

[If you have problems and are unhappy, you are not alone. Everyone has problems. Some problems are more serious than others, and some people have more problems than others, but everyone has to face up to solving their problems. It's important to realize, also, that it is never too late to solve problems you've left unresolved. Granted, it may be more difficult and take more effort to solve those problems, but sooner or later you're going to have to buckle down and put all your effort into getting back on the right track. In order to do this it's helpful to understand two things: What is causing the problem and how to help yourself solve the problem.

The following essay is intended to help you resolve your attendance problem. What is causing your attendance problem? Why do you cut classes?]

SKIPPING', DITCHIN', AND CUTTIN': HOW TO TROUNCE TRUANCY

by

Dan L. Miller

How many students are usually truant from classes on any given day? Generally, the percentage of unexcused absences for most schools runs from 2 percent to 5 percent. In an average sized high school of 1500 students, this means that, on any given day, 30 to 75 students would have missed one or more class sessions without an excuse. Thirty to 75 students may seem like quite a few, but consider the fact that while those 30 students are out of class there are 1470 students who are attending all of their classes.

Why is it that 1470 students attend all of their classes as they should while 30 students skip out? What's the difference between the type of student who stays in class and the type of student who skips class. There is something that the student who attends classes has which the truant student does not have. What is it?

If you've missed classes without an excuse, can you tell what it is that makes you skip classes while most other students attend classes faithfully? This something that is missing in the truant student represents a need that must be fulfilled. If a student misses a class, there is a reason for it. That reason must be identified if the truant student is to solve his attendance problem. Once the reason is identified, it should be obvious what the nature of the need is that must be fulfilled.

For instance, take the case of Holly. Her schedule of classes was such that she had four classes in the morning that occupied her time from 8:00 a.m. to 11:15 a.m. She then had several free periods, and her next class, Speech, did not start until 1:30. She had over two hours free before she had to report to her Speech class. The fact that Holly lived near the school made it easy for her to go home. While at home, she ate lunch and turned on the TV. Her mother worked during the day and wasn't home to supervise Holly. After lounging at home for a couple of hours and becoming interested in her TV programs, Holly couldn't move her butt off the couch to return to school and attend her Speech class. As the weeks passed, she began to miss the class more and more frequently. Once she had reached a point in the

semester at which she was failing the course, she felt even less motivated to attend. Holly had fallen into a pattern of truancy which she couldn't correct.

In a case such as this, the reason for Holly's truancy was twofold. One reason for the truancy was a lack of will-power and responsibility on Holly's part. She should have been able to stay in school and keep herself occupied with studying or with school-related activities until her Speech class started, or she should have been able to leave her home in time to make it to Speech. A second reason for Holly's truancy was the fact that the school had given her a bad schedule. Generally, students should not have that much free time between classes because many students can wander off-task. The reasons then for Holly's truancy were her inability to return to classes and the fact that the school had given her a bad schedule. Holly, through her truancy, expressed a need for help. She needed a better schedule to help her attend classes regularly. She also needed more structure in her midday activities. She had to plan her free time so that she was in school and ready to attend Speech class when it began.

Why do students skip class? Holly's reasons for truancy were obvious, but, generally, reasons for truancy fall into three categories:

1. Some students miss classes because of home and family problems,
2. Some students miss classes because of school-related problems, and,
3. Some students miss classes because of personal problems, behavior problems, or habits.

In some cases, a student may have a home life which is so chaotic that he can not concentrate on school. Take Kevin, for instance. He had been raised during most of his life by only his mother, since his father had abandoned them shortly after Kevin was born. Kevin's mother had remarried recently, and Kevin's step-father made life more miserable for both Kevin and his mother than it had been before his mother had remarried. His step-father was away from home a lot, but when he was around, he was usually drunk or stoned. Kevin's mother and step-father argued a lot and even physically fought at times. He step-father even beat him at times, and Kevin certainly didn't have a close relationship with him. He no longer had a close relationship with his mother either. She worked a lot and didn't have much time for Kevin when she was at home. It was hard for Kevin to live at home with this situation.

