

Solutions Newsletter

October 2020



Effective School
Solutions

Solutions is a newsletter published by ESS for parents, guardians and caretakers. Each issue highlights an important topic related to children's mental health and provides practical applications for parents in the home environment.

School Avoidance and Beyond- A Return to Structure and Routine

For many students, the return to school each September represents a fresh start. New clothes and school supplies, new subjects and teachers, new friends and extracurricular activities to enjoy. But, even under the best of circumstances, school avoidant youngsters dread the return to school, and this year, in the midst of a global pandemic, the return to school is even more difficult. And, to make matters worse, even if you have opted to send your children back for in-person learning, your own uncertainty about this difficult decision might increase your child's fears.

There are many factors that contribute to school avoidance, and it is critical to have a mental health professional conduct a comprehensive assessment to determine what maintains your child's avoidant behavior. Some children refuse school to avoid the negative feelings associated with learning or attentional issues, or with trying to meet academic demands. Some avoid to escape bullying. Some are extremely self-conscious and assume that others are always judging them. Others have an intense fear of being away from home, often the result of frightening experiences such as an accident or a family member's illness. Still others prefer the rewards available at home – a comfortable room, videogames, their favorite foods, etc.

Some school avoidant children have done well with remote instruction as many of the sources of their anxiety have been reduced or removed altogether. This can make the return to school even harder since avoidance worsens anxiety. It is possible, however, for parents to alter their behavior in order to help school-avoidant children return to school during this difficult time.

Perhaps the most essential aspect of transitioning back to the classroom (either remote or in-person) is the development and maintenance of both in-home and school routines. October is a good time for both parents and teachers to review routines and to revise as needed. Parents can:

- Create and stick with predictable home routines. These include sleep and eating schedules, daily exercise, homework and recreation times, time to socialize, etc.
- Ensure that children on medication receive their doses at the same time(s) each day.

- Learn a simple mindfulness technique (e.g. a breathing exercise) that you can practice each day for a couple of minutes with your child.
- Plan movement into each day to discharge body tension and to clear the mind: e.g., a "seventh inning stretch", 5 jumping jacks, walking up and down the steps once or twice, etc.
- Schedule daily "emotion" check-ins, so your child can express a wide range of feelings.
- Practice coping self-talk with your child such as "it is ok to be nervous and scared", "I can feel uncomfortable feelings and still do my school work, enjoy my friends, do my chores" etc.
- Schedule a time each week to help your student clear and organize his/her workspace.
- Be aware that parents can sometimes reward school avoidance behavior without meaning to. Don't give too much supportive attention to your child while he/she is avoiding school – be matter-of-fact and business-like. Don't give your child access to games, tv, phones, etc. during the school day if he/she is avoiding school. While it is not helpful to lie to children ("the virus is not dangerous, there is nothing to worry about"), parents can normalize a child's anxiety by sharing a realistic perspective ("this is scary but we will get through it together"), and by teaching coping self-talk ("I can handle anxious feelings") and strategies (e.g., mindfulness, good health habits such as exercise, hand washing, physical distancing).

Resources:

Resilience and Routines for Families During the Pandemic

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/child-development-central/202003/resilience-and-routines-families-during-the-pandemic>