



School Phobia

(Fact Sheet by the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry)

Going to school usually is an exciting, enjoyable event for young children. For some it brings fear or panic. Parents have cause for concern when their child regularly feels sick from tension, "plays sick" or with minor physical complaints wishes to stay home from school. Often the child five to ten years of age who behaves this way is suffering from a paralyzing fear of leaving the safety of parents and home. The child's panic is very difficult for parents to cope with, but these fears can be treated successfully.

The first appearance of unreasonable fear of school is typically in nursery school, kindergarten, or first grade, and it peaks in second grade. The child may complain of headache, sore throat, or stomach-ache shortly before it is time to leave for school. The "illness" subsides after the child is allowed to stay home, only to reappear the next morning before school. In some cases the child may simply refuse to leave the house.

Refusal to go to school often begins following a period at home which the child has become closer to the mother, such as a summer vacation, a holiday break or a brief illness. It also may follow a stressful occurrence, such as the death of a pet or relative, a change in schools or a move to a new neighborhood.

Children with an unreasonable fear of school may feel unsafe staying in a room by themselves and may display clinging behavior, shadowing the mother or father around the house. Such fears are common among children with separation anxiety disorder. They often have difficulty going to sleep, and they may show exaggerated, unrealistic fears of animals, monsters, burglars or being alone in the dark.

The potential long-term effects are serious for a child who has persistent fears and does not receive professional assistance. The child may develop serious educational or social problems if away from school and friends for an extended period.

The parents and child can benefit from seeing a child and adolescent psychiatrist, who will work with them in an effort immediately to return the child to school and other important daily activities. Since the panic comes from leaving home rather than being in school, frequently the child is calm once in school.

For some children, the more fundamental causes of fears will need to be treated at greater length. Refusal to go to school in the older child or adolescent is generally a more serious illness, and often requires more intensive treatment.

In any case, unreasonable fears about leaving the home and parents can be successfully treated, and parents should not hesitate to seek professional help. The child's physician can refer the parents to a child and adolescent psychiatrist.



The Center for Parent Involvement (FCPI) was funded by the U.S. Department of Education; Goals 2000, Educate America Act from 1994-1999. Guided by an advisory board of parents and professionals, the FCPI's goal was to tap the power of parents.

The FCPI gathered information on parent needs, coordinated the information, and created a series of resources organized by theme, including fact sheets for parents and professionals, "Beyond the Basics" resources, and resource identification lists. Many of the resources have been translated into Spanish language versions, and every effort has been made to preserve the meaning and flavor of the original English documents. This series of materials provides a wealth of current information for both parents and providers; the complete set of resources can be obtained in PDF format on the Department of Child and Family Studies Website at www.fmhi.usf.edu/cfs/dares/fcpi. The staff of the FCPI are hopeful that their work will continue to help children get ready to learn for many years to come.

The series' themes include:

- Family Empowerment
- Parent Involvement
- Parenting Support
- School Readiness
- Violence in the Lives of Children
- Transition to Kindergarten

The Center was one component of a project led by Hillsborough County Center of Excellence in collaboration with the Department of Child & Family Studies at USF's de la Parte Institute and the Florida Children's Forum. Other project partners include HIPPY (Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters), Hillsborough County Head Start and Hillsborough County Even Start. For more information about these projects, call 813.974.4612.

Transition, Beyond The Basics: School Phobia

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