Kevin hated life at home. In cases like Kevin's, where parents have little time for their child and don't seem to care very much about their offspring, students will look for attention and acceptance elsewhere. Students can easily get attention from adults and peers at school through misbehavior and truancy. Although adults at school don't approve of such behavior, a student who misbehaves may be getting something he needs, for at least adults will be paying attention to him and working with him. The student's truancy and misconduct may also continue because he knows that his parents care so little about him that he will receive no consequences at home. "Why not mess around all day and have a good time? My parents couldn't care less and probably wouldn't do anything to me if they did find out."

In cases such as these, a student also may be trying to get the attention of his parents. If he's truant from school, the school puts pressure on the parents to get involved with their child or forces them to attend parent conferences convened to deal with the student's truancy.

So in a case like Kevin's, what is the reason for his truancy? Kevin's behavior is immature and irresponsible, his home life is unstable, and his parents are not actively involved in his life. All of these reasons contribute to Kevin's missing school. What actions must Kevin take if he is to solve his problem with truancy? If he could secure a comfortable home life, it would help, but he also must realize that he cannot change his parents. He can sit down and talk with them and try to get their support and try to make them aware of his needs, but if he fails, he must realize that he is on his own. He's responsible for his own life, and, if he is interested in having some success at school and in having some chance at a decent future, he's going to have to pull himself together, make a great deal of effort to understand his problems, and set out to help himself and run his own life responsibly. If he does need adult help in managing his school activities and personal life, he can ask for help from teachers, counselors, social workers, administrators, and others at school. The staff at any school is there to help every student grow into a responsible adult. They will not refuse to help a young person in need of assistance.

There is also the case of parents who care a great deal for their children, but who, because of jobs and other responsibilities, are unable to spend the time with their sons or daughters needed to provide a close relationship and adequate supervision. Because of the excessive absence of the parent, the adolescent often is left to his own devices. Adolescents in a situation such as this often become more and more irresponsible and have a tendency to miss increasingly more school.

Other problems with parents also contribute to truancy. Some parents are over-protective or overly-strict. Most teenagers, by nature, are rebellious, and many resist authority figures to the extent that they openly fight with parents, teachers, and others who have authority over them. If, for instance, a student's parents are strict about school attendance, they will expect their child to be in every class every day—sometimes even if the child is ill. In a case like this, some teenagers rebel against their parents' power over them. The teenager is a growing person who becomes more independent the older he gets. Many teens try to prove to their parents, themselves, and their friends just how independent they are. They do this by doing things that they know will anger their parents. Few parents condone truancy. Some teens try to show their parents that they can be independent and that they can decide for themselves how to run their own lives.

The sternness of the parents and the inability of the student to accept the standards of his parents may be the reason for truancy in a case such as this. The action that the student can take to help solve his problem of cutting classes is to communicate. He should be talking with his parents about the management of his life and his need for some freedom and responsibility. If his parents will not work with him to ease the pressures, then the student must realize that his life will be much happier and more free of hassle if he learns to live cooperatively with his parents. He must understand why his parents are so stern. It may be

because they are afraid. They are afraid of their son getting hurt. They love their child and are afraid to let him make his own decisions about friends, school attendance, dating, etc., because they are afraid their child will make mistakes which will hurt him. They also, through experience, feel that they know what is best for their child. They were adolescents once, too, and know what is good and bad for their child's development. Without letting the adolescent learn for himself, or without trying to communicate and reason with their child, they simply decree what their child will do in order to help him avoid harm and disappointment. It will help the adolescent with this type of parent to understand that this dictatorial parenting is the result of love. Beyond communicating with his parents and trying to develop mutual understanding, there is little the adolescent can do at home to help the situation. Trying to exert his independence through truancy or some other form of misconduct is going to cause more difficult problems between himself and his parents, and the behavior is also going to hurt his schoolwork and his future.

