



Health Tips for Parents

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Why is your child avoiding school?

Up to 35 percent of school-age children display school-resistant behaviors, which can range from temporary/short-term reluctance to continual avoidance and refusal to go to school.

School avoidance and refusal

If your child continually begs to stay home or be home schooled, visits the school nurse with vague complaints or asks to be picked up early from school, he/she may be avoiding school. If not addressed, school avoidance can turn into school refusal, a more serious behavioral issue characterized by extended avoidance, refusal to attend or stay in school, distress or social and academic impairment.

“Children attempt to avoid school for many reasons, but most often it’s to avoid academic or social stressors, or to spend time doing preferred activities,” says R. Lindsey Bergman, PhD, director, UCLA Child OCD Intensive Treatment Program, faculty member, UCLA Center for Child Anxiety Resilience Education and Support. “School-resistant behaviors can also be related to underlying anxiety disorders, such as separation anxiety, panic disorder, selective mutism or social phobia.”

Addressing school avoidance

Extended school avoidance or refusal can lead to serious consequences such as family conflict and stress, difficulty maintaining peer relationships and problems with academic success in adulthood.

To combat school avoidance, parents should not allow their child to stay home, Dr. Bergman advises. “Staying home is avoiding, which reinforces the desire to stay home,” Dr. Bergman says. “Insist that your child goes to school and then give him/her praise and positive attention for attending school.” Open communication can also help resolve a child’s fears or concerns. Parents should discuss specific events that occurred at school, focusing on the positive and talking through specific problems together. “If a parent does allow the child to stay home,” Dr. Bergman says, “it should not be ‘fun’ — they should be doing school work without their electronics out.”

Why children avoid school

Some common reasons for school-resistant behavior:

- **Social and performance-related fears** (difficulty making friends, lunchtime isolation, bullying)
- **General school-related anxiety/distress** (tests, teachers, riding a school bus)
- **Desire to spend time with others** (parents)
- **Desire to do fun activities outside of school** (play video games, watch TV)



When to ask for help

Parents should start by speaking to their child’s teacher to find out if there are specific issues at school that could be causing them anxiety, such as bullying, learning issues or being behind on course work. If the problem is significantly affecting their child’s life, parents should seek a diagnostic assessment with a mental health provider who specializes in pediatric anxiety and behavioral avoidance. In serious cases of school refusal, cognitive behavioral therapy is the most common intervention. Treatment usually includes close collaboration with the school, and in some cases, an individualized education plan.