

School Refusal

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Okay—it's Monday morning and you're just getting started. Let's see...take the dog out, grab a shower, and wake up the kids to get ready for school. All goes as planned until your nine-year-old son hits you up with "I don't wanna go to school" and rolls over on his top bunk. Now what? Most likely you've had to deal with this before and you know that a combination of tickling and firm persuasion usually gets your kid up and moving.

Lots of children don't "wanna" get up and go to school, especially after having a weekend of fun. Hanging around the house and playing with friends sure beats having to pay attention in the classroom—so it's not unusual for kids to check to see if you'll cave in and let them play hookey.

It's normal if your child tries this out occasionally, as long as she makes it to school without too much fuss. However, it's a whole different ball game if the kid habitually balks at going to school or seems genuinely fearful or anxious about going. Kids, especially in the grade school years, display school refusal behaviors mainly for three reasons:

1. They feel socially at-risk—rejected, ostracized or ignored by peers. The school environment may be perceived as lonely, uncomfortable, or threatening. It's tough when you're seven years old and you feel unaccepted and different from the other kids.
2. Those who perceive themselves as academically inferior often feel picked upon or teased by other children when they make errors in class, and many consider themselves to be dumb or stupid because of the teasing. (It's humiliating to answer incorrectly in class with twenty kids watching your unsatisfactory performance!)
3. Children who are very active, perhaps even hyperactive, can become extremely uncomfortable when expected to sit for several hours in the classroom, even with breaks for recess, lunch and PE. These kids seem to be constantly chastized by their teachers to stay in their seats, to focus on their work, or to keep their hands to themselves.

Children who display one or more of the above problems tend to have school refusal issues at some point in the academic careers. Feeling lonely, dumb or unfocused would be uncomfortable for just about anyone. Consider the adult who feels rejected by her co-workers at the office—it's no fun thinking that others are talking negatively about you or that they have little to say to you. Or, if you're having trouble completing a project and day after day your on-the-job frustration mounts, leaving work at five o'clock becomes a relief. Ever feel antsy or edgy because you're cooped up behind a desk pushing papers or answering phone calls, while you yearn to be working out-of-doors?

Well, just as an adult who feels socially unaccepted, or inferior to the task, or incompatible with the environment on the job site would begin to be uncomfortable or unhappy with their job, so do kids who have similar problems. It's human nature to avoid an unpleasant situation by calling in sick to work or, for a child, to refuse to go to school. The child with school refusal issues is generally trying to avoid the unpleasantness he perceives waiting for him when he hits the classroom or playground. What to do?

First, listen to your child. Take her seriously. If there's a pattern of complaints about kids not liking her, check it out further. Ask the teacher about children she seems to get along with. Does she have a special friend to sit with at lunch or is she alone? Does she hang around kids at recess? If not—your daughter's legitimately feeling lonely and sad. What can you do? In the grade school years it's still possible to help create and cement social relationships for your children. Encourage the teacher to pair her with another child whom your kid would like to get to know better. You can also jump-start friendships by inviting classmates home to play after school or on weekends. Get to know the other moms and dads—some are probably in the same boat, looking to help their kids establish relationships with their classmates. Also, check out organizations such as Cub Scouts and Brownies, sports teams, or chorus and band—kids with similar interests tend to get along and their mutual experiences help conversations to flow easier.

If your child fits into the second category leading to school refusal—that of being weak in an academic area or two—assessment and remediation should do the trick. Consult with your child's teacher or guidance counselor to get information on achievement testing. After you understand the nature and causes of the weak areas check into tutorial situations, both at school as well as privately. If your child's testing meets certain criteria he'll be eligible for special programs providing individualized instruction to bring his knowledge, grades and skills up to par. The process may be lengthy so try to get started as soon as you notice a deficit area developing.

Once your child feels more comfortable with the work, be it math problems or reading comprehension, he'll feel smarter and more confident. The "I hate school" problem will tone down as he begins to look forward to answering questions in class and is no longer nervous about participating in front of his peers.

The third group of kids, those antsy, fidgety Phils, present a challenge for even the most seasoned of teachers. It's difficult to remain diplomatic when a kid is constantly getting out of his seat, wiggling around, dropping pencils, or talking to his neighbor. Teachers often resort to reminding, nagging and disciplining fidgety, over-active kids much more than their quiet, self-controlled counterparts. Often this makes kids feel singled out and picked-upon by the teacher, leading to anxiety about coming to class the next day.

There are three techniques that can be helpful in keeping your antsy, unfocused child on task: classroom behavior management reward systems, academic remediation for

knowledge gaps in weak areas, and consideration of medication for those kids who are diagnosed with the hyperactive form of Attention Deficit Disorder. These techniques generally help kids to become more focused on their work rather than on the contents of their neighbor's pencil box, as well as helping them to keep their bodies in their seats.

It's amazing what a reward system will accomplish if the consequences for completing classwork, staying in the seat, and not making car noises during math class are important and consistently delivered! Once your child realizes self-control and success via one or more of these methods, he'll feel on top of the work in the classroom situation and less worried about being "picked on" by the teacher or others.

WHAT TO EXPECT AS YOUR CHILD MOVES TO MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL

School refusal generally decreases dramatically as children grow older. Although social rejection is still a realistic possibility in adolescence, the sheer size of most middle and high schools lend themselves to kids finding a buddy or two to pal around with at the cafeteria. Also, many academic problems have been worked out by then—either through direct remediation, compensation, or inclusion in a special program at school. In addition, the fidgety second grader usually becomes calmer by middle school and no longer is constantly chided by teachers to sit still or to keep his hands to himself. He may still be evidencing inattention, but generally this does not lead to behavior-based referrals or classroom embarrassment.

There is a light at the end of the tunnel—the Monday morning chorus of "I hate school, do I hafta go?" decreases as your child gets older. The trick is to decipher what's motivating the school refusal behavior and to take the appropriate steps toward remediation of the problem.