The student can help himself by talking with friends about his problems at home. He will realize that he is not alone. Many teens have overly-strict parents and must learn to live with and cope with the situation. The student can also talk with his counselor at school or a teacher or social worker about ways of coping with his home life. Truancy is not a helpful or positive route to take in trying to get back at strict parents, and truancy actually hurts the student more than the parents.

Just as there are all types of students, there are also all types of parents. Some parents intentionally keep their children home from school in order to take care of family business. If the mother is working and a small child that needs to be taken care of is at home, the adolescent student may often have to miss class sessions or whole days of school in order to babysit. Sometimes parents also have their son or daughter run errands such as picking Uncle Burt up at the airport or taking Grandma to the dentist. Most adolescents regard these types of absences as legitimate since they have their parents' approval. However, the more school a student misses the less chance he has for success in his classes. It cannot benefit a child to be out of school when he should be in a classroom learning and trying to improve himself.

Parents are also sometimes responsible for a student's truancy when they call the school or send a note to school to excuse her when there's really no legitimate reason for her absence. Some parents do this either because they feel they're helping their child out or are doing her a favor. Others are so afraid of the fights that will ensue with their children that they simply excuse their child to avoid hassles. One must consider the values of parents and students in cases like this. How important is school? If a student is enrolled in school to improve herself and to get an education, she can only do it by attending classes regularly. The more her parents call in to excuse her, the more school she is going to miss in the future because this practice of fake excuses will soon become a habit. A student should not feel comfortable about putting her parents in a position in which they have to lie to school officials in order that she may have some time off from classes.

Whereas parents may sometimes be at fault for a student's truant absence, there are also times when the school may be indirectly responsible for the student's cutting. In some

cases, such as Holly's, the student may be given a schedule which makes it very easy for the student to cut classes. One of the most common reasons students give for skipping class is that it's boring. In some cases this may be a legitimate excuse. Some students may be placed in a course which is too easy for them. If they are bored for that reason, they should see their counselor to get a class changed or arrange some independent study assignments with the teacher for extra credit or enrichment. This will at least make the class more interesting, and if the student is interested in his education, it will also make the class more challenging.

In some cases a student is bored with a class because it is too hard. If the student cannot understand or follow what is going on in class, he is, of course, going to be bored and may very well have a tendency to skip class. Rather than opting for truancy, the student should attack his problem positively. He should, of course seek after-school help from his teacher. He also may want the aid of a tutor either in school or out of school. His counselor will be able to help him find a tutor. If it's possible for the student to change to a lower level class, and the counselor thinks a change is warranted, then this is also a positive solution to the problem.

A student may also have a tendency to skip class because of what the student considers poor teaching. If, indeed, a student feels a teacher is doing a bad job, he should talk with her counselor about the situation. A class change may be possible, but more than likely the student is going to have to adjust herself to the teacher's style and simply cope as well as possible. Everyone in school, whether it's grade school, high school, or college gets stuck with a poor teacher or a boring teacher once in a while. The student must realize that school is not intended to be entertaining and that not every teacher can interest students. In cases such as this, the student should consider the importance of the course to her development and progress in school. She should simply report to class every day, do what the teacher requires, and get something positive out of the experience. Ditching the class may provide temporary relief, but the student will fall behind in her work. She then will not only be bored but will be bored and failing. It would be too bad if the student were to fail the class and have to repeat it. It would be even worse if the student had to repeat the course with the same teacher. Better to pass the course, get it over with, and move on to a course which may be better taught and more interesting.

Because of a personality conflict or a disagreement or a fight with a teacher, a student may not want to attend class. The student must keep in mind what she can lose by not attending class and work to straighten out her problem with the teacher as soon as possible. If a frank discussion with the teacher after class does not help, the student should discuss her problem with a counselor, social worker, or school administrator.

