

Solutions Newsletter

March 2022



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.

How to Help Your School Avoidant Child

Under the best of circumstances school avoidance is a thorny and frustrating problem for both parents and school personnel. While all youngsters with mental health vulnerabilities were impacted by pandemic-imposed school closures, school avoidant students have been amongst the hardest hit. To make matters worse, some students with no prior history of avoidance began exhibiting these behavior patterns when full day, in-person school resumed in the fall.

In many cases, school avoidance is best understood as an anxiety disorder: up to 56% of avoiding youngsters have a primary anxiety diagnosis, including generalized anxiety, separation anxiety, and social anxiety. Research suggests four primary reasons why students avoid school:

- To avoid school-related situations that cause discomfort or anxiety
- To avoid evaluative or social situations related to school performance
- To receive attention from parents or caregivers
- To access rewards that make staying home more comfortable or enjoyable than going to school

Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) research long ago demonstrated that avoidance is one of the factors that worsens anxiety over time. Hence the phrase "get back on the horse" – failures or negative outcomes of any kind that are followed by avoidance of the feared thing or situation only increases anxiety over time and undermines confidence in one's ability to tolerate uncomfortable emotions.

It is natural for a loving parent to move in to support and protect a scared child. In doing so, however, parents run the risk of unintentionally rewarding school avoidance behaviors. Parents can reinforce school avoidance by offering excessive reassurance, by allowing or encouraging avoidance behaviors when the child shows extreme distress, and by "taking over", that is, by doing tasks for children that they are developmentally capable of doing. This "taking over" helps reduce a child's anxiety in the short term but interferes with the child's ability to develop necessary coping skills and to regulate their emotions.

A mental health professional should be the driver of any intervention plan, but first and foremost parents must recognize and address their tendency to blame themselves for their children's problems. To be effective, parents must try to let go of guilt and shame about their child's mental health problems. There are actions that you can take to help your child, but you did not create your child's anxiety or school avoidant behavior.

Here are some tips to keep in mind when working with therapists and teachers to address your child's school avoidance:

- Practice a relaxation or mindfulness exercise (e.g., deep breathing) that will help you maintain your cool when dealing with your child's frustrating avoidance behaviors.
- Reduce "rescue" behaviors that soothe the child in the short run; instead, communicate clear expectations and confidence that your child can perform and succeed.
- Offer reality-based information about the actual level of threat in any feared situation, while helping your child label emotions, and identify/modify unhelpful thoughts ("I can't do this", "Everyone will make fun of me", etc.).
- Learn about the coping skills that your child is working on in therapy so you can remind him/her to use them when needed.
- Acknowledge your child's anxiety and the potentially scary aspects of a situation while also emphasizing that he/she can learn to tolerate the discomfort.
- Do not punish anxiety behaviors; instead recognize and celebrate all efforts and small accomplishments that bring your child closer to full school attendance.
- Consider how you might be making the home environment more rewarding for the child than being in school, including allowing access to video games and other recreational activities, to unlimited snacks, to extra attention from you, etc. A child's time at home while school is in session should be made as uncomfortable and non-rewarding as possible.
- Consider if there are ways that you are unintentionally communicating that your child is needed at home. Reassure the child that you are dealing with your adult concerns, and that the best way that the child can be helpful is to be in school.

Resources:

[When Children Refuse School: A Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy Approach Parent ... - Christopher A. Kearney, Anne Marie Albano - Google Books](#)