

solutions

SCHOOL AVOIDANCE

If you are engaging in a battle every morning as your child resists, or actually refuses to attend school, you know how disheartening and disruptive this struggle can be. Children and adolescents with excessive school absences are often suffering from emotional issues such as anxiety or depression, which can lead to a condition known as school avoidance. The good news is that when the appropriate treatment is provided, peace at home and at school can be restored. Effective School Solutions has helped countless families face this challenge successfully.

The first step towards conquering school avoidance is timely recognition of the problem. It is so important that parents, teachers, therapists and medical practitioners collaborate, identify, and intervene with these children as early as possible. The longer a child stays out of school, the more difficult it is for that child to return. Knowing who is susceptible, when it develops, what the warning signs are, and what to do about it, significantly improves the recovery rate from this potentially debilitating condition.

Who: Research studies have shown that as many as 20% of school-aged children struggle with school avoidance. A child's basic temperament can make him vulnerable to school avoidance. In response to intense emotions, someone who is hyper-sensitive, quick to react and slow to calm down, may be at risk. And, those children with a family history of anxiety are more prone to respond to stressful situations with worry, or fear, or both.

When: The most common ages for school avoidance to emerge is from five to seven and ten to twelve years old. Symptoms may begin gradually after a change in routine: after a school vacation, a holiday, an illness, or at times of family stress. During times of loss, the child may fear that something else bad is going to happen while he is in school,

so he refuses to leave home. Sudden onset of school refusal may be related to in-school incidents of bullying, taking a test, making a presentation, or experiencing peer conflicts and rejection.

Warning Signs: Students with school avoidance often experience anxiety attacks and/or physical symptoms such as: headache, nausea, upset stomach, dizziness, weakness, palpitations, and/or a variety of other aches and pains which diminish when the child stays at home, or leaves school to go home early.

Treatment at ESS: School professionals often refer school avoidant students to the ESS Program to receive treatment. Sometimes, improvement can be noticed quite soon, since having a personal ally within the building often gives them the courage to work on establishing a normal school routine. The clinician develops an individualized treatment plan to assist in reducing the child's (and parent's) anxiety, thus reducing the incidence of unexcused absences. Any or all of the following techniques may be implemented to improve the student's attendance: early morning phone calls, home visits by ESS therapists, desensitization exercises, a graduated exposure plan, early morning greetings at the school, extra drop-in sessions, increased family and individual sessions, attendance reward systems for home and school, teacher conferences to develop special schedules strategies for the classroom, and CBT/DBT training.

Resources:

2004 National Association of School Psychologists

School Refusal By Mary B. Wimmer, PhD

National Association of Social Workers (NASW) press@naswdc.org.

Anxiety and Depression Assoc. of America www.adaa.org/

Child Mind Institute www.childmind.org

National Association of School Psychologists — www.nasponline.org

Parent Information Center — www.parentinformationcenter.org

PARENTS MATTER:

"Fight your fears and you'll be in battle forever. Face your fears and you'll be free forever"
- Lucas Jonkman