Although some student truancy may be a direct or indirect fault of the parent or the school, most truancy is the fault of the student alone. There are probably as many reasons for a student's truancy as there are truant students. The most obvious and probably the most popular reason for a student to miss a class is for socializing with friends. Students gather outside today's high schools to chat and smoke, and they often consider this socialization to be more important than their education. Many times the students will not return to classes but simply remain outside the school to continue their activities. Students also leave campus

to go out to breakfast or for other adventures. They drive to town, order breakfast, and stay at the restaurant to enjoy their food and conversation until they are ready to return to school—regardless of how many classes they miss. Students also joy-ride during school hours. Some even spend the whole day riding around town and visiting parks and forest preserves or hanging out at a friend's house.

Generally, what these students are doing is reverting to their childhood—their early childhood. When a person is four-years-old, he has no responsibilities other than to play, have fun, and enjoy being a child. Once that person enters school, his responsibilities begin to change. From first grade on, that child is accepting more and more responsibility and spending more and more time on school work. For most teenagers their only responsibility is to attend school and do the required work in order to prepare themselves for the time when they will be responsible for supporting themselves and conducting their own lives. School, at this point in their lives, is their job. Students who are truant from school in order to socialize are returning to the age of four when they had nothing to do but play. A teenager should be responsible enough, whether he is thirteen or eighteen, to attend a full day of school on a regular basis and do the work required of him. Parents and school officials who see children continuing to be truant from school become frustrated and angry because they know that the students are hurting themselves in the missed schoolwork, the lowered grades, and the lost credit. Frustration and anger occur, too, because of the hard work teachers undertake in preparing lessons and teaching classes and giving extra help. Teachers then see that certain students do not care enough about themselves or the efforts of others working on their behalf to even show up for class. Parents, too, often make a great deal of effort in trying to help their children attend school and do well, only to see their efforts frustrated by the continued truancy or misconduct of their children. Parents and teachers have to work hard every day to support themselves and their families. They have no choice but to report to work and do their jobs. If a student's schooling were treated as a job just as his parents or teachers, the truant student would not last very long but would quickly be fired for irregular attendance.

The efforts of teachers and parents to help students attend school regularly are efforts taken because teachers and parents care about teenagers. They don't want them to grow up to be irresponsible—they want to help them grow up and be able to manage their own lives successfully and responsibly. If a student demonstrates through continued truancy that she cannot responsibly run her own life, then she is, in a sense, inviting adults to interfere even more in her life, and through punishment and restrictions try to control her life to a degree which will not enable her to live it irresponsibly. In most cases, the more irresponsible a student is, the more restrictions she places on herself through adult intervention and control. If, indeed, the truant teenager wants more freedom and responsibility in her life, she should abide by the school regulations, demonstrate to her parents and to school officials that she can responsibly run her own life, and thusly receive more freedom in return.

Oftentimes, however, the teenager is more interested in proving himself to his friends or pleasing his friends than he is in pleasing his parents or teachers. If a number of students are going out to lunch rather than attending class, those truant students believe they must prove to each other that they are *adult* enough to choose for themselves what they do with their time. If they don't go along with the crowd, they feel they won't belong. They'll be

different. If a student feels that he would rather be like his truant friends than attend a class he knows he should attend, then that student should do some serious thinking about where he's going. Why is he in school in the first place? Is it primarily to have a good time and to please friends, or is it to help himself to grow and improve through education? Certainly everyone wants to be a part of a crowd and belong, but one is a weak individual indeed if he goes against his own beliefs simply for the sake of being part of the crowd.

Certainly, it is hard for one to go against the crowd, but the best solution to the problem is not to give in to something you know is wrong. One should stand on his own, and stick up for his beliefs. It's difficult but it's the only way one will receive the respect of others and of oneself. It doesn't take courage to conform to someone else's rules, but it does take courage to hold firm to your own beliefs.

