

## When Your Child Refuses to Go to School: Dealing With School Refusal

### What to Do When Your Child Won't Go to School

When a child refuses to go to school many parents will wonder what they're doing wrong, but they are not alone. Some estimates indicate that up to 20 percent of children show signs of school refusal at one time or another during their school career. Dealing with school refusal relies on understanding what's behind it and working with a team of professionals to help your child through this tough time.

### Why is Your Child Refusing to Go to School?

Before coming up with a definitive plan for dealing with your child's school refusal, it's important to get a sense of why your child is refusing to go to school. The [NYU Child Study Center](#) identifies four main reasons children refuse to go to school. Your child may be refusing to go to school:

1. *to get away from feeling bad*. He is trying to avoid something at school that causes anxiety, depression or other feelings of distress.
2. *to avoid social interactions or performance situations*. He has anxiety in social situations, trouble with peer interactions or is worried about how he'll do in testing situations and/or about being called on in class.
3. *to get attention*. Her tantrums, clinginess and separation anxiety may be a way to get attention she desires.
4. *to get some sort of reward outside of school*. This can be as simple as being able to watch TV or play video games while at home.

His school refusal may be for a combination of these factors, but as long as he's being reinforced, the behavior will continue. Behavior isn't just reinforced by reward; it's also reinforced by successful avoidance of a stressor.

For example, a child may not want to go to school because she hates riding the bus. Her tantrums in the morning either makes her miss the bus or let her stay home; she has been *negatively reinforced* by successfully avoiding the bus ride. On the other hand, the child who won't go to school because of separation anxiety is being *positively reinforced* by getting to stay home and spend time with you.

## What Should You Do When He/She Refuses to Go to School?

1. **Talk to your child's teacher and other school personnel about the problem.** Your child's teacher may be able to provide some insight as to whether there are things going on at school that are contributing to the problem or she may be able to reassure you that despite the morning tantrums and leg-clinging drop-offs, your child is okay once in the classroom and involved in the routine.
2. **Bring your child to the pediatrician.** Many children will have physical symptoms as well as emotional ones. It's important to make sure that these symptoms and the accompanying anxiety or depression aren't related to an illness or have any other physical cause. Once you can rule that out, you and the pediatrician can decide together whether it's time to bring a psychologist or counselor on as part of the team.
3. **Try to stay calm and rational.** Of course, this is easier said than done, especially when your child's behavior is disrupting your household and causing you to worry about things like truancy laws and whether or not you're going to lose your job if you have to call in one more day. Regardless, you need to maintain the expectation that school is a non-negotiable activity. Engaging in arguments or bribery is not going to solve the underlying problem.

### General Strategies

1. Expect your child to go to school each day.
2. Be consistent and use these methods every day.
3. Set up a regular morning routine that allows plenty of time for everyone to get ready for school and work.
4. Reward your child for properly getting ready in the morning and completing the morning routine. Praise good behaviour and ignore poor behaviour.
5. Speak to your child in a calm and matter-of-fact tone, single/ brief and specific directions.
6. Work daily with your child to help her/him prepare for the upcoming school day. Help them problem solve and practice the solution.
7. Seek supports from others.
8. Be consistent and use these strategies daily.

Sources:

<http://childparenting.about.com/od/schoollearning/a/dealing-with-school-refusal.htm>

Kearney, Christopher A. (2007) Getting your child to say "yes" to school