

School Absenteeism Among Children and its Correlates: A Predictive Model for Identifying Absentees

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Objectives: To determine the magnitude of absenteeism and its correlates and to develop a model to predict absenteeism in school children.

Design: A cross-sectional study.

Setting: Three government schools in Delhi.

Participants: 704 students, aged 10 to 15 years.

Methods: Students were registered and interviewed using a pre-designed questionnaire. The frequency and causes of school absenteeism were ascertained by school records, leave applications and one month's recall. The factors were subjected to univariate analysis and a stepwise multiple logistic regression analysis and a predictive model was developed.

Results: The average absenteeism of a student over 6 months was 14.3 ± 10.2 days (95% CI 13.5-15.0). 48% children absented themselves for more than two days per month on an average. The main factors associated with school absenteeism were younger age, male sex, increasing birth order, lower levels of parental education and income, school truancy, school phobia and family reasons. The discriminating ability of the predictive model developed was 92.4%.

Conclusions: It is possible to identify potential absentees in school children.

Key words: Academic performance, Child, India, School absenteeism.

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School absenteeism has been studied in detail in relation to various social and physical causes(1,2). School absenteeism has been linked to maternal education, residence, and specific illnesses like asthma, headache, abdominal pain, etc(3-7). However, role of social pressures like poverty, part-time jobs etc. has not been explored. There is paucity of literature comprehensively assessing the various factors leading to school absenteeism.

We conducted this study to assess the magnitude of school absenteeism and to study its correlates. Identification of social, demographic and medical correlates may help in predicting children at higher risk of absenting themselves and ensuring timely preventive interventions.

METHODS

A cross-sectional, school based study was conducted

in three government schools in South Delhi. The absenteeism was studied over a 6 month period from July to December 2006. Total of 704 children, of both sexes in the age group 10-15 years were registered in standards 6 to 9, in all the three schools. Each standard had 3 to 5 sections, varying across schools. Of the standards having 3 sections, one section per standard was randomly selected and all students in selected classes were eligible to be enrolled. Where there were more than 3 sections per standard, 2 were chosen randomly. Participants were included following an informed written consent. Repeat visits were undertaken to interview those who were absent at the first visit. Students who contributed only a few school days due to late admission in the current session or who left the school were excluded.

At enrolment, information on socio-demographic profile of the students was collected. It included age,

sex, class, education and occupation of the parents, their family structure and income. The socio-economic status was calculated as per the Revised Kuppuswami's Scale for determining socio-economic status of urban families (2001).

A pre-designed questionnaire was administered to ascertain the duration of absence and the causes for absenteeism, medical and non-medical. Participants were assured of confidentiality and were inquired about school truancy and various phobias of schools, teachers and subjects. The causes of absenteeism were also ascertained by school records, leave applications and one month's recall by the students. Students, teachers and parents were interviewed whenever needed.

The average absenteeism of more than 2 days per month (i.e. 12 days in the 6 month study period), was defined as significant absenteeism, for the purpose of our study. Despite extensive review of existing literature, there is no consensus on the level of absenteeism which may be regarded as significant. Previous studies have considered absenteeism even when the child was absent on a single day, to define their own criterion for absenteeism(8-10).

Data were analyzed using Stata 9.1 software. The average number of days of absence in the 6 months reference for each child was calculated along with 95% confidence interval. The proportion of significant absentees was determined along with 95% confidence interval. The correlates of significant absenteeism were assessed by calculating the odds ratios. Stepwise multiple logistic regression analysis was performed to identify predictors of absenteeism.

RESULTS

A total of 704 students were registered of which 332 (47.16%) were boys. The mean number of days of absenteeism over the 6 month study period was 14.3±10.2 days (95% CI 13.5-15.0). The total number of working days was 140.2±8.6 days over the last 6 months. Hence, the average absenteeism per child was 10.2%. Only 9 children did not miss a single school day. Many had missed 1-6 days (26.6%), 6-12 days (24.4%), 13-18 days (17.1%), 19-24 days (10.2%) or 25+ days (20.4%). 336 (47.8%) children had significant absenteeism.

