



Making the Grade: How to Coordinate and Collaborate With Schools

Evidence has shown that health and education outcomes are intricately linked; healthier students have been shown to achieve more in school. Connecting with the schools in your community can go a long way in ensuring your patients are healthy, successful students.

Helping All Children

School-aged children and adolescents spend most of their day in the school setting. To make sure your patients are getting what they need when they need it to stay safe, healthy, and successful in school, you should

- **Identify and document the child's school, the district, and your primary contact at the child's school** as part of the regular health history. In most instances this is the school nurse; however, in the nurse's absence this may include but is not limited to the social worker, school psychologist, principal, or occupational, physical, or speech therapist.
- **Ask school-related questions in regular history taking** including questions about the number of days a child has been absent from school in the preceding month(s), especially with specific symptoms or health conditions.
- **Learn the health requirements for school enrollment** in your area (eg, immunizations).
- **Learn about your local schools' communicable disease exclusion criteria and related policies** such as readmission, medication, and transportation.
- **Provide information that schools need to know directly to them.** When communicating with the school, write specific, clear, and detailed instructions on dated, standardized forms.
- **Encourage parents to get involved in their child's education** including attending parent-teacher association (PTA) meetings and parent-teacher conferences.

Helping Children With Special Health Care and Educational Needs

According to recent national child health surveys, a sizable portion of school-aged children have special health care and educational needs.

For example, most currently available data indicate

- 13.9% of US children have special health care needs.
- Nearly 10% of children have been identified as having a learning disability.
- Nearly 7% of children have been identified as having attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder.
- 9.2% of children aged 3 to 17 years have moderate or severe social-emotional difficulties.
- 12.5% of children have been diagnosed with asthma.

To ensure these children and adolescents receive the care they need throughout the day, it is important to coordinate the evaluation, management, and treatment of these conditions in collaboration with schools. To that end, you should

- **Know about federal and state laws that serve children with special health and educational needs** (eg, Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, do-not-resuscitate laws).
- **Learn when and how to request or refer patients** for psychoeducational assessments, early intervention services offered by the schools, and alternative physical education and educational programs.
- **Ask parents for written permission to interact with the child's school** whenever there is a health or social-emotional problem for which school input can be helpful and whenever the school needs to provide a health-related service.

Helping Your Community's Children

Pediatricians are often well-respected members of their community and can serve as a bridge between the education and health systems, which are often separate and noncommunicative. Many school officials have a high regard for your opinions and would appreciate your expertise and support. Additionally, working with schools allows you to reach a large number of children and their families, reinforce important health promotion messages, and save practice time. There are many ways you can get involved. Here are a few ways you and your local school or district can enjoy these benefits.

- **Educate school administrators, staff, and parents** on important child health issues, especially those that may be addressed in the school setting. Opportunities to do this include but are not limited to speaking at PTA meetings or staff in-services, and presenting comments at school board meetings.
- **Inform, advocate for, and assist in developing sound, evidence-based school health policies, practices, and programs.** For example, volunteer to serve on your district's wellness committee or school health advisory council.
- **Display or disseminate posters, flyers, and other handouts** about school-related programs or events in your office.

Helpful Hints

- ✓ Work with, not against, the education system—consider its goals and primary responsibilities.
- ✓ Recognize that the education system is just as complex as the health care system.
- ✓ Recognize that education systems have a different culture than health care systems—learn as much as you can about this culture and respect it.
- ✓ Become recognized as a reliable medical expert and not just an advocate.
- ✓ Don't use medical jargon.
- ✓ Don't be turned off by educational jargon—speak up and ask for explanations of acronyms or unfamiliar phrases.
- ✓ Make no assumptions about health care staffing—realize that while funding is decreasing, demands for health programs are increasing.

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