

2.2 Attendance

Regular attendance and engagement in school is important for the development of intellectual and social emotional skills, and contributes significantly to not only educational outcomes⁵⁷ but outcomes across the life course. While engagement with school and learning is a multifaceted concept, absence can be considered a marker of disengagement.^{58 59} Understanding from the view of students the reasons behind attendance and absence from school is important to inform responses to absence and increase attendance.

Survey findings

- 74 per cent of Year 3 to Year 6 students and 67 per cent of Year 7 to Year 12 students said it is 'very important' to them to be at school every day.
- 24 per cent of Year 3 to Year 6 students 'worry lots' if they miss school, 55 per cent 'worry a little'.
- 12 per cent of Year 7 to Year 12 students had wagged school for a full day or more in the current school year.
- Seven per cent of Year 7 to Year 12 students had previously received a suspension.

Being at school every day

Three-quarters of Year 3 to Year 6 students (74.4%) reported that being at school every day is 'very important' to them, with the remaining one-quarter saying it is 'somewhat important' to them. A small proportion of respondents (2.1%) said it is 'not important' to them.

No statistically significant difference was found between male and female Year 3 to Year 6 students in regard to how important being at school every day is to them.

There was also no regional difference measured.

A significantly higher proportion of Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal Year 3 to Year 6 students said being at school every day is 'very important' to them (84.9% versus 73.4%).

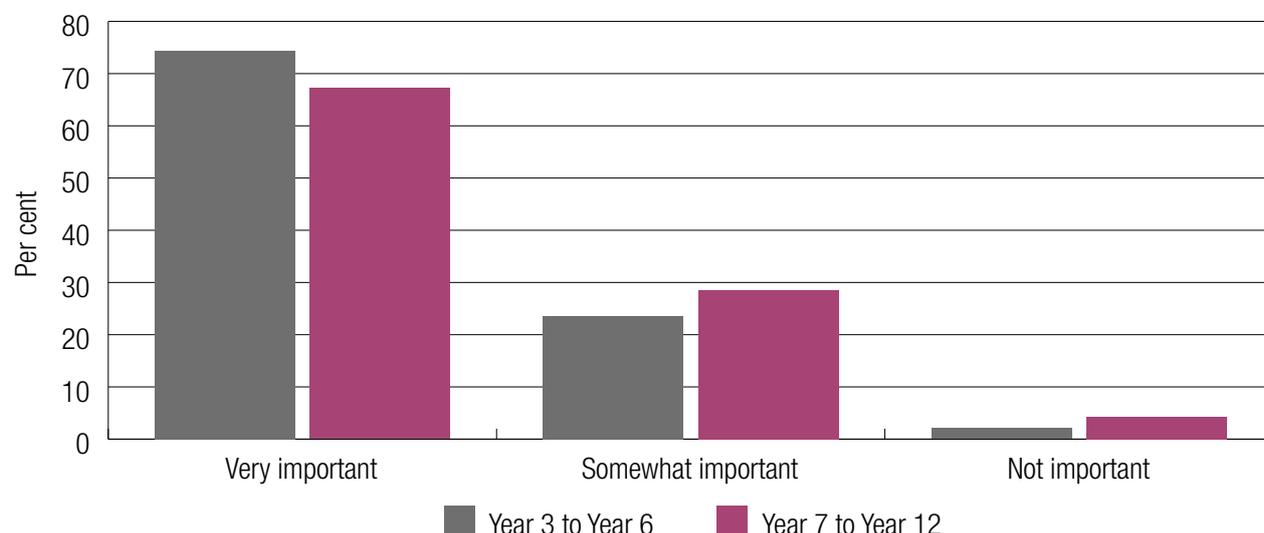
Table 2.3: Proportion of Year 3 to Year 6 students saying being at school every day is very important, somewhat important or not important, by selected characteristics

	Male	Female	Metropolitan	Regional	Non-Aboriginal	Aboriginal	All
Very important	71.5	76.6	72.9	76.7	73.4	84.9	74.4
Somewhat important	25.5	22.1	24.7	21.7	24.6	12.3	23.5
Not important	3.1	1.3	2.4	1.6	2.0	2.7	2.1

Among Year 7 to Year 12 students, two-thirds of respondents answered that it is 'very important' to them to be at school every day and 29 per cent said it is 'somewhat important' to them. The remaining four per cent answered that this is 'not important' to them.

