



The Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds

Shining light on mental health through education.

School Refusal: What to Know & How to Help

When it comes to concerns about school refusal in a child or teen, it is important to know what signs to look for, when to worry, and what to do. This handout shares information to support you in this process.

School refusal can be a difficult challenge, but it is highly treatable. The key to success is: noticing signs early; identifying the cause; and fostering a quick return to school.

School refusal is when a child regularly resists or refuses going to school. They often experience emotional distress at the thought of going to school, which leads to them staying at home with the parents' knowledge. School refusal is not a disorder – it is a *symptom* of another issue.

Common Signs of School Refusal

All Children

- Physical complaints: headaches, stomachaches, dizziness, aches & pains
- Fear of impending doom or that something horrible will happen to a loved one while they are at school

Younger Children

- Extreme clinginess
- Crying
- Temper tantrums

Older Children

- Panic attacks
- Threats of self-harm
- Refusal to leave for school

Common Underlying Causes

Health Concerns

- Anxiety disorders
- Depression
- Learning disorders
- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Major medical conditions
- Substance use disorders

Social Concerns

- Bullying
- Close family member with major medical illness (sibling, parent)
- Parental separation or divorce
- Death in the family
- Relocation – New school
- Student/Teacher mismatch or conflict

A Quick Return to School

Success is built on strong communication/cooperation with parents, schools, and any doctors involved.

- **Ask your child** what makes going to school so hard.
- **Problem-solve together** about ways to address the barriers.
- **Set clear, firm rules** on when staying home is allowed (e.g. fever, vomiting, diarrhea)
- **Work with the school** on a gradual plan to get them back
- **Identify trusted people** at school that your child can turn to if they need extra support
- **Don't shame or blame** your child for not going to school
- **Speak positively** about good things at school like friends, favorite subjects, special teachers, fond memories
- **Make home boring** to help returning to school seem more rewarding than staying home

If you are worried about your child or an underlying health condition, talk to your pediatrician.

**Thanks for all you do to support a young person in your life.
It really makes a difference.**

For more resources on school refusal and other topics, visit us online: mghclaycenter.org

