

When Children Don't Want to Go to School

What is School Refusal or Avoidance?

Nearly one-third of all children go through a phase when they don't want to go to school. This happens most often in kids who are between 5 and 7, and between 11 and 14. They may develop a fear of leaving the shelter of their home, and may insist that they feel sick. Their behavior may include any of the following:

- Anxiety
- Excessive crying
- Temper tantrums
- Refusing to stay alone in their rooms
- Following the parent through the house
- Wanting to be held
- Worrying about the parents' safety
- Worrying about their own safety
- Fears of animals and monsters
- Inability to fall asleep
- Bad dreams

If the children are allowed to stay home, they seem to calm down and feel better quickly. Many parents have a hard time dealing with this behavior when it becomes a daily struggle. In many cases, this type of behavior starts right after the child has been at home with the parents for several days or weeks, such as on a vacation, or it may happen after a stressful event or change in the family, such as moving to a new home and school, or the death of a family member or pet.

A child who refuses to go to school for several weeks or longer may develop both social and academic problems. If the child's feelings of fear and anxiety are not addressed, he or she is at risk for developing an anxiety disorder. Older children and adolescents who refuse to go to school generally need more serious treatment.

School refusal behavior includes any problem relating to attending school that lasts longer than 2 weeks. It can range from refusing to attend school at all to attending school under strong protest. Some kids protest and argue every morning, but do attend; others go to school but regularly leave during the day. They may continually look for ways to avoid school and plead with their parents to be allowed to stay home. To be considered school refusal, the behavior must be initiated by the child and not the result of a problem at home that prevents the child from attending school.

Why do Kids Refuse to Go to School?

Children may refuse to go to school for many reasons. The most common ones include the following:

- Wishing to avoid situations at school that cause feelings of anxiety or depression
- Wishing to avoid certain people who the child dislikes
- Wanting to avoid situations that cause discomfort, such as taking tests or having to speak in front of the class
- Wanting to get the attention of family members
- Wanting to spend school time doing more enjoyable things with one's parents or family members

What is the Treatment for School Refusal?

If school refusal behavior lasts more than 2 weeks, it is important to seek treatment for the child to prevent the development of more serious emotional and academic problems. The following steps should be considered:

- Meet with the child's teacher and discuss his or her view of the problem and its causes
- Ask the school psychologist or counselor to assist with the assessment of the situation. He or she may interview the child and administer one or more assessment questionnaires to determine the causes, and recommend a treatment plan

Depending on the diagnosis, the treatment may include any of the following:

- Medication to treat an underlying anxiety disorder or depression
- Relaxation training
- Positive reinforcement for gradually returning to normal school attendance
- Individual counseling to explore feelings about negative situations at school, and to teach coping skills for dealing with anxiety
- Training to develop social and problem-solving skills
- Parent training to deal effectively with negative behaviors and to reward positive behaviors
- Family counseling to help the family manage conflict and communicate effectively

Suggested Readings:

- McEwan, Elaine. *When Kids Say No To School: Helping Children at Risk of Failure, Refusal, or Dropping Out*. Colorado Springs, CO: Harold Shaw Publishing, 1998.
- Heyne, David & Rollings, Stephanie. *School Refusal: Parent, Adolescent and Child Training Skills*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002.