

Helpful Ideas for School Refusal

School Refusal: Although young children usually find going to school fun and exciting, one in four children may occasionally refuse to attend school. Such behavior becomes a routine problem in a small percentage of children. Many children with school refusal have an earlier history of [separation anxiety](#), [social anxiety](#), or [depression](#). Undiagnosed learning disabilities or reading disorders may also play a significant role in the development of school refusal.

Some signs of separation anxiety and school refusal include:

- 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
- 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



First Method - Be caring, yet consistent and firm.

1. Make sure your child always knows that staying home from school is not an option. It has to be clear that going to school is always the plan, and that they just have to accept the responsibility of attending.
2. Don't give attention to the problem. Don't sit and lecture the child, don't debate the child, don't try to explain why it's a good idea to go to school. The child wants to stay home whether it's a good idea or not, more attention only fuels the fire and brings the child's attention back to the issue. Just bring the child to school, pay little to no attention to complaints, and do the same if complaints continue after school.
3. IF the child does stay home one day, if the child is legitimately ill for example, make sure that staying home isn't a party. Keep the child in bed, give the child what they need to get better, but don't let the child watch tv or play or do anything that might make them want to stay home instead of be at school. A good alternative while at home is having the child work on schoolwork until the school day is over.
4. Let the school nurse decide if your child is sick. Make it a rule that your child doesn't get to decide when it's a stay home day, that power lies with the school nurse. This will make it easier to avoid giving attention to the child in the morning while discussing symptoms etc.

Second Method - Ensure there aren't other serious underlying causes.

1. Talk to the child about what he/she says when the time comes to leave for school.

- Does the child say it's difficult?
- Does the child complain about feeling sick or tired?
- Sometimes children don't understand why they are feeling sick/uncomfortable. Help them understand their feelings and how they can cope with them. Example: A child who feels nervous may feel sick to his/her stomach, help them identify this and then you could work on relaxation techniques.
- What else are they fearful of?
- Sometimes children are fearful of school because something traumatic has happened like bullying. If this is the case, inform your school's principal immediately.



2. Talk to the child and validate the "excuse."

- Let them know they have a valid concern.
- Let them know that many people who have serious worries or struggles feel the same way.

3. Help them identify the cause of the symptom.

- Do you have any worries that might be making you feel this way?

Once the child has identified the cause of their struggle, you can help them deal with it.

Third Method - Gradual Exposure

If your child is seriously struggling going to school and there is significant anxiety, gradual exposure to school may help. Over time, you can add more of the following steps until your child is able to attend a full day of school.

1. Take your child to the 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!

Fourth Method- The Buddy System

In some schools the buddy system is used to help kids with a number of struggles. If your child is struggling with school refusal, it could be helpful to talk to their teacher about getting a buddy system set up for one or two activities at school.

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.

Other Helpful Hints

- Listening to the child's actual concerns and fears of going to school is important. Some of the reasons for refusing to attend school may include another child at school who is a bully, problems on the bus or carpool ride to school, or fears of inability to keep up with the other students in the classroom; these issues can be addressed if they are known. On the other hand, making too big a deal of school refusal may promote the child's behavior to continue.
- 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; 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 the child's return from school; this should be repeated over and over, if necessary. Let the child know that the parent or caregiver will be doing "boring stuff" at home during the school day. Always be on time to pick the child up from school if you provide transportation rather than a school bus.
- Whenever events occur that could tend to cause students to miss school (for example, traumatic events such as terrorism, school shootings, or other traumas), all attempts should be made to help students return promptly to school and to help them to feel safe at school.

** If your child is still struggling with attending school, you may consider meeting with a doctor or psychologist for further evaluation and testing.**

