Truancy Packet #1: Focusing

Introduction

In this state any child between the ages of 7 and 16 years shall attend some public school . . .

You have been given this Truancy Packet because you were absent from school or classes without permission.

Truancy is any unexcused absence from required schooling. The term usually describes absences caused by students of their own free will, and usually does not refer to legitimate “excused” absences, such as ones related to medical conditions. The term’s exact meaning often differs from school to school, and is usually completely defined in your school’s handbook of rules.

The term “truancy” may also refer to students who attend school but do not go to classes.

In some schools, too many truant days may result in a student being prevented from graduating. In the short term, it usually results in disciplinary action.

A brief history of dealing with Truant Students

As soon as states and provinces made laws requiring students to attend school they realized they needed to create a job for the person who would enforce these laws. The “truant officer” became a common sight in many cities as he walked the streets in search of students who should be in class. Some schools could not afford a special truant officer so they gave the job to the janitor.

This history of one school’s truant officer is not unusual:

> In prior years, janitors doubled as truant officers. The first to serve in this capacity--in addition to his janitorial duties--was John Hewson, chief janitor in 1909. He received no increase in salary for the extra duty.

> The first full time truant officer was A. M. Jake Meyer, who retired in 1954 and
became U.S. Marshal in town.

Meyer was furnished a Ford sedan by the School District. He would drive around town seeking truants, carrying a golf club to defend himself against dogs. Meyer also took along a bloodhound to help persuade truants to return to school. The bloodhound “wouldn’t bite a piece of meat unless it was cooked, but those kids didn’t know it.”

Many truant officers were kind and understanding. There are stories of students who did not go to school because they had no shoes or were close to starving. Some truant officers carried boxes of clothing with them and would let children select items from the box before driving them to class.

Other truant officers, or “attendance officers,” as they later became known, were not so kind. There are stories of children being chased and beaten. Some officers were given a “bounty” for the “collection” of their students.

**Losing Focus: A reason for truancy**

One common reason for not going to school or class is called “losing focus.”

A student sits in class and looks around at the other students. He sees a couple girls up front in cheerleader outfits: they’re always giggling and talking to each other. Maybe there’s a game this weekend. Who knows? They talk to almost everybody in class and never get in trouble for it. Not him though.

And there are a couple of boys wearing football jerseys. They think they’re pretty cool. He can tell that lots of the other boys in class want to be like them. Not him. He doesn’t care.
There are about five or six kids up front who are the brains. The teacher loves them. They already have their notebooks out and are starting to take notes. Unbelievable. Class hasn’t even started yet and they’re studying the notes they took yesterday.

The teacher starts talking but he tunes her out. He stares out the window and thinks about all the things he could be doing. Biking over to the 7-Eleven. Fishing. Earning a couple bucks cutting grass. Listening to music. Watching a movie. Walking around the mall. Almost anything but being here.

It wasn’t always this way.

He can remember back in third or fourth grade when school was pretty good. His teachers liked him, he had plenty of friends and he did all right with grades.

Something happened when he got to junior high school though.

First, he started daydreaming more. Then his grades slipped.

He lost some of his friends, and got new ones. But his parents didn’t approve of his new friends.

He started getting in trouble in class. At first it was for little things: not paying attention, not turning in his homework (“I forgot”) and not having his book, his pencil or his notebook.

His grades got worse and it became harder and harder to listen to his teacher. He didn’t hear when she said something about homework. He forgot to look at what was written on the board before the final bell rang. And he always tried to be the first one out of the door.

When he was in school he just couldn’t concentrate. At least, he couldn’t focus on what the teacher was saying or what was in his book. His mind wandered and he thought about other things.

It seemed that the harder he tried to concentrate on his schoolwork, the more his mind drifted. His grades continued to slide.

Oh, sometimes he tried to pay attention. He tried to listen to
the teacher. He tried to be a good student. But when he went to write down the homework assignment he found he had forgotten his pen. Or he couldn’t find a piece of paper to write it on. “I’ll remember,” he said to himself. But he rarely did. Or if he did, he discovered he had left his book somewhere else.

His teachers started to keep him after school. “You’ll have to do your homework after school with me young man.” And then, for a while, he would try hard to remember all those things that he had to in order to do a good job. He would carry a pen in his book bag. He made sure he always had paper. And he carried all of his books with him - all the time. That way he made certain he had the right one.