TABLE I RELATIONSHIP OF SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS WITH SIGNIFICANT SCHOOL ABSENTEEISM

Factors	Absentees (n=336)	Others (n=368)
Sex*		
Male	208 (61.9%)	124 (33.7%)
Female	128 (38.1%)	244 (66.3%)
Age group(yrs)*		
< 14	250 (74.4%)	191 (51.9%)
≥ 14	86 (25.6%)	177 (48.1%)
Standard*		
6	92 (27.4%)	40 (10.9%)
7	122 (36.3%)	102 (27.7%)
8	68 (20.2%)	112 (30.4%)
9	54 (16.1%)	114 (31%)
Birth order*		
1	42 (12.5%)	123 (33.4%)
2	133 (39.6%)	143 (38.9%)
3	83 (24.7%)	57 (15.5%)
4	40 (11.9%)	41 (11.1%)
5	38 (11.3%)	4 (1.1%)
Religion		
Hindu	288 (85.7%)	330 (89.7%)
Non Hindu	48 (14.3%)	38 (10.3%)
Mother's education*		
≤5 standard	180 (53.6%)	97 (26.4%)
>5 standard	156 (46.4%)	271 (73.6%)
Father's education*		
≤8 standard	124 (36.9%)	82 (22.3%)
>8 standard	212 (63.1%)	286 (77.7%)
Residence		
City	107 (31.8%)	120 (32.6%)
Urban slum	229 (68.2%)	248 (67.4%)
Occupation*		
Unskilled	48 (14.3%)	14(3.8%)
Semi skilled	81 (24.1%)	33 (9%)
Skilled	83 (24.7%)	95 (25.8%)
Clerk/Shop	112 (33.3%)	161(43.8%)
Semi Professional	12 (3.6%)	65 (17.6%)
Family size*		
≤4	63 (18.8%)	95 (25.8%)
5	80 (23.8%)	147 (39.9%)
6	67 (19.9%)	48 (13%)
7	61 (18.25%)	46 (12.6%)
8	65 (19.3%)	32 (8.7%)
Family income/mo (Rs.)*		
≤6,100	78 (23.2%)	6 (1.6%)
6,101-10,160	92 (27.4%)	5 (1.4%)
10,161-15,280	104 (30.9%)	11 (3%)
>15,281	62 (18.5%)	346 (94%)

*P<0.01.

TABLE II CAUSES OF SCHOOL ABSENTEEISM REPORTED BY STUDENTS

Cause	Absentees <i>n</i> = 336	Others <i>n</i> = 368	OR (95% CI)	<i>P</i> value
Part-time job	72 (21.4%)	0 (0%)	-	<0.001
Illness	182 (54.2%)	187 (50.8%)	1.14 (0.85-1.54)	0.37
Chronic illness	51 (15.2%)	14 (3.8%)	4.52 (2.45-8.34)	<0.001
Perception of ill health	150 (44.64%)	129 (35.1%)	1.49 (1.10-2.02)	<0.001
Family function	162 (48.2%)	115 (31.2%)	2.05 (1.51-2.78)	<0.001
Family illness	103 (30.6%)	62 (16.85%)	2.2 (1.52-3.12)	<0.001
Family problem	141(42%)	36 (9.8%)	6.7 (4.44-10.01)	<0.001
School phobia	159 (47.32%)	82 (22.3%)	3.13 (2.26-4.34)	<0.001
School truancy	59 (17.6%)	2 (0.5%)	39.0 (9.44-160.90)	<0.001
School load	167 (49.7%)	121(32.9%)	2.02 (1.49-2.44)	<0.001
Tuitions	27 (8%)	0	-	<0.001

Male sex, increasing birth order and family size, lower parental education and income were identified to be associated with significant school absenteeism (*Table I*). Causes responsible for their school absenteeism, as reported by the students are listed in *Table II*.

On stepwise multiple logistic regression analysis, gender, age group, birth order, parents' education and income, school phobia, school truancy, school load and absenting for family reasons were found to be independent significant factors responsible for school absenteeism (*Table III*). Based on these factors, we developed a model to predict absenteeism, taking the sum of the regression coefficients weighed by the code for each predictor. All the variable scores for a particular child were summed up to arrive at a final score.

The total score generated can range from a minimum of -6.1 to a maximum of + 6.5. A positive score i.e. ≥ 0 indicates that there are 87.7% chances of that child being a significant absentee, whereas a negative score i.e. < 0 indicates that there are 79.5% chances of that child being a regular attendee. For this model, the area under the receiver operating characteristic (ROC) curve was calculated to be 92.4% (*Fig. 1*).

