

## Tips and Tricks for School Refusal

Does your child complain of a stomach ache when going to or at school? If your child stays home, do the symptoms vanish, only to reappear the next morning? Does your child throw a tantrum or make excuses to stay home when you try to make your child go to school? If so, your child may have what's known as school refusal. Children with school refusal have a very difficult time getting to school and/or staying in school. These parents have likely spent plenty of time and energy trying to get their



child to school, but with little or no success. There are many possible causes for this behavior. The symptoms of separation anxiety, social anxiety, depression, an undiagnosed learning disability or reading disorder may also play a significant role in the development of school refusal. If your child refuses to go to school you may have noticed some of the following:

- A child who cries or protests every morning before school
- Excessive reluctance to be alone at any time
- Repeated complaints of physical symptoms whenever the child is about to leave a significant parental figure
- Excessive worry about losing a parent; excessive worry that a parent might be harmed
- Persistent refusal to go to sleep without a parent or other caretaker present
- A child who regularly develops some type of physical symptom when it is time to go to school

*Listed are some methods to try out:*

### **1. Check for physical/underlying needs.**

- **Physical Needs:** Doctor and/or psychologist to evaluate - is there a valid medical concern?
- **Safety:** Is there bullying taking place?
- **Ability:** Is there a learning disability?

**2. Safe to feel:** Talk to your child, validate their concerns, avoid lecturing. Talk about what's bothering them, while at the same time making it clear that a plan will be made to return to school. Keep in mind, though, that some children can't describe what is bothering them. Be caring throughout, don't force conversation if it doesn't seem to be

going anywhere. The most important message to convey is this: their concern is valid(connection), you believe your child can conquer this problem(confidence), and you'll be there to help them through it(safety). It may also be helpful to explain that many people have this problem.

- Use clear, calm statements to let your child know that you expect them to go to school. Say 'when' rather than 'if'. For example, you can say, 'When you're at school tomorrow ...' instead of 'If you make it to school tomorrow ...'.
- Your child may be concerned about a specific problem, from the bus to a bully, but can't quite express or understand what they want to avoid. If they say they don't want to go to school because of a tummy ache, try to help them connect the dots by saying, "You know, sometimes my tummy hurts when I'm worried about being late. But if I think about how to be on time, my tummy usually stops hurting. What are you worried about?"

**3. If at all possible DO NOT let your child stay home.** The hard-wired biological response to most scary things is to run or fight. Staying home is avoiding, which in this situation is the equivalent of running. Please understand this: Avoiding will give immediate relief, which in turn becomes powerfully reinforced. Reinforce simply means that something is likely to be repeated. It can be more powerful than mom and dad being mad. Once you allow this, the desire to stay home will get stronger and stronger.



If they do stay home (maybe due to a legitimate sickness) have them stay in bed and don't allow screen time. Staying home shouldn't be a party - make it as boring as possible and take away any fun free time activities. They should be doing homework, chores, etc. Fun activities after school like playing at a friend's or going to a party are a privilege that they lose if they stay home from school.

**4. Make a sick policy ahead of time:** Only fevers can keep you home. One suggestion to avoid a power struggle is to decide ahead of time that the school nurses/health clerks

are the only ones who can decide whether the child is sick. Although it's unsettling to see your child intensely distressed about attending school, try to remain calm and supportive, but ultimately firm.

**5. Take care of yourself.** Do your best to not take the blame and prepare to get simplified suggestions and advice from well meaning or judgmental observers. If you haven't had this happen to yourself or your child, it is hard to understand and so many people will minimize this problem. Everyone gets to take a peek into your family and it may not be compassionate. Seeing your child in distress may also cause you a significant amount of distress. You may have thoughts that you are a bad parent, you are harming your child, or your child doesn't think you love them. Recognize their behavior may be possible manipulation to stay with you or be at home. Their behavior does not make you a bad parent!

**6. Make a plan and stick to it.** Keeping your child's routine for school/mornings consistent helps them to know what to expect. Make morning routines as smooth as possible. Layout clothes and pack backpacks the night before, wake up on time, etc. Again, let your child know not going to school isn't an option.

## **7. Incentive and Intervention Ideas**

- Set up an incentive plan (working towards a reward). Sticker charts for coming everyday, a prize at the end of the school day, etc.
- *Get someone else to drop your child at school.* Children often cope better with separation at home rather than at the school, near the classroom.
- When your child goes to school, praise him by describing what he might be feeling. You could say, 'I know this is very hard and I am proud of you for trying hard'.
- Have another student meet them at school.
- **Avoid long goodbyes!** Say goodbye, convey a statement of care (I love you, have a great day) and leave.
- Give students a special job at school. Water a plant, take care of a stuffed animal, write the date on the board, collect homework, mentor another student, wipedown the tables, be the kindness catcher, etc.
- Buddy System-If your child can be placed with a buddy for reading, math, music, or any other activity that the teacher feels would work best, your child and their buddy will have a better opportunity to develop a friendship over time. This interaction will help both students improve in the subject they are helping each

other with, have better social interaction at school, and feel stronger desire to attend school each day.

- Gradual exposure, 1. Take your child to school, drive by, or park outside. 2. Walk to the door and walk through the hallways of the school. 3. Go to class and spend increasing time at school - each time letting your child know what time you will be there to pick them up. **BE THERE ON TIME!**
- In some extreme cases, a shortened day can be considered.

**8. PRAISE, PRAISE, PRAISE.** When your student is making an effort, or they are successful praise them! Say things like, “I am so proud of you for going to school today”, This will go a long way in their effort in coming to school. A word of caution: Students sometimes use these times as a way to bring up the negatives again. Try to praise and then **DO NOT** engage in debating the ‘negatives’ again. Ex: “But my stomach hurt all day!”

#### **9. Skills that may help.**

- Learn about the brain, how it works, and why we worry.
- If they have anxiety, depression, learning disability etc., educate them about it. Help to normalize some of these experiences while expressing love and communicating to them that these issues don’t make them “bad”, “imperfect”, or “flawed.” Therapy or counseling may be considered if you feel they have these concerns.
- Breathing techniques.
- Meditation/relaxation videos
- Print out a picture of a parent or someone who is special to them to take to school.
- Bring a stuffed animal or toy that is comforting (talk to teacher to let them know)
- Try reading “The Kissing Hand” by Audrey Penn.

#### **10. Other Helpful hints.**

- Be Patient. Working through your child’s school refusal will not be resolved quickly. So be patient and be proud of the small accomplishments.
- **Firmly getting the child to school regularly and on time will help.** Not prolonging the goodbyes can help as well. Sometimes it works best if someone else can take the child to school after the parent or caregiver says goodbye at home.

- It truly helps to believe that the child will get over this problem(confidence); discuss this with the child (the parent or caregiver needs to convince himself or herself of this before trying to convince the child).
- The parent or caregiver should reassure the child that he or she will be there upon return from school(safety); this should be repeated over and over, if necessary. Let the child know what the parent or caregiver will be doing at home during the school day. Always be on time to pick the child up from school or the bus stop.
- Just a side note: The first day back from the weekend or holiday will usually be worse. If you get to avoid something for a few days, then facing it again is harder. This is one more example of how avoiding makes things worse.
- **Don't give attention to the problem, don't lecture, don't debate, and don't try to persuade. More attention only fuels the fire and brings the attention back to the issue.**
- Whenever events occur that could tend to cause students to miss school all attempts should be made to help students return promptly to school and to help them to feel safe at school.



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