This result represents a small shift in the proportions measured for Year 3 to Year 6 students.

Graph 2.4: Proportion of students saying being at school every day is very important, by year level



Similar to the younger cohort, there was little difference between male and female students and between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in Year 7 to Year 12 in regard to this question.

There was however a significant regional difference between male Year 7 to Year 12 students: 56.4 per cent of male students in regional areas answered that being at school every day is 'very important' to them – a significantly smaller proportion than the 69.1 per cent of male students in metropolitan areas who said the same.

Table 2.4: Proportion of Year 7 to Year 12 students saying being at school every day is very important, somewhat important or not important, by selected characteristics

	Male	Female	Metropolitan	Regional	Non-Aboriginal	Aboriginal	All
Very important	64.9	69.6	69.5	61.8	67.5	63.4	67.2
Somewhat important	30.9	26.5	26.9	32.4	28.3	31.7	28.6
Not important	4.2	3.9	3.6	5.8	4.2	4.9	4.3

Year 7 to Year 12 students who said being at school every day is 'somewhat important' or 'not important' to them were asked to write down some of the things that were more important to them than being at school.

Many students mentioned one or more of the following topic areas:

- being with and spending time with friends and/or family
- having time for me or myself – relaxing, being free, particularly stress-free
- doing things that promote being healthy – physically and mentally
- a sport or particular activity.

“My family and friends are more important to me than being at school. Also netball is a bit more important to me.”

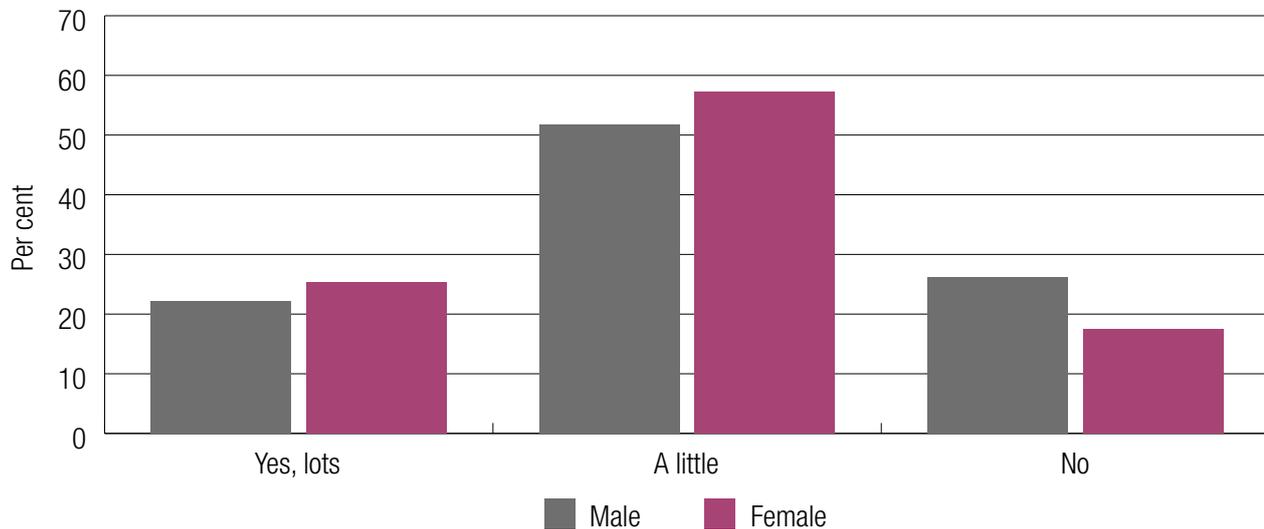
“Playing sport, hanging with friends, being a kid and messing around and spending time with family.”

“Taking days to step back and take a breath – mental health days [...] sometimes one day of school is less important than your mental health.”

