



When Kids Don't Want to Go to School



Many children are reluctant to attend school at some point in their lives, making it one of the most common childhood behavior problems.

The reasons children don't want to go to school vary. One reason is high rates of school-related anxiety. Reluctance also tends to be worse after kids have been out on sick days or vacations because it's hard for them to return after time away from the classroom.

Sometimes, reluctance to attend school is just a temporary thing, and is easily remedied with a conversation between a parent and the child. A bigger problem occurs when reluctance transitions to outright refusal.

School refusal behavior is defined as a child refusing to attend school and/or having difficulty remaining in

class for an entire day. A number of factors make refusal different from normal avoidance. These include:

- How long a child has been avoiding school
- How much distress the child associates with attending school
- How strongly the child resists
- How much the child's resistance is interfering with his or her (and family) life

The consequences for missing school intermittently or over a lengthy period may include family conflict and stress, problems in learning and earning good grades, difficulty making and keeping friends, dropping out of school and delinquency.

Signs of School Difficulties

A number of signs can indicate a child may be having difficulty attending and staying in school, including:

- Fear of specific things at school: tests, teachers, other kids, riding the bus
- Physical/somatic complaints
- Temper tantrums
- Refusal to get out of bed or get dressed
- Clinging to parents
- Asking the same questions over and over (Can I just stay home? Can't we do homeschooling?)
- Arriving late for school
- Crying in the classroom
- Missing school during test or presentation days
- Asking to see the nurse and then calling parents to be picked up
- Truancy/missing certain classes or leaving school before specific classes

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- Withdrawal, extreme shyness at school and different behavior in different classes (may indicate poor peer relationships or bullying)

Understanding the Problem

To effectively address this behavior, the first step is to determine the reason for a child's reluctance or refusal to attend school. Some of the most common reasons include:

- **Bullying:** Verbal, physical or relational bullying
- **Learning problems:** Specific learning disabilities, ADHD, expressive or receptive language problems, memory deficits
- **Medical problems:** Chronic medical problems such as asthma, diabetes, cystic fibrosis, cancer, epilepsy
- **Family stress/illness or conflict:** Chronic illness in the family, child needs to work to support the family

One of the most extreme reasons is an anxiety disorder. Nearly any of a number of anxiety disorders — separation anxiety, selective mutism, panic disorder, OCD and social phobia, to name a few — could be the culprit, and refusing to go to school may be just one symptom.

A child also may have a lot of “suspicious” sick days and/or make frequent trips to the school nurse. Anxiety can be shown in physical ways, so symptoms could be consistent with anxiety about attending or staying in school. If you are in this situation, we recommend getting your child checked out by a pediatrician so as not to overlook a possible medical problem.

How Can I Help My Child?

Here are several steps you can take if your child regularly doesn't want to go to school:

- Have a mental health professional who is familiar with school-based anxiety or school refusal complete an assessment with your child to determine the reason(s) and severity of the school refusal.
- Learn and use skills that can help reduce child and parent anxiety/distress.
- Reward your child's appropriate behavior of attending school and provide negative

consequences for inappropriate, attention-seeking behavior such as tantrums and truancy.

Working with Your Child's School on a Plan for Attending and Staying in School

Identifying and working with appropriate school personnel to address your child's school refusal behaviors is another important step you can take. Areas to focus on include:

- Discussing your child's absences and amount of school time he or she misses
- Reviewing your child's current grades, homework and credits
- Discussing your child's current behaviors in school
- Exploring possible barriers to school attendance (learning problems, peer problems)
- Becoming familiar with school rules regarding attendance and truancy, and the legal or disciplinary actions that can result when a child is not going to school
- Making a plan and setting an expected timeline for your child's re-integration to school, while also considering possible obstacles
- Discussing whether a 504 or IEP is appropriate for addressing learning and social-emotional issues that are interfering with your child's school attendance

Additional Resources

- ***Getting your Child to say “yes” to school: A Guide for Parents of youth with school refusal behavior*** by C.A. Kearney
- ***Helping Your Child Overcome Separation Anxiety or School Refusal*** by A.R. Eisen, L.B. Engler and J. Sparrow
- ***When Children Refuse School: A Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy Approach Parent Workbook*** by C.A. Kearney and A.M. Albano

➡ **For more information** or to make an appointment at the Boys Town Center for Behavioral Health, call **531-355-3358**.

Visit **BoysTown.org/Parenting** for more information from the parenting experts at Boys Town.