

When Your Child Refuses to Go to School

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In New England, the end of August brings the beginning magic of the change in leaf color. It also brings the start of school. For most children, that means an air of excitement and anticipation - new school clothes, new pencils, pens and renewed friendships. For other children, however, there can be a sense of fear or panic. Some children may even feel unable to leave home and are paralyzed with fear of leaving the safety of their parents and home. If this is a persistent complaint, you should seek professional consultation. There are highly successful treatments for school refusal and separation anxiety.

Not wanting to go to school may occur at anytime, but is most prevalent in children ages 5-7 and 11-14, times when children are typically dealing with the new stressors of elementary and middle school. The first experience of separation anxiety can vary widely from child to child. Most children experience some degree of separation anxiety between the ages of 18 months and 2 ½ years. Life stressors, such as birth of a sibling, new caregiver experiences, change in residences, or parent's separation or divorce, may also trigger it.

School refusal is:

- most often experienced following summer vacation
- equally common among boys and girls
- most likely to occur in children aged 5 – 11
- may be accompanied by somatic complaints such as stomach ache, headache or nausea before, during or after school, and visits to the school nurse may be frequent

Children with a persistent fear of school often report and or display:

- Feel unsafe staying in the classroom
- Clinginess
- Difficulty sleeping
- Exaggerated fears
- Nightmares
- Tantrum before school

Typically, children who develop school refusal are compliant, well-behaved and academically capable children. Unlike children who avoid school in a sneaky way, these children do so with their parent's knowledge and seek the comfort of proximity with their parent. It becomes very confusing and frustrating for parents when a child who had always been eager to please becomes strong-willed in his/her refusal to go to school and goes to great lengths to avoid having to attend school.

The key is understanding what underlies the avoidant behavior. For some children, the pressures of the social environment takes a toll. These children can successfully benefit from social skills training, or assertion skill development so they can say "no" to undesired children, interactions, or activities. For other children who may be feeling unsafe and bullied, these skills are also important, as are adult monitoring and school collaboration.

There could also be underlying depression or generalized anxiety that would respond to other therapies. Non-blame – listening and responding to your child – and holding the capacity to still require school attendance, are fundamental approaches for the parent to help their child be successful when school is less than the “first choice” after summer break.