

## School Anxiety and Refusal

It can feel like there is an emergency when a child becomes overly excited and anxious and is refusing to go to school. So, it is no wonder that a parent often feels bewildered and helpless in getting their child to school. A parent often is fearful that the child has been through some sort of trauma based on the intensity of emotions and the strong position of refusing to go to school. This is unlikely, yet it is wise to ask the child and the school if they have observed any problematic behavior of others at school.

A balanced approach works best where a parent is neither too soft nor too strict. In cases of school anxiety, it is not uncommon for me to observe one parent who is overly 'protective' and the other is harsh. It is as if both parents are polarizing and trying to compensate for the other parent.

Reported headaches and stomachaches are often quite real. Children need to know that you believe them. *And*, unless there are medical reasons for a child to stay home, it is beneficial for the child to go to school. Once a child has stayed home, it is very difficult for them to go to school. So, in the short term, it is important to go through the parental emotional upset of enforcing school.

The major reasons that I have found that children refuse to go to school are:

- Fearfulness of separating from a parent, usually the mother
- Worrying about a parent and that something bad will happen to them
- Being bullied by others
- Being afraid the teacher will yell at them or call on them
- Anxious that they are behind their peers in learning
- Hostile relationship between parents, and therefore trying to choose sides; children also pick up on a parent feeling guilty and who is overly involved in their struggles
- A child's temperament is anxious by nature

The following are the most successful ways to have a child return to school and to get greater enjoyment out of the school experience:

- Parents staying calm and matter-of-fact when the child shows upset about going to school
- Allowing more space and time between the parent that the child has trouble leaving, usually the mother
- Keep reassurance by a parent to a minimum, allowing the child to find ways to reassure themselves, learning from anxiety-reducing activities such as:
- Distraction, especially on Sunday nights or times such as sickness and holidays where there has been many days away from school
- Keeping their minds off the ‘worry channel’
- Watching a funny clip from a movie or YouTube
- They can conjure up a scene from a favorite show
- Let the child know that there are adults in their lives who can be there for the parent and that the child’s job is to go to school
- Show confidence in your child that they can handle the upset teacher
- Allow the bus, the other parent, or another trusted adult take the child to school if he or she has ‘melt-downs’ with that parent
- If bullying is a problem, work with the child and the school to solve the problem; a child needs to be at school and learn to work the problem through
- If school performance is a problem, work with the school and perhaps get a tutor for the difficult to manage subjects
- If parents are hostile towards one another, keep the child from the burden and work things out away from the child, letting the child know that it is for the parents to work out
- Teach the child some deep breathing exercises

Perhaps the most important thing a parent can do is to stay calm and without emotion. Otherwise, a child believes the parent lacks confidence in their ability to work through their fears. I have seen amazing change when the child is separated from the parent with whom he struggles most.

Leta LaRue LeRossignol, L.C.S.W., B.C.D., RPT-S