

School absenteeism, mental health problems linked

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School absenteeism is a significant problem, and students who are frequently absent from school more often have symptoms of psychiatric disorders. A new longitudinal study of more than 17,000 youths has found that frequently missing school is associated with a higher prevalence of mental health problems later on in adolescence, and that mental health problems during one year also predict missing additional school days in the following year for students in middle and high school.

The study, published in the journal *Child Development*, was conducted by researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), the University of Florida, Boston University, the Child and Adolescent Services Research Center, the Oregon Social Learning Center, and Johns Hopkins University.

"We've long known that students who are frequently absent from school are more likely to have symptoms of [psychiatric disorders](#), but less clear is the reason why," says Jeffrey Wood, associate professor of [educational psychology](#) and psychiatry at UCLA, who led the study. "These two aspects of youths' adjustment may at times exacerbate one another, leading over the course of time to more of each."

The study found that between grades 2 and 8, students who already had mental health symptoms (such as [antisocial behavior](#) or depression) missed more school days over the course of a year than they had in the previous year and than students with few or no mental health symptoms. Conversely, middle and [high school students](#) who were chronically

absent in an earlier year of the study tended to have more depression and antisocial problems in subsequent years. For example, 8th graders who were absent more than 20 days were more likely to have higher levels of [anxiety and depression](#) in 10th grade than were 8th graders who were absent fewer than 20 days.

"The findings can help inform the development of programs to reduce school absenteeism," according to Wood. "School personnel in middle schools and high schools could benefit from knowing that mental health issues and school absenteeism each influence the other over time. Helping students address mental health issues may in turn help prevent the emergence of chronic absenteeism. At the same time, working to help students who are developing a pattern of chronic absenteeism come to school more consistently may help prevent psychiatric problems."

The researchers looked at more than 17,000 children in 1st through 12th grades using three datasets: the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a longitudinal study of a nationally representative sample of adolescents in grades 7 to 12; the Johns Hopkins Prevention Intervention Research Center Study, a longitudinal study of classroom-based interventions involving children in grades 1 to 8; and the Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers trial, a [longitudinal study](#) of children in grades 1 through 12.

Researchers interviewed students and parents annually or biennially, and they gathered information from school attendance records. In addition, students, parents, and teachers filled out questionnaires.

Provided by Society for Research in Child Development

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