Other Serious Impediments to School Attendance

Student Attitudes: Some students hold the attitude that certain classes (particularly P.E. class and study hall) are a waste of their time. Students in this category usually place a low value on education. Their attitude will not change until they can understand the importance of these classes. Talking with teachers, administrators, or counselors in their building will help them understand. Also the classes will be a waste of time for the student only if she makes it so. Some students show up at P.E. class but don't dress and don't participate. Yes, that is a waste, of time. Study hall should be planned for so that it isn't a waste of time. Essentially it's a free period. One can plan on doing the same thing there every day, such as math homework, or one can do whatever homework needs to be done. One can also make the experience more enjoyable by reading books, magazines, or newspapers or by working crossword puzzles or other word games. There also is usually a teacher on duty in study hall. Ask that teacher for homework help. Above all, make the experience profitable!

Socialization: Many students miss class simply to hang with friends. There are many chances for students to get together or chat outside of school. A student simply has to decide what's important in a case such as this.

Failure to do Homework: Some students don't go to class because they didn't do the homework and are afraid of embarrassment in the class for not having it done. Students have to become conscientious in doing their homework every day. If there isn't enough time for one to do all the required homework, a student should ask for tutorial help or help from his parents. Also the student should talk with the counselor about ways of organizing and studying more efficiently. The school librarian can also help in finding magazine articles, pamphlets and books on how to study effectively. The important thing in doing homework is to plan ahead and finish it before the next school day. If homework is not completed, demonstrate the courage to attend class, explain the situation to the teacher, and complete and submit the missed homework as soon as possible.

Peer Pressure: Many students do what their friends do in order to please their friends. If one has to ditch classes in order to belong to a group, one should, perhaps, find a new group. One should be able to find friends to hang with during the school day who do attend classes. Also a student might consider the fact that people respect others because they stand up for their beliefs. If a student ditches class and feels guilty about it but feels he may be pleasing his friends, he is not earning their respect. He could be a stronger person, attend classes, and hang with his friends after school. If his friends do respect him, they might even follow him to class.

Job: Some students consider a job more important than attending classes. They often leave school early to get to work on time and sometimes even work while they should be in school. Not only is the student breaking the state law on school attendance, but the employer is breaking the law by employing a student while he should be attending school. Some students work so late at night that they can't get up the following morning to attend school. In both cases the working student should talk with his employer in order to arrange a schedule that won't conflict with school. Perhaps shorter hours or a more reasonable schedule would help.

Bullying: Teens can be cruel. They can tease and taunt other students for any number of reasons. Students who are teased in a class may not want to attend regularly, and for good reason. No student should have to suffer abuse at school, and the quicker a student seeks help in these situations, the better. The student should seek help from his teacher, counselor, dean or other school administrator. These people are trained to deal with bullying, and they can be successful in correcting the situation. The student should not be afraid of bullying and run away but should be courageous and attack the problem constructively. Understand that there is something wrong with the bully—not with you.

Status Seeker: Some students who may subconsciously consider themselves unimportant, or even worthless, may seek status among their peers by playing the role of the hard guy or tough dude who mocks authority. By walking the halls during classes, hanging around outside the school and bragging about his truancy, this type of student sees himself as important among his friends and maybe even somewhat of a hero. He's fooling himself, however. Most people, even his friends, really have very little respect for this type of student and, in fact, probably think him to be foolish. The student could very likely be expelled from school, as many of these types of students are. He won't appreciate school until the day he is told that he can't come anymore—that he can't even step on the school campus.

Fear of Failure: Failure in a class is never something to be proud of and is never a pleasant experience. Some students are afraid to admit that they can't handle the work in a class. They feel they are going to fail a class, and rather than seek help or face the embarrassment of academic failure, they truant the class. When they then fail the class, they

can brag to their friends that they failed only because they didn't attend. They could have passed the class easily, but the teacher bored them or they were wasting their time. This student feels he's coming across as a big man to his friends. To himself, however, he's afraid. He's afraid because he knows he's actually a weak person, running away from a difficult problem. Many teachers grade on effort. If this student were in class every day working to the best of his ability and, perhaps, seeking help after school, he would almost certainly pass. There would then be no reason at all for this student to fear failure.

