

The purpose of this newsletter is to provide parents with helpful parenting tips and useful resources.

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School Refusal Overview

School refusal occurs when a student will not go to school or frequently experiences severe distress related to school attendance. Parents can also do several things to help their child who refuses to attend school. School refusal is considered more of a symptom than a disorder and can have various causes. If the school refusal is severe, formalized treatment, psychiatric help, or medical evaluation may be necessary.



School Refusal: Symptoms and Signs of School Refusal

School refusal typically occurs in children 5-7 years of age and also in those 11-14 years of age. During these years, children are dealing with the changes of starting school or making the transition from elementary or middle school to high school. Preschoolers may also develop school refusal without any experience of school attendance.

Generally, the child or adolescent refuses to attend school and experiences significant distress about the idea of attending school. Truancy is when a student is absent from school without permission. The truant student generally brags to others (peers) about not attending school, whereas the student with school refusal, because of anxiety or fear, tends to be embarrassed or ashamed at his or her inability to attend school.

Signs of school refusal can include significant school absence (generally one week or more) and/or significant distress even with school attendance. Distress with school attendance may include the following:

- Anxiety (Social, Generalized, Performance, Separation)
- Bullying
- Depression
- Health Related Concerns
- A child who cries or protests every morning before school
- An adolescent who misses the bus every day
- A child who regularly develops some type of physical symptom when it is time to go to school

http://www.emedicinehealth.com/school_refusal/page3_em.htm#school_refusal_symptoms_and_signs (adapted from emedicinehealth)



Treating School Refusal



As a parent you are the ally in assisting your child in returning to school. It is important that your child's desire to stay home is assessed. Motivating factors need to be determined (i.e. stress at school, bullying, bonding time with parent, playing games, or other fun activities when he or she is at home during school hours). If the school refusal is driven by a negative factor, you will need to determine the conflict in discussion with your child and school. The school is a reliable resource in assisting your child back into their school routine. Therefore, a collaborative approach is essential between parents, your child's privately based therapist, and the school to ensure a consistent plan. Additionally, communication between the school based counselor and your child's private therapist is helpful. The school based counselor can provide additional emotional support, teach appropriate coping skills, and provide opportunity to practice these skills.

If your child receives privately based therapy, research has shown that several different types of treatments can be beneficial including cognitive behavioral therapy, systematic desensitization, exposure therapy, and operant behavioral techniques. Other strategies to assist your child can include relaxation training, social skills training, setting up rewards or contingencies based on school attendance, goal-setting, and teaching children to use helpful thoughts and actions when they are worried or fearful.

It is important to get the child back to school, because the longer he/she is away, the harder it is likely to be to return to a school routine. Some other key points to consider (depending on the cause):

- It is important to believe that your child will overcome these challenges
- Remind your child that you believe in him/her
- Try not to let your child see that you are worried
- Listen to your child and encourage him to tell you about his/her feelings and fears
- Let your child know that you can understand how he/she feels
 - For example say, "That must feel really scary to you"
- Don't make fun of your child's feelings or make statements like "big boys aren't scared," instead say something like "everyone is afraid sometimes"
- Normalize and validate your child's feelings

Resource: http://www.emedicinehealth.com/school_refusal/article_em.htm#school_refusal_overview

Helpful Resources

National Association of School Psychologists:

<http://www.nasponline.org/resources/principals/School%20Refusal%20April%20NASSP.pdf>

Podcast Presentation by Dr. Katharina Manassis, MD

<http://www.adaa.org/resources-professionals/podcasts/school-refusal>

Helpful Book for Parents:

Getting Your Child to Say "Yes" to School: A Guide for Parents of Youth with School Refusal Behavior by Christopher Kearney

Scholarly Article on School Refusal:

School Refusal in Anxiety-Disordered Children and Adolescents

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