But the book bag weighed a ton and he got tired of carrying it around. He started leaving his books in his locker. Then his paper and pen. It wasn’t long before it started all over again.

No focus. Bad grades. Too far behind.

Who cares?

**Getting it Back**

Is there any reason to start concentrating again? To get back on track with school? To earn better grades?

In almost every case, when a student loses direction and starts to give up, it’s not too late for a change. But the student has to want to do better. There have been many cases of students who had “given up” on school, let their grades go to Ds and Fs and then turned the corner and graduated. In fact, there are some multi-millionaires who almost quit school when they were 16 but changed their ways and became successful.

First, some good reasons to work on getting back in the game:

1. Money - A recent government report in the U.S. showed the following:
Adults aged 18 and older earned an average income of $34,626 per year. Average earnings ranged from $16,485 for high school dropouts to $26,156 for high school graduates, $49,656 for college graduates.

On average, a man with a high school education will earn about $2.2 million from ages 25 to 64 years. This compares to about $2.9 million for men completing a college degree. Further, men with less than a high school education will earn an average of $1.2 million. Women in the same age group completing high school will also earn an average of $1.2 million, about 60 percent less than the estimated $2 million for women completing a bachelor’s degree.

The bottom line is simple: stay in school because it pays to get your diploma.

2. Friends and relationships. Sure, almost everyone has friends. But what do your friends do for you? Do they help you improve or do they hurt your chances of improving?

One thing that has changed in the past few years is “networking.” Everyone seems to be talking about his or her “network.” Facebook is one of the biggest: it’s a website where users can join networks organized by city, workplace, school, and region to connect and interact with other people. The network lets one person (the individual) become “connected” with many others.

When you are a young teen the social network helps you find others to chat with about things that interest you. Many use it to talk about movies, video games, music, food and hundreds of other things. When you are an older teen the network can help you find job openings and/or give you ideas about where to find a job.

The real-world “face-to-face” network of your friends can give you a good idea of where you’re going. Look at your friends. If you’re still friends with them in ten years, what kind of job do you think they might help you get?

If you think you’re hanging around with the wrong kids, it might be time to ease yourself
away from them and start saying “hi” to some new people in the hallway or at the mall. By coming to school regularly and getting your grades up it will be easy to meet new friends.

Sure, at first it might be hard. But remember, you’re doing this for yourself - not for anyone else. Look around and see if you can find some “winners” to be in your network of friends.

**Fixing it**

It’s better to fix it yourself than wait for someone to do it for you.

It’s true.

Think about this situation:

Two brothers, one fifteen and one sixteen, are supposed to take turns taking out the trash every week. The rule is simple: gather the trash from around the house, put it in the trash can (separating the recyclables, of course) and take the can out to the street. It has to be done every Wednesday night because the trash truck comes through the neighborhood around 5:30 AM Thursday morning.

The sixteen-year-old, Josh, forgot. It happens. Then his brother, Jamie, took his turn at forgetting. Oh well.

So the whole family is inconvenienced until the trash truck comes back next week; wastepaper baskets overflow, the garage starts to stink and maybe those raccoons dump the can and make a mess in the back yard. Josh’s fault. Jamie’s fault.

After both Josh and his brother forget a couple of times their mom starts the punishments. First, with a warning:

*Both of you are old enough to know better. You can’t let this happen. So next time, you’ll be punished.*
A week later, “next time” gets to be experienced by Josh, because he blew it again.

Thursday morning: Josh briefly wakes up to hear the trash truck rumbling down the street at 5:30 AM and quickly falls back to sleep. A minute later he sits straight up in his bed. *Shoot! I forgot.*

Option Number One: Josh can face his mother in the morning and say, “Sorry, I forgot” and wait for her to explode and dish out the punishment. She’ll say something about being *disappointed.* And something about *growing up* and being *responsible.* And then maybe she’ll tell him he has to do the trash for the next two months. And that he has to take all the wastepaper and kitchen trash and put in in a garbage bag before he leaves for school. Oh yes, and he can’t use his cell phone for the next two weeks.