Missing school

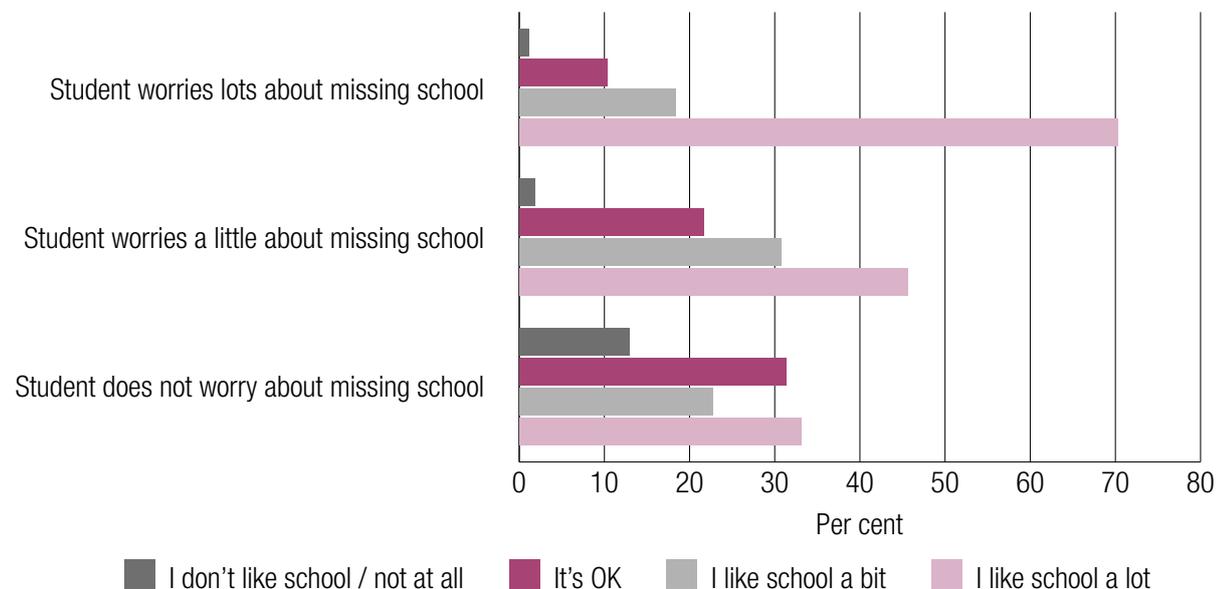
More than one-half of Year 3 to Year 6 students (55.0%) said they worry 'a little' if they miss school. About one-quarter of students answered 'lots' (23.9%) and the remainder (21.1%) said they did not worry about this. Girls were a little more likely than boys to worry about missing school (either 'a little' or 'lots').

Graph 2.5: Proportion of Year 3 to Year 6 students saying they worry lots, a little or they don't worry if they miss school, by gender



Students who answered that they 'worry lots' if they miss school were more likely than other students to like school 'a lot' (70.3% of students who worry 'lots' like school 'a lot' compared to 33.1% of students who 'don't worry' if they miss school).

Graph 2.6: Proportion of Year 3 to Year 6 students saying they worry lots, a little or they don't worry if they miss school, by how student feels about school



Wagging

Among Year 7 to Year 12 students, 12 per cent (n=82) had wagged school for a full day or more in the current school year (2016). Students in Year 3 to Year 6 were not asked questions related to wagging.

Of the 12 per cent of Year 7 to Year 12 students who reported wagging:

- The majority had wagged school for one or two days (46.3%) but more than one in 10 (13.4%) had wagged for 10 days or more in the referenced school year.
- More than two-thirds (69.1%) answered that their parents or the people who look after them know when they wag school.

The most common reasons for wagging were:

- I didn't feel like going to school (43.8%)
- Family reasons (37.5%)
- School is boring (27.5%).

Students who reported wagging also listed a range of 'other reasons' including feeling/being sick, having an injury and going on holidays.

