

School Refusal Calls for Quick Action

It's time to get ready for school, but your child burrows deeper under the covers, claiming illness or crying pitifully.

If the behavior is persistent and your pediatrician has ruled out medical causes, the problem could be school refusal. This behavior is wrenching for parents and children, and should be taken very seriously.

School refusal can be a symptom of anxiety and depression. It can also be a sign that a child is being bullied or is struggling socially, feels unable to keep up in school, or is having trouble separating from a parent. Staying home can compound the problem, because the child becomes more socially disconnected and falls farther behind academically. Whatever the cause, these kids need help.

My middle child began to find ways to be late or to miss school altogether in 8th grade. This was about the time her older sister went to a residential therapeutic school, so I cut daughter No. 2 some slack—we had all been through a lot. Her transition to high school was very rocky. She sobbed and refused to get out of bed once or twice a week, and withdrew from friends and activities she once enjoyed. She was diagnosed with depression and anxiety, and began treatment with medication and counseling.

Her therapist advised against letting her stay home. On the days when I could not coax or wrangle her out of bed, he recommended letting her know that I expected her to be at school the next day. She missed more than a dozen days of school as a freshman, several days the following year and, by her senior year, just a few.

As a parent, it was hard to know what to do or how to react. I could see that her pain was real, but I worried that allowing her to stay home would only inflate her demons. I also felt angry—her behavior disrupted mornings for the whole family, and kept me from work. The behavior took a long time to overcome, but once treatment began, we saw steady improvement.

School refusal is unlikely to go away without treatment. Medical and psychiatric assessment is very important to identify and treat physical or emotional causes. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) can also help children and teens learn more positive ways of thinking along with healthy coping skills.

Here are tips to help overcome school refusal:

- Don't get angry or upset—this will escalate your child's anxiety.
- Be reassuring about school and friends. For younger children, it may help to offer small incentives like a favorite snack after school.
- Enlist your child's teachers and/or school social worker to identify causes or triggers at school, and to create ways for your child to feel successful and accepted.
- Some children fear losing control in front of peers, and this heightens their anxiety. Help your child plan what to do if he or she feels upset or anxious at school. Ask the school to identify a safe, supervised place where your child can retreat if necessary.

- Don't allow your child to skip school if at all possible. Staying home may make the problem worse and, conversely, a good day at school may make it easier for your child to go the next day.
- Have patience—this will take time!

I know parents who have addressed a teenager's chronic school refusal by reporting their child truant and letting the school and potentially the juvenile court step in. I didn't go this route, but I understand that some parents have exhausted all other options and see outside authorities as allies or a last resort.

Untreated school refusal can be crippling, and has been linked to increased anxiety and depression later in life. It is critical to act quickly, to help these kids acquire the tools they need to function today, and to meet future challenges.

My daughter sometimes still struggles with anxiety, but she has insights and good coping skills. She is now a college student and, according to reliable sources, gets herself to class.