child's school has an attendance policy, and 74% believe a policy is needed to make sure children go to school. However, 25% of parents feel the policy makes it difficult for children with a medical condition and 22% that it encourages parents to send children to school when sick. Parents report that the consequences for missing too many days include a note or call home (63%), having to get a doctor's note (49%) or meet with school staff (35%), being charged with a truancy violation (41%), or the child not being allowed to participate in activities (21%).

Through February of the current school year, 15% of parents say their child has missed 6 or more days of school, 21% missed 4-5 days, 31% missed 2-3 days, and 33% missed 0-1 days. Parents who report ≥6 missed days are more likely to believe the school's attendance policy encourages parents to send sick children to school and makes it difficult for children with a medical condition.

Stay home sick or go to school?

% of parents of children in middle or high school who consider the following factors

If child thinks they can make it through the day 59%

If child poses a risk to teachers/other students 54%

How child is behaving 39%

If child has a test/presentation 34%



Report Highlights

1 in 5 parents consider if their child in middle or high school needs a mental health day when deciding whether they're too sick to go to school.

1 in 4 parents think school attendance policies make it difficult for children with medical conditions.

2 in 3 parents say their child in middle or high school worries about the impact on grades if they are absent from school.

Data Source & Methods

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by Ipsos Public Affairs, LLC (Ipsos) for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital. The survey was administered in February 2024 to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults who were parents of at least one child age 1-18 years living in their household (n=2,057). Adults were selected from Ipsos's web-enabled KnowledgePanel® that closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 61% among panel members contacted to participate. This report is based on responses from 1,300 parents with at least one child age 11-18 attending junior high or high school. The margin of error for results presented in this report is ±1 to 3 percentage points.

A publication from C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, the University of Michigan Department of Pediatrics, and the Susan B. Meister Child Health Evaluation and Research (CHEAR) Center.

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C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health

Co-Director: Sarah J. Clark, MPH
Co-Director: Susan J. Woolford, MD, MPH
Design Lead: Sara L. Schultz, MPS
Data Analyst: Acham Gebremariam, MS
Contributor: Gary L. Freed, MD, MPH
Poll Manager: Dianne C. Singer, MPH



**SUSAN B. MEISTER
CHILD HEALTH EVALUATION
AND RESEARCH CENTER**
MICHIGAN MEDICINE

Implications

In most families, parents make decisions about whether children are too sick to attend school. In some cases, this decision is clear, such as if the child is vomiting, has a high fever, or has a contagious condition that could spread to classmates or teachers. In other circumstances, parents have to guess at whether their child's report of "not feeling well" represents a sufficient reason to miss school. When that child is in middle school/junior high or high school, these parent decisions incorporate a range of factors. For example, parents take into account whether their child needs rest and monitoring, or if they can handle the strain of crowded hallways and changing classrooms and teachers.

Grades often become more important in middle and high school. Two-thirds of parents in this Mott Poll believed their child worries about the negative consequences of missing class, and many parents include academic considerations in their decisions about whether their child should attend school when sick. Typically, parents may view their child's concern about academics as a positive indicator that they are striving to do well in school; however, in some cases, a child's refusal to stay home when sick may indicate anxiety about school performance. Other parents may recognize that a child's request to stay home on the day of a test may reflect their lack of preparation or anxiety about performing well. In making decisions about whether a child should miss school, parents should listen carefully as their child talks about academic considerations to get a better sense of what may be prompting their child's attitude.

One in five parents in this Mott Poll said they consider whether their child needs a mental health day. This may reflect parents' recognition of the increase in mental health concerns among children in recent years. Some aspects of the school setting, such as social or academic pressure, may lead children with mental health disorders to miss school to sustain their well-being. Additionally, in some instances, face-to-face interactions may trigger or exacerbate mental health issues, such as a breakup with a romantic partner, a falling out with friends, or an embarrassing incident shared on social media. It is understandable that children would be hesitant to face their peers in such situations, but allowing children to miss school any time they expect an unpleasant or challenging social interaction is unsustainable.

In balancing their decisions about allowing their child a mental health day, parents may want to consider the purpose of the day away from school. It may be an opportunity to help their child plan how to handle interactions, practice strategies to stay calm and ease anxiety, and identify specific peers, teachers or staff who could be sources of support. For children who have been diagnosed with depression, anxiety or another mental health condition, parents may consult with their child's mental health provider for guidance.

Nearly all parents in this Mott Poll indicated that their child's middle or high school has an attendance policy, and most felt that having a policy was necessary to ensure that children attend school regularly. This seems reasonable, as truancy or excessive absenteeism is linked to poor school performance and dropping out prior to graduation.

Compliance with school attendance policies can be particularly challenging for children with chronic medical conditions. These children typically have more healthcare visits and may need to travel to see specialists, which causes more school absences. Moreover, these parents may have been instructed to act on early signs of illness to avoid an exacerbation of the child's illness. It may be helpful for parents of children with chronic medical conditions to inform school personnel about the likelihood of health-related absences, enlisting the child's healthcare providers for support in requesting school flexibility in completing assignments at home or with additional time.