

So, Your Child Doesn't Want To Go To School...

- Author Unknown

Dreading the end of summer and the beginning of the school year is probably something with which most parents can identify. Days become shorter, the weather gets cooler and life becomes more structured. Many children experience a certain amount of apprehension about going back to school, most commonly after a school break, such as summer vacation, after an absence due to illness, or after a traumatic event in a child's life, such as parental divorce. When a child is experiencing school "jitters," parental reassurance and re-exposure to school is usually enough to get the child back into the school routine.

A child experiencing more than just "jitters" usually refuses to go to school on a regular basis, or has problems staying in school once there. This is a signal that there may be a more serious underlying issue. These children are suffering from a potentially debilitating, according to Elisa Shipon-Blum, M.D., Executive/Medical Director of the Childhood Anxiety Network (CAN) and author of the book, *Easing School Jitters for the Anxious Child*. This should not be confused with truant children who, "reject school because of antisocial behavior or delinquency, and often have no remorse about missing school."

School refusal can develop into a serious problem, having a negative impact on socialization skills, self-confidence, coping skills and, of course, education. Anxiety-based school refusal affects 2-5% of school-age children. It is common at times of transition, for example, graduating from elementary school to middle school and from middle school to high school. Anxieties tend to differ among age groups, but the most common stressors are: separation anxiety, concerns about academic performance, anxieties about making friends, and fear of a teacher or bully.

Unlike anxiety disorders, which tend to affect girls in greater proportion to boys, school refusal occurs at the same rate in both boys and girls. The most common ages for school refusal are between five and six, and between ten and eleven. Children who suffer from school refusal tend to be average, or above average in intelligence.

Younger Children

Children who did not attend daycare or preschool first may have difficulties when it comes time to enter kindergarten, they may suffer fears and anxieties about separating from parents, including fears that their parents will be hurt while they are in school, they may also be concerned about making friends, being bullied, not doing well in class or finding their way around in a strange place (see box on separation anxiety). Very often, younger children experience generalized anxiety and it might be difficult to pinpoint the exact cause. Their stress may come out in the form of physical symptoms, such as: headaches, stomachaches, nausea, and diarrhea. When a parent sees that a child is suffering physically, the tendency is to let the child stay at home. But if the underlying cause of the physical symptoms is the fear of school, then letting the child miss school reinforces the anxiety. Have the child checked by a medical professional, if nothing medically wrong can be identified, then there is a good chance that the culprit is school avoidance. In addition to physical symptoms, there can be behavioral symptoms. According to Dr. Shipon-Blum, these can manifest as tantrums, inflexibility, separation anxiety, avoidance and defiance.

Older Children

Children in middle and high school often have a different set of worries than younger children, although separation anxiety may be an issue as well, in which case it must be dealt with promptly. Older children not only experience the stress that goes along with transition from one school to the next, but there is added academic pressure in the higher grades as students begin to see their futures unfolding before them. The transition from child to adolescent to adult is naturally rife with anxiety, it is also a time of intense peer pressure, when a child is concerned with "fitting in," and being liked by peers. All of these factors can work together to make an anxious child try to avoid school. According to Leslie Paige, Ed.S., NCSP, these stresses may manifest themselves in an extreme preoccupation with appearance, sleeplessness, or rebellion. As with younger children, it is important to keep the child in school, although they may fight it. Missing school reinforces anxiety, rather than alleviating it, but it is necessary not to discount the possibility that the child has a legitimate reason to fear going to school.

Common School Fears:

- Being separated from caregivers;
- Riding on the bus;
- Eating in the cafeteria;
- Using the school bathroom;
- Being called on in class;
- Changing for gym;
- Interacting with other children or teachers;
- Being picked on by peers or older children.

Helping Kids Get Past the Fear

It is important to help children develop coping strategies. This will not only help them deal with their school anxieties, but it will serve them well throughout their lives. Chris Wever, M.D., a child, adolescent and family psychiatrist and author of *The School Wobblers*, writes that, "The main principle is to teach the child or teenager that the anxiety will settle with time and nothing bad will happen despite the child feeling as if it will." An effective way to do this is to expose the child to school in small, but ever-increasing degrees, in this way the child will eventually come to realize that there is nothing to fear.

If you know that your child is anxious about going back to school, it is a good idea to prepare him/her for the beginning of school ahead of time. There are a number of ways in which this can be done, according to Dr. Shipon-Blum. She recommends speaking to the child about his/her fears, encouraging verbalization makes the fears loom less large. While doing this, it is also a good idea for the parent to emphasize all of the positive aspects of going to school: being with friends, learning a favorite subject, recess, lunch - whatever it is the child actually enjoys about being there. Other stress relieving ideas include taking the child to school before the start of the school year and allowing him/her to become familiar and comfortable with the setting; and arranging for a one-on-one meeting with the

child's new teacher, getting to know the teacher in an informal setting will take the much of the fear out of classroom interactions.

Once the fear of going to school is controlled, the physical symptoms should subside. Getting the fears under control, however, can take some effort on the part of both child and parent. It is necessary to get to the bottom of the child's fears, to find out what it is that is worrying them, and then to try to dispel those concerns. Involving the school psychologist or guidance counselor is also helpful. It is, however, important to get the fears under control because, says Leslie Paige, "Negative experiences can create a lifelong issue." A child who is preoccupied with fears will not engage fully in the educational process and may fall behind.