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School Refusal: When Your Child Doesn't Want to Go



Dr. Jenn Berman

Jane is a junior in high school. She often sneaks off campus for lunch and doesn't return to class.

Benjamin is 6-year-old who cries every day before school and asks to stay home. He starts begging to skip school at dinnertime every Sunday.

Carmen is a fourth grader who cries for her mother halfway through the school day. She rarely makes it all the way through the day without trying to go home a few times.

Demarco is an eighth grader who only ditches school on test days.

As fall approaches, millions of children run to the nearest stores to collect their school supplies for the year. Some eagerly look forward to the school year as a time for getting their new clothes. In general, children are filled with excitement, anticipation, and some nerves as they approach the new academic

year. But there is another group for whom school is more than just a pain in their underoos. Many of these children are reluctant, fearful, and even full-out resistant to going to school.

The term "school refusal" is often used to define child-motivated refusal to attend school or difficulties remaining in class for an entire day. This includes a wide spectrum of behaviors: the child who is completely absent from school, the child who attends for part of the day then leaves, the child who attends school following severe misbehaviors in the morning (tantrums, clinging, dawdling, stomach aches, aggression, etc.), and the child who attends school under great duress with lengthy pleas for future non-attendance.

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Causes

While there are probably as many reasons to skip school as there are children who do it, there are some common, less serious, reasons why kids are motivated to ditch. Some try to avoid it because they simply find school to be unpleasant. They may not like a classroom, a teacher, or a subject they are studying. The children who miss school for these types of reasons tend to be younger and have a difficult time explaining what is bothering them. Often times, older children and adolescents find themselves avoiding school to escape from social situations or circumstances where they will be evaluated (tests, public speaking, etc.). Another reason kids refuse to go to school is for positive rewards like: sympathy from their parents; attention from doctors or family members; getting to watch television during the day or playing video games.

Treatment

There are many different ways to treat the problem of school refusal. Cognitive behavioral interventions tend to be the most useful in changing these habits. One of the most effective interventions I have used with parents is a behavioral reward chart. Using this method, parents use a calendar to

chart positive behavior changes. Depending on the previous behavior, the child gets a star for every time he does something such as: make it to school without complaints, stay in school the entire day, take a test without leaving, or complete a presentation in class. Parents decide in advance a reward chart so children know how many stars earn a treat. It is important that the rewards are things that the child actually cares about so that they will be effective tools. Children who experience a lot of fear or anxiety at school can benefit from some basic relaxation or deep breathing exercises to help them calm themselves down.

Sometimes these children need professional help. A therapist can help by using talk therapy or more complex techniques like systematic desensitization, or cognitive restructuring. Other times a good therapist can teach parents better ways to handle the kind of acting out the comes with this kind of problem.

Dr. Jenn Berman is a psychotherapist and sports psychology consultant. She regularly appears on television and radio as an expert on psychological issues. She has been on 48 Hours, NBC News, The Other Half, and many more. For questions, comments, or advice to be used in one of her columns, she can be reached through her website at www.DoctorJenn.com.

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