Suspensions

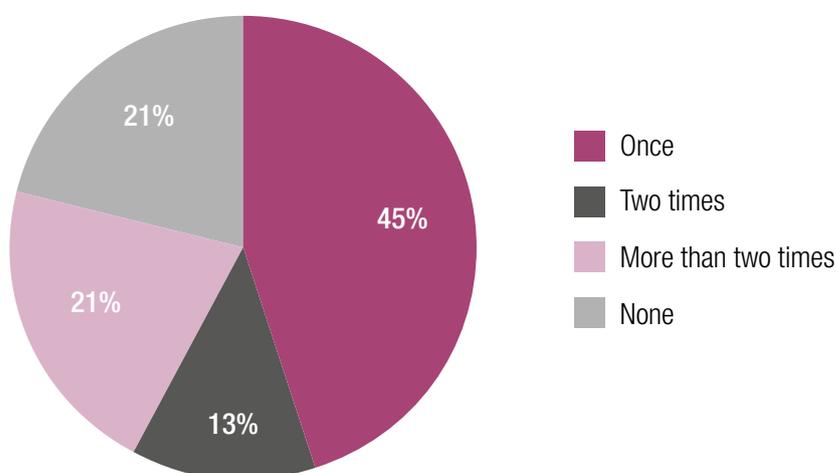
Seven per cent of Year 7 to Year 12 students (n=47) answered that they had previously been suspended from school and 6.6 per cent (n=46) reported that they had received an in-school suspension sometime in the past. About one-half (47.8%) of students who reported a suspension from school also reported an in-school suspension.

It is also interesting to note that the cohort of students who reported suspension(s) from school was not identical to the cohort who reported wagging. Only about one-fifth (21.7%, n=18) of students who reported wagging also reported having been suspended from school.

Male students were twice more likely than female students to have been suspended from school (9.8% of male students compared to 4.9% of female students) and nearly three times more likely to have received an in-school suspension (10.5% of male students compared to 3.9% of female students).

Those students who had previously been suspended were asked to identify how many times in the current school year (2016) they had been suspended. Almost 45 per cent (n=21) answered 'once', 13 per cent said 'two times' and 21 per cent said 'more than two times'.

Graph 2.7: Proportion of Year 7 to Year 12 students having been suspended in the current year, by number of suspensions



Group discussion findings

“When they are encouraged to come to school because (they know) that day (or any day) will be a good day.”
(Year 3 to Year 6)

Understanding why students are absent from school, from their own perspective, is an important element in responding to the complexity of attendance. Students clearly articulated the multi-layered factors influencing attendance and absence. Student, family and school factors all came into play. Responding to attendance concerns therefore requires multiple approaches and shared responsibility. What is clear from the student’s comments is that the relationships with their peers and school staff are significant factors in the motivation to attend. Schools that invest effort into creating a school culture in which students feel valued, accepted and safe are likely to increase student motivation to attend school. Students also articulated the need for support to prevent and to mitigate the effects of absence.

“Maybe if there is a reward each week for coming to school they will want to come.” (Year 3 to Year 6)

Relationships and attendance

The social aspect of school was highly significant for students in Year 3 to Year 12 and positive relationships with peers and teachers made school an enjoyable place to be. Poor relationships negatively influenced interest in learning and attendance, and made students feel anxious about going to school.

Students in Year 3 to Year 12 discussed how friendships gave them motivation to attend school and made school enjoyable. For some students, friendships were essential to provide the support that may not be available in the home.

The feelings and experiences associated with not having friends – such as feeling unsafe, unhappy or excluded – meant that students did not enjoy school and were not motivated to attend. Often experiences of school without friendships caused stress and anxiety. As discussed in Chapter 3.1 – Having friends and positive relationships with other students, relationships and spending time with friends gave students a sense of purpose to attend school and this purpose was diminished without friends.

Year 3 to Year 6	Year 7 to Year 12
<p><i>“They [friends] give you someone to look forward to and play with.”</i></p> <p><i>“You might be lonely and you need someone to talk to and you will also want to come to school more. Friends also encourage you and help you if you need a friend to talk to especially if you don’t want to talk to a teacher.”</i></p> <p><i>“Because if you don’t have any friends you might not want to go to school. No enthusiasm. Friends can encourage you to keep going.”</i></p> <p><i>“To make you happier and want to come to school more.”</i></p>	<p><i>“It’s one of the reasons people come to school for friends.”</i></p> <p><i>“I suppose not everyone has a great family and it might provide additional support. Also if they lean towards extraversion it might make them more likely to attend.”</i></p> <p><i>“You look forward to going to school.”</i></p> <p><i>“They distract you from the schoolwork, give you something to look forward to.”</i></p> <p><i>“Even for kids who don’t like school, having a group of friends gives them something to come to school for.”</i></p>
<p><i>“If you don’t have friends you won’t want to go to school.”</i></p> <p><i>“[...] you’d be upset and bored.”</i></p> <p><i>“If you don’t have friends you will always be lonely and might not be willing to attend school all the time. Without friends you will always be the left one out in group activities and leave you with someone you dislike. You will also have no one to talk to when you need someone the most.”</i></p> <p><i>“School would not be worth coming to.”</i></p> <p><i>“I would be by myself and be really lonely. I would hate coming to school.”</i></p> <p><i>“You will feel lonely and people will tease you and make fun of you. You will start feeling depressed. You will hate school and start skipping school.”</i></p>	<p><i>“You will feel like not going to school anymore and not being interested.”</i></p> <p><i>“You feel unsafe and unable to come because you will get bullied.”</i></p> <p><i>“You don’t have support when you need it. This means that you may breakdown and turn to drugs for help. It also means you won’t enjoy school as much. This will make you want to ditch and do something more interesting.”</i></p> <p><i>“Then you struggle to find the motivation to come to school. For many people seeing your friends is the highlight of the day.”</i></p> <p><i>“A lower self-esteem can make you want to wag school if you don’t have any friends.”</i></p> <p><i>“You might not want to come to school without them.”</i></p>

