

School Avoidance

Many of you have probably experienced the morning battles and/or rationalizing to get your child to school if you are reading this. The seemingly reasonable accommodation to let your child stay home a few times in hopes of them feeling better has not worked. Your child is pulling you in one direction and the school in another. What now? There is **Good News**- your child and family can **OVERCOME** these challenges! Treatment may be necessary to support your child/family. The following also includes supports, resources, further information, and steps to end school avoidance.

Support and Resources:

- Hey Sigmund, Where the Science of Psychology Meets the Art of Being Human:**

<http://www.heysigmund.com/>

- Turnaround: Turning Fear into Freedom (Anxiety Support):**

Phone: (877) 300-7436 Website: <https://www.turnaroundanxiety.com/>

- Utah Parent Center:**

Website: <http://www.utahparentcenter.org/>

- Anxiety and Depression Association of America:**

<https://www.adaa.org/>

- Other:**
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Diagnosis Information:

- National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH):**

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/index.shtml>

- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP):**

http://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/FFF-Guide-Table-of-Contents.aspx

- ❖ **Work to open communication about why the child does not want to attend school:** It is important to ensure bullying, a medical condition, learning disabilities, or another legitimate reason is not a contributing factor.
- ❖ **Talk with your child about feelings and fears, which helps reduce them.**
- ❖ **Practice relaxation methods with your child.** Deep breathing, muscle relaxation, imagining a relaxing place, counting to ten, stretching, and healthy self-talk can greatly reduce stress and anxiety.
- ❖ **Encourage hobbies and interests.** Fun is relaxation, and hobbies are good distractions that help build self-confidence.
- ❖ **Help your child establish a support system.** A variety of people should be in your child's life—other children as well as family members or teachers who are willing to talk with your child should the occasion arise.
- ❖ **Emphasize the positive aspects of going to school: being with friends, learning a favorite subject, and playing at recess.**
- ❖ **Be firm and calm.** High emotion and anger can trigger kids' anxiety response. Try to keep the morning organized and chaos free. Prepare for school the night before.

- ❖ **See the danger in school refusal:** Children not showing up for school is equivalent to adults not showing up for work and not caring for their families' needs. The longer a child doesn't go to school, the harder it is to go back.
- ❖ **Ensure Children do not have access to enjoyable activities or added parent engagement when they stay home.** If an unhealthy behavior is rewarded, it will likely continue.
- ❖ **Arrange an informal meeting with your child's teacher away from the classroom.**
- ❖ **Meet with the school guidance counselor for extra support and direction.**
- ❖ **Expose children to school in small degrees, increasing exposure slowly over time.** This will help them realize there is nothing to fear and that nothing bad will happen.
- ❖ **Schedule with a therapist to assess and address underlying behavioral health concerns.** Be open to new ideas so that your child is also. Learn about your child's anxiety disorder and treatment options.
- ❖ **Take care of yourself:** Exercise or relax every day, spend QUALITY time with your child(ren), get enough sleep, eat healthily, make priorities and find balance in meeting them, pick your battles.
 - Role modeling self-care, healthy coping, and taking responsibility is essential.

Turn Around Anxiety Suggestion: <https://www.turnaroundanxiety.com/child-refuses-go-school/>

Step One

If at all possible DO NOT let your child stay home. The hard-wired biological response to most scary things is to run or fight. Staying home is avoiding, which in this situation is the equivalent of running. Please understand this: Avoiding will give immediate relief, which in turn becomes powerfully reinforced. Once you allow this, the desire to stay home will get stronger and stronger.

A little time off is a big gamble. It is just fine for illness, sleepless nights, and other things but almost never for anxiety disorders. Don't mention homeschool, changing schools or some other way to escape. These options will become the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow for your child. If all else fails this might be an option but don't go there if you haven't already. Even a little hint will open that door. Some parents get professionals to also say this is not an option. That can cement the "No" and parents can end the argument by saying the doctor said no.

If you continue to make you child go to school you need to be prepared for many tearful mornings. Many schools will work with a crying child until he or she can go into class. This is the hardest part of facing fear when the anxiety is high and it doesn't seem to be getting any easier even after many times of facing the fear. There are a few things to consider that could extend the time it takes for it to settle down.

First, try to be firm but as unemotional as possible. Anger can activate the same part of the nervous system as anxiety. Try to keep the morning as chaos free as possible. Have things prepared so the morning is less rushed.

Step Two

Second, try to remove any excuses. Kids are amazing at finding these. Any subtle things like keeping the option open for not going or coming home will keep the anxiety going longer. Kids will wear you down. If there is a possibility for not going then that will keep the anxiety going. The day after a weekend or holiday will usually be worse. If you get to avoid something then facing it again is harder. Avoiding makes things worse.

Step Three

The reality is that sometimes you can't get your child to school. Who wants to have to physically drag their child out the door? If that is the case then it is time to get to work and create a plan.

The first part of the plan is to contact the school. You need them to work with you and your child. Keep in mind that schools go from completely unsympathetic to very understanding and flexible. You may have to get pretty tough. I think most public schools will have to accommodate anyone with a disability. I am guessing this is a big hassle for schools so expect some resistance and try not to take it personally. There are lots of steps for this and you will have to find out from your school administrators. The end of the process is a 504 plan. It is part of the Americans with Disabilities Act. If at all possible include teachers, counselors and administrators in your plan.

Steps to get back in school may involve someone coming to your home, attending part of the school day, access to a counselor or nurse, and options to contact you. That is part of the reason you need to find out what is possible at your child's school.

Next take care of yourself. Do your best to not take the blame and prepare to get simplified suggestions and advice from well-meaning or judgmental observers. If you haven't had this happen to yourself or your child it is hard to understand so many people will minimize this problem. Everyone gets to take a peek into your family and it may not be compassionate. Unfortunately, it comes with the territory.

Step Four

The next part of the plan is to develop a step-by-step hierarchy to get your child back in school. The general principle is to create a series of steps that get harder as you go. You do each step until the anxiety for that step has substantially decreased and then move to the next. Depending on your child, your child's age, the severity of the anxiety and your resources it might take several months for the process of getting your child back in school. Adjust your expectations accordingly.

If possible and/or available you could consider getting a therapist to help your child face his or her fear and also work with the school to help your child overcome this anxiety. We offer a lot of help in the Turnaround program that you can use at home with your child or in conjunction with a counselor.

THOUGHTS OF SUICIDE

If you or your child begins to have suicidal thoughts, please contact your treatment team immediately or call 911 in an immediate emergency. Effective treatment and safety planning can help you or your child overcome these challenges and find the hope to live!