

Understanding “School Phobia” and Related Fear Factors

Thirteen-year-old Kevin started having stomach cramps and diarrhea every morning about 15 minutes before the school bus arrived. His mother, Geena, would wave the bus on and, in frustration, wait for Kevin to feel better so she could take him to school herself, which made her late for work all too frequently.

Geena's morning frustration, as well as Kevin's, was compounded by arguments when Kevin refused to go to school at all. His escalating illnesses before school and his fears about going seemed to be developing into what some psychologists call “school phobia.”

Anxiety, Fear, or Phobia?

All children have periods when they don't want to go to school, but missing school because of on-going fear is not typical truancy. Five to ten percent of American children are believed to have fears that cause them to frequently miss school. (Murray, Bridget. “School phobias hold many children back.” *APA Monitor*, Sept. 97). Most of these cases, however, are referred to as “school avoidance” or “school refusal” rather than “school phobia”.

Only about one percent of American school children are thought to suffer from school phobia. A phobia is an excessive, irrational fear. It's a prolonged incapacitating fear that can seriously disrupt the child's education and damage self-esteem and confidence.

More Fear Factors

Children with serious anxiety, fears, or phobia about school usually send warning signals that are hard to miss. Eating and sleeping patterns change, school success is disrupted, and mysterious illnesses surface before or during school hours only to ease up or disappear late in the day and weekends.

Fear of bullies, reading aloud in class, embarrassment in the gym locker room, a critical teacher . . . these and other confidence-shaking problems (such as separation anxiety about being away from a parent) cause some children a lot of worry and stress that can manifest itself into very real physical symptoms: nausea and vomiting, diarrhea, headache, dizziness, and/or fatigue.

What Can You Do to Help?

If discovered and dealt with in time, children can overcome their school-related fears before they turn into full-fledged phobias. Here are some things you can do help:

- Ask the child to try and tell you exactly what incident, situation, or thoughts are causing him or her to feel afraid. Listen in a patient, nonjudgmental manner. Allow plenty of time for composing thoughts into words.
- Stay attentive and reassuring, but don't over-sympathize or over-dramatize the situation. Calmly make it clear that he or she does need to go to school and does have the inner power to overcome the fears. Reinforce the notion that facing fears and other tough life challenges will build confidence and personal strength.
- Ask teachers, school bus drivers, and/or other adults who supervise your child whether they have noticed specific situations that seem exceptionally troublesome. Consider your interview with them to be a fact-finding mission rather than an interrogation. Remain nonaccusatory and nondefensive.
- Recruit teachers and school counselors to help by taking time for some school day reassurances and for allowing some flexibility to leave classes to go to the

counselor's office for a reprieve at the onset of a sense of panic or other overwhelming feelings. Sometimes children overcome their fears with gradually increased exposure to the situation while they are assisted to feel comfortable, secure, and rewarded for success.

There are no easy answers to school phobia. Recognizing that there are fears that need addressing is the first step in overcoming the problem. Then you can begin the process of reestablishing confidence, regular attendance, and hope for a successful academic and social future.

Call in Reinforcements

A persistent case of school avoidance, school refusal, or school phobia may require professional assistance to prevent it from becoming a serious pattern of behavior. Kevin worked through his fears gradually with the help of his mother and professional support from a counselor who offered specific recovery steps, including communication skills he could use with his peers and relaxation techniques to use whenever he began to experience anxiety or excess stress.

If your child is struggling with anxiety and fear about school, or about any area of life, you can contact an SAP counselor who can direct you toward appropriate professional resources in your area.

Kid troubles? Call the Student Assistance Program and arrange to see a counselor. Contacts are confidential within legal limits and available at no cost to students and their family members. Call (515) 244-6090 or toll free (800) 327-4692. Counselors are on call 24 hours a day.