

School Anxiety and Refusal: Tools to use in School and at Home

Presenters: Patrick McGrath and Jackie Rhew, of Alexian Bros. Behavioral Health

School refusal is avoidance of a stressful, intensely uncomfortable situation. Avoidance becomes a coping behavior that maintains the anxious condition. Home schooling or tutoring may make the problem worse. Instead, it may be better to bargain—if the child goes to school 2 days or 3 days in a week, he/she gets free time on the weekend, the speakers said. It's a very gradual process.

Children/teens can improve if they learn to sit with the discomfort and learn that they can handle it. McGrath said kids with anxiety need to be uncomfortable so that they are motivated to strive toward a comfortable place. "We tell kids, 'You can get out of where you're at—you just have to move toward it' (whatever makes them anxious)"

Rhew said it is important for parents to examine how they react to an anxious child, and to keep their goals for the child in mind. "Ask yourself, 'Am I parenting out of my own anxiety (wanting to comfort my child) or parenting out of my goals, (helping the child learn coping skills).'"

McGrath said we should not reassure an anxious child by telling him/her everything is going to be ok or fine. It is more empowering to say, "You may be uncomfortable, but you can handle it. "

Kids with anxiety need a lot of structure, he said. They don't do well with time off; they need structured time for homework. If a child is anxious, he advised walking with them or encouraging deep breathing exercises, instead of sitting, comforting and other actions that may focus attention on the anxiety rather than distracting and offering coping strategies.

Treatment involves individual and family therapy, where kids and parents work on setting goals. Early treatment is best and it is easier to change when behaviors are less established.

Don't talk with your child if he/she is crying, screaming, or losing control. Instead, tell the child you'll come back to talk when they are more together. Trying to talk in the midst of tears makes anxiety worse and reinforces tears/anxious behavior with attention.

"Think about, 'What behavior am I reinforcing?'" Rhew said.

McGrath and Rhew said parents of kids with anxiety may make things worse by being overly controlling, or overly invasive. "Kids need to learn to manage difficult feelings on their own," McGrath said. "Parents should take a step back—they don't have to be in

control. They fear their kids will fall apart, but sometimes people have to fail in order for things to turn out well.”

Parents should focus on long-term goals, not short-term.

Why do kids avoid school -- what causes their anxiety? They fear evaluation, don't want to be judged. They are consumed with “what if” statements that are all negative – “What if I fail? What if others don't like me? What if I disappoint the teacher?”

Often, they retreat to video games and electronics. Their sleep schedule is off—they stay up late at night, fall asleep in the afternoon. Sometimes, they get involved in substance abuse.

Supportive strategies at school can include matching an anxious child with a peer mentor – often, anxious children don't feel connected at school. Kids also need to feel purposeful at school, and may benefit from jobs like being a guidance department runner, etc. Consistency is also important, at school and at home.

“If something bothers you, you need to go do it,” McGrath said. “Start at the shallow end of the pool, don't dive in the deep end. Children need to take gradual, small steps toward the situations that make them anxious. You can't talk someone out of being afraid of something—they have to behave themselves out of being afraid.”

“Anxious kids need to face their fear and learn they can handle it.” In therapy with kids who suffer panic attacks, McGrath said he recreates symptoms of panic attacks by having them run in place until they are short of breath or spin until they feel dizzy. Kids learn they can experience these symptoms and survive and recover.

McGrath recommended that parents write out a behavioral plan or contract, with expectations and consequences that the child and parent sign. Changing behaviors is not fast—it will take 3-4 weeks, but it does happen overtime.

A sample family contract lists:

Expectations

Attend school

Be ready for school at 7 a.m.

Do chores

Do homework

Privileges

2 hours of screen time

Go out on Friday night

Receive an allowance

Have a cell phone

If a child does not fulfill the expectations, they lose the corresponding privileges.

Rhew said video game addictions and other anxiety-related conditions are real and should be addressed directly. For example, kids who cannot limit video time may be told they cannot be in their rooms unless they are sleeping; some families lock outlets when parents are not home, so that kids can't watch TV, use computers, etc.

Use “Will you/won’t you” language – not “You can’t”

Kids with anxiety also may need to adjust school demands and not take AP and high stress classes. “Your child may be very smart, but be careful how much stress they are under. “ Often anxious kids think anything except an A is a failure at school.