Option Number Two: Josh can come up with his own solution to the problem. In essence, he can come up with his own punishment. His goal is to punish himself enough to make his mom feel that it’s a good punishment but still leave him some personal freedom. Like, somehow, keep the cell phone out of it! So Josh can face his mother in the morning and say, “Sorry, I forgot. That was really stupid of me. I had to study for this test and I completely forgot, but that’s no excuse. I know I have responsibilities around here and I know I blew it. So I’ll make it up to you by taking the trash out every week for the next two months. And, of course, I’ll take care of everything this morning before I go to school. And I’ll do Jamie’s turn at the dishes for the next week too. That should pretty much guarantee that it won’t happen again.”

Associated Press - Nov. 2008

SAN ANTONIO — Court authorities will be able to track students with a history of skipping school under a new program requiring them to wear ankle bracelets with Global Positioning System monitoring.

Linda Penn, a Bexar County justice of the peace, said she anticipates that about 50 students will wear the thick ankle bracelets during the six-month pilot program recently announced. She said the time students wear the anklets will be on a case-by-case basis.

“We are at a critical point in our time where we can either educate or incarcerate,” Penn said, linking truancy with juvenile delinquency and later criminal activity.

Penn said students in the program will wear the ankle bracelets full-time and will not be able to remove them. They’ll be selected as they come through her court, and Penn will target truant students with gang affiliations, those with a history of running away and skipping school, and those who have been through her court multiple times.

Penn said the electronic monitoring is part of a comprehensive program she started four years ago to reduce truancy. She cited programs in Midland and Dallas as having success with similar electronic monitoring measures.
Whom do you want to design the punishment? You, or someone else?

Truancy breaks school rules. There are punishments. Be creative and be honest: figure out your own punishment and your own way to “fix the problem” before someone else has to step up and do it for you.

**Setting Goals**

It can be done. A goal is your personal plan to make improvements.

The best way to get your focus back is to set some goals. Don’t try to do everything at once! Like a football player who’s had an injury, you make your comeback slowly, one step at a time.

When losing your ability to focus on your responsibilities becomes a problem, getting it back starts with being prepared. First, you need paper and pencil and books. In fact, if you don’t have these main “tools” you’ll have a very hard time focusing on anything. You might need to give yourself a hint to remember your tools: put a rubber band around your wrist - it has a private meaning just for you - bring pencils, paper and books.

Once you have the tools, start making lists.

Write the important stuff down. What’s important? Sometimes that’s difficult to decide. The first two problems with making notes are writing too little and writing too much. Then, the third problem is finding what you wrote when you need it. Assignment notebooks help.

No, it doesn’t have to say “Assignment Notebook” on it. Any little notebook will do. Just start making notes to yourself in it. Notes about English or History or Science or Math. Notes about homework. Notes about a quiz. Once you start, you’ll find it easy.

Now that you’re equipped with some tools, you should start seeing some success again in school. Don’t be upset when you don’t get straight A’s right away. Good grades often take some time.

Two important goals that can get you started on the right path today include these confidence boosters:

- I know I can do it
- I will improve
Someone once said “Whatever the mind of man can conceive and believe, it can achieve.” In other words, a positive mental attitude can help one overcome any problem, any obstacle, anything. Just don’t give up. When a person gives up on himself, others tend to give up on him too.

“A positive mental attitude is the starting point of all riches, whether they be riches of a material nature or intangible riches.”

-Napolean Hill
STUDENT RESPONSE FORM

Focus

Answer the following questions in the space provided.

1. You have been given this packet because you were truant. Why were you truant?

2. Define the term “truant.”

3. What is the job of a “truant officer” or “attendance officer?”

4. How has the job of truant officer changed over the years?
5. Explain what it means to “lose your focus” as it relates to school.

6. When a student loses his or her focus in school what happens? Why?

7. Explain why you agree or disagree with the following: “All students get ‘off-task’ from time-to-time.”

8. This packet mentioned two good reasons for getting back on task. What are they and explain why each is important.

9. What is “networking” and how can it help you improve?
10. Why is it better to fix a problem yourself rather than let someone else “do it” for you?

11. Who is judge Linda Penn and how did she choose to punish the truant students?

12. Explain what is meant by “positive mental attitude.”

13. What are the “tools” one needs in order to get back on track at school?

14. What are you going to do to keep yourself from being truant again? Explain why you think your idea will work. This is the section where you’ll list goals.