We also found that school absenteeism had negative correlation with the academic performance

of the students ($r = -0.513$).

DISCUSSION

The average absenteeism per child in our study is 10.2%. Gender (male sex) age group, birth order, parents' education and income, school phobia, school truancy, school load and absenting for family reasons were found to be independent significant factors related to increased school absenteeism.

As compared to a study conducted by Awasthi, *et al.*(8) in 2000-2001 who calculated prevalence as 4.7%, the absenteeism has increased. However in New York(2), percentage of absenteeism varied between 7.3% to 17.8%. The factors found significant in our study are consistent with previous

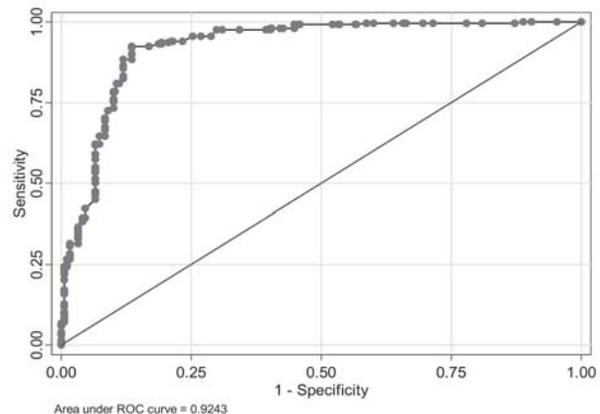


FIG.1. The receiver operating characteristic curve.

TABLE III PREDICTIVE MODEL BASED ON MULTIVARIATE REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Variable	Code	Regression coefficient	OR	95% CI
Sex		-1.40		
Male	0		1.00	
Female	1		0.25 (0.15-0.40)	
Family care		1.76		
No	0		1.00	
Yes	1		5.81 (3.15-10.73)	
Age group (years)		-1.50		
<14	0		1.00	
≥14	1		0.22 (0.13-0.39)	
School phobia		1.17		
No	0		1.00	
Yes	1		3.22 (1.87-5.54)	
School truancy		2.69		
No	0		1.00	
Yes	1		14.78(2.92-14.85)	
Birth order		0.71		
<3	0		1.00	
≥3	1		2.02 (1.21-3.38)	
Father's education		-0.68		
≤8 standard	0		1.00	
>8 standard	1		0.51(0.29-0.87)	
Mother's education		-1.15		
≤5 standard	0		1.00	
>5 standard	1		0.32 (0.19-0.53)	
Income (Rs.)		-2.58		
≤10,160	0		1.00	
>10,161	1		0.08(0.03-0.16)	
Family illness / demise		0.67		
No	0		1.00	
Yes	1		1.96 (1.00-3.84)	
School load		1.25		
No	0		1.00	
Yes	1		3.49(2.10-5.77)	

studies linking absenteeism to male gender(8), younger age(11), increasing birth order(12) and lower parental education and income(1,13,2). A different trend was seen in the NCHS study(2) where absenteeism was higher among older students. Ananthakrishnan, *et al.*(11) found no significant gender difference. The differences may be attributable to different settings of the study. Despite extensive research we could not find a multivariate analysis of the factors of school absenteeism.

We developed the model based on the factors found to be significant. Our prediction models appear to be useful for predicting prospective absentees incorporating relevant risk factors. There are no existing models to predict absenteeism. This model can be applied to all the students in the given setting; however, modification and further evaluation by receiver operating characteristic curve may be required when applied to a different setting(14,15).

Hence, school absenteeism has a high magnitude, with 48% children absenting themselves for more than two days per month. Our model predicts the chances of a particular child to be an absentee. The predictive value of the model is about 92.4% and can be used for timely preventive interventions

Contributors: PP conceptualized and designed the study, interpreted data, revised manuscript and approved the final version to be published. She will act as guarantor of the study. PU acquired the data, drafted the article and helped in final approval of the manuscript. VS analyzed the data, revised contents and helped in final approval.

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WHAT IS ALREADY KNOWN?

- School absenteeism is associated with asthma, headache, abdominal pain, male sex, younger age, increasing birth order and lower parental education and income.

WHAT THIS STUDY ADDS?

- This study provides a model to predict absenteeism in school children based on its correlates and also identifies school truancy, school phobia, school load and absenting for family reasons as new independent significant factors associated with school absenteeism in the population studied.

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