Similarly, relationships with teachers influenced student attendance. Positive student-teacher relationships meant students were more likely to enjoy school, whereas if student-teacher relationships were not positive or non-existent, students were less likely to enjoy school and would not want to attend.

Year 3 to Year 6	Year 7 to Year 12
<p><i>“Because if you don’t get along with your teachers you won’t be happy and then you wouldn’t want to come to school.”</i></p> <p><i>“If the teacher is nice and the student really likes school the student will have a reason to be excited to come each day and see someone nice.”</i></p>	<p><i>“May increase duration at school.”</i></p> <p><i>“You might not want to learn or come to school/class.”</i></p> <p><i>“If you don’t get along with them you may not want to go to their class and maybe even come to school.”</i></p>

These comments from students emphasise the importance of relationships with peers and school staff for making school a place students want to be. When students are in a positive environment and feel a sense of belonging and that people care about them, they are more likely to be motivated to attend school.

Sense of safety

Students emphasised feeling and being safe as critical for school and learning. Bullying was a factor that made students feel unsafe at school and, for some, made them not want to attend, whereas for others the uncomfortable feeling of not being welcome or of not having friends influenced their sense of safety.

Year 3 to Year 6

- “It may help kids come to school if they know they’re safe and are in good hands. And know that no one will harm them. It may help if we stop bullies.”*
- “It may be hard for kids to come to school if they are being bullied or don’t feel safe.”*
- “They might be scared of bullies and won’t come to school.”*

Obstacles to attendance

Students in Year 3 to Year 6 discussed several obstacles to their attendance at school. These included transport access, family situations and organisation to get to school.

Year 3 to Year 6

- “It may be hard for kids to go to school if they have family issues. If their mum or dad don’t drive a car they might miss or be late for school.”*
- “They can’t get to school on time.”*
- “[Hard] To get up in the morning.”*
- “Phones have alarms on them so some kids use them to get up early in the morning. It is difficult for teachers to get ready for school at 8 o’clock.”*

Impact on learning

Students in all year levels noted that absences from school and from the classroom can make learning or receiving support for learning difficult. This included when students attended extension or gifted and talented programs, with students explaining they missed 'regular' class.

Year 3 to Year 6	Year 7 to Year 12
<p><i>"My friend needs help because he always travels and can't have as much time for homework."</i></p> <p><i>"If they are away and other kids get to practice more, it is hard to learn the play or recital that they are doing."</i></p> <p><i>"When kids are away from school e.g. sick or on holidays. Kids are at other classes e.g. Imagineers."</i></p>	<p><i>"Being sick and next day it's hard to catch up."</i></p> <p><i>"Missing lots of classes."</i></p> <p><i>"Travelling."</i></p> <p><i>"School attendance – wagging [makes it hard for kids to get support]."</i></p>

Students across Year 3 to Year 12 expressed a desire for strategies to mitigate the negative effects of absence. Students in Year 7 to Year 12 suggested that to know the curriculum content before coming to class was a helpful strategy to prepare for class and for when they were away. Students felt it was unfair that they needed to cover missed learning in their own time and suggested that school staff should help them understand the work they had missed. Support for gaps in learning is particularly important for students who may have interrupted connections to schooling, such as students who experience high mobility, homelessness, illness or caring responsibilities.^{60 61 62 63}