Fear of Work: Some students simply do not like to work. It's too hard. It takes effort. It's much easier to do nothing than to do something. This type of student is getting nowhere in school, and, if she doesn't change something about her habits and attitudes, she will get nowhere in life. She will more than likely be unsuccessful and unhappy. If she is too lazy to help herself, others such as parents and school administrators will put increasingly more pressure on the student to produce some work and make an effort at success in school. A lot of heartache will result on the part of the parents and the student because of the fights and arguments that will result from this pressure. The unpleasantness and continued hassles could be avoided by a minimum of effort in the classroom.

Smoking: Some students are so hooked on smoking that they feel that they have to leave the building for a quick cigarette between classes. Unfortunately, the quick cigarette usually lasts longer than planned, and the student is either late to class or truant from class. Little can be done for this student unless he quits smoking, at least during school hours. No one, however, quits smoking unless they really want to. Most teenagers, once they've started smoking have no desire to stop. They don't feel the harmful and painful physical effects of smoking because they are young, and smoking serves an important social function among friends. It makes them feel a part of the crowd. If a student wants to quit smoking, help is available from health teachers, counselors, school nurses, and librarians. When a habit such as smoking interferes with the productive aspects of a person's life, something should indeed be changed.

Emotional Problems: Because of the pressures of life, some people develop emotional problems which are responsible for their behaving differently than they usually do. Everyone has problems and pressures, and sometimes these problems become too much for one to handle. The person may experience a breakdown or a change of personality or a change of emotional character. In cases such as this, the individual can usually not help himself. He needs to talk for an extended period of time with a professional—a social worker, psychologist, therapist, or counselor. Usually people suffering from emotional problems will not seek help on their own. It is up to someone else to recognize that the person has a problem and try to coax them to get help. The only thing the student can do is to take the advice of concerned adults and cooperate in talking with a counselor or therapist.

Illness: Illness is often responsible for truancy. Sometimes a student will be at home for a long period of time with a legitimate illness. Anyone out of school for a long time for any reason has a very hard time returning to school and readjusting. Some students have been out of school so much for illness that they have gotten into the habit of being out of school. They are uncomfortable in school and overwhelmed by the amount of make-up work they face. It becomes easier to stay at home than to attend school. In extreme cases some students develop “school phobia” during long illnesses. This is a fear of school. The student is actually afraid to step into the school building. Some of these students never return to school. In cases like this it is important for the student (with the help of a school counselor or social worker) to simply get back into the school and once again develop the habit of going to classes and attending regularly. The habit of going to classes has to become stronger than the habit of staying at home.

Other students stay at home because of psychosomatic illnesses which are physical disorders brought on by emotional processes. Many times students will have cramps, upset stomachs, headaches, backaches, dizziness, nausea and other symptoms which keep them home from school. Many times the student with psychosomatic illnesses will miraculously recover enough by the time school is out to participate in an after-school activity or go out with friends. Oftentimes too, they will again be ill on the following morning. Any student whose attendance follows this pattern or who misses a lot of school due to illness should certainly see a doctor. If there is no physical cause for the ailments, the problem lies in the student’s mind and should be addressed by working with a social worker or therapist.

Learning Disabilities: Some students are truant from classes because they can’t do the work. They can’t do the work because of a problem they can’t help. They can get help, though, and correct the problem. Learning disabilities are physical or emotional problems which make it very difficult for a student to learn. She rarely knows that she has a disability, and these problems must be diagnosed by teachers or other school personnel or doctors. Learning disabilities can be addressed, and once a disability is diagnosed, the student should take the advice of the people helping her and do what they advise.

Language Differences: Some students may be foreign-born and still learning to speak the English language. Learning is doubly difficult for these students, and it becomes easy to run away and skip classes rather than to face the difficult problem of learning a new language. These students should talk over the problem with their teachers and work cooperatively with them. Ask for extra help. Teachers will be willing to give students having problems any help they possibly can. English tutors are available. The student should see a counselor to line up a tutor for help.

Don’t let truancy ruin your education, your relationships, and your future. Everyone has problems and difficulties in life, but truancy only makes everything worse. Show some

strength and courage, address your responsibilities at school, and ensure a successful future for yourself.