

Healthy Kids

School refusal and kids: What can you do?

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I see lots of desperate parents in my office, and the winners of the tearing-their-hair-out sweepstakes are those with the school refusing child. "School refusal" refers to repeated instances of absenteeism for what are "non-legitimate" reasons. Contrast: "I'm in a coma" or "I have a measurable fever" with "I have a stomach ache/head ache/muscle ache/just don't feel quite right – but all that clears up magically when you say I can stay home!"

Children can miss half days or full days, just a few days or a full semester. The start of the school year and the return after winter/spring vacation are the harshest times and Mondays are the cruelest day. While their parents plead (often loudly!) their children cry, freeze, dawdle, refuse to get ready, refuse to leave for the bus, refuse to get out of the car, refuse to listen to reason, and everyone just feels helpless and lousy.

School refusal used to be termed "school phobia," but that's a misnomer – there are plenty of things other than "fear of school" that keep a child preferring home over attending school. Research suggests that there are a few main reasons that children to refuse school, which can occur in combination: separation anxiety, avoiding painful emotions they may encounter at school (performance anxiety, social anxiety, loneliness, boredom), the myriad rewards of staying at home (Video games! All day video games!). Prevalence studies suggest that between 5-10% of children show school refusal behavior and that it is most likely to start at two ages: 5-6 (entry to KG or elementary school) and 10-12 (entry to middle school).

There are no well-established, evidence-based treatments for school refusal. Too often, I hear of clinicians spending session after session talking with a child individually about why he doesn't want to attend school. This is a shame because, in my experience:

1. NO AMOUNT OF JUST TALKING will get a child to return to school.
2. The longer a child is out of school, the harder it is to get him back (he gets used to staying at home, and distress about what he would possibly tell peers about why he was away/why he is back mounts with each passing day).

However, the available research supports behavioral therapy, specifically a combination of the empirically supported treatments for anxiety (gradual exposure) and oppositional behavior (parent training in contingency management). That is, successful treatment usually involves a combination of helping a child develop some coping strategies to get back into the school building while working with parents to provide a system of reinforcement for increasing attendance and eliminate any tangible rewards for staying at home (i.e., access to preferred activities). School personnel must be involved in the treatment.

Books:

There is only one I recommend: Christopher Kearney's *Getting Your Child to Say 'Yes' to School: A Guide for Parents of Youth with School Refusal Behavior*. Kearney is the national expert on assessment and treatment of school refusal, and his book is refreshingly no-nonsense.

Online:

No family with a school refusing child leaves my office without the following handouts, all of them short and all of them free off the web. I ask parents to copy them and give to any caregiver in the child's life (teachers, doctors, grandparents, nannies, etc):

- Interview with the Expert: Dr. Christopher Kearney on School Refusal
- "School Refusal in Children and Adolescents," from the American Academy of Family Physicians
- Mary Wimmer's "School Refusal: Information for Educators" from the National Association of School Psychologists.

Hilarity Corner:

Shel Silverstein's classic children's poem "I Cannot Go to School Today!" (psst: It's actually for parents). (And, come to think of it, it's really not all that funny).