Rev. June 8, 2015

**Overcoming School Avoidance and Separation Anxiety: Guide for Parents and Caregivers**

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# Case Example (Separation Anxiety Disorder)

Dominique is a 9-yo girl who lives with her single mother. Her mother however, develops a medical problem that leads mother to be offwork, and thus her mother stays home for several months. Dominique begins missing school in order to try to be at home with her mother. Even after her mother gets better and returns to work, Dominique continues to miss excessive amounts of school. Dominique’s mother tries to bring Dominique to school, however Dominique becomes extremely distraught and tearful, to the point of having a full-blown panic attack. The panic that Dominique has is so severe, that her mother feels there is no choice but to bring Dominique back home. Fortunately, Dominique’s mother talks with the school social worker, and together with Dominique, they work out a gradual re-entry plan. The plan has two main parts: 1) where Dominique gradually attends more and more school, week by week, and 2) where Dominique learns strategies to deal with the stresses/fears that block her from getting back to school. She starts the first week with just attending one period; by the second week she is attending two periods, and by the third week, she is attending the full-morning. By the fourth week, she is able to attend full days again.

# Case Example (Bullying)

Mary is a 8-yo girl who is normally a good student, who works hard and gets along well with her peers. She is somewhat shy though, which makes it more challenging for her to make friends. Half way through the school year though, her parents notice that she is refusing to go to school, stating that she is feeling unwell. Parents notice that she has trouble sleeping, and is too exhausted to attend school. She denies any problems, but after speaking with her teacher, concerns about bullying are raised. After talking with the teacher, a bullying intervention is put in place, and Mary is able to return to school. The most important part of the intervention is encouraging Mary to continue attending school, and hanging out with her friends. By having friends who stick up for her, and sticking up for her friends, Mary makes herself a harder target for the bully, and the bully leaves her alone.

# What is School Avoidance?

School avoidance (aka school refusal) when a child refuses to attend school.

# Why Does a Child Avoid School?

Many things can contribute to a child avoiding school:

* Worries about separation from parents, such as with separation anxiety: Some children are worried about separating from parents, or leaving the home. They may worry that something bad will happen to their parents.
* School phobia, which is fear of the actual school itself, usually because there is some stress with school. Usual stresses with school might include:
* Schoolwork: The child may be overwhelmed by the academic expectations, which can happen if a child has learning problems, attention problems.
* Teachers, such as the child not feeling connected to the teacher.
* Peers (e.g. bullying, teasing).
* Mental health problems such as depression, anxiety disorders, psychosis or other issues: Having a mental health issue can affect one’s concentration, energy (among other things), and thus it can make attending school feel overwhelming.
* Physical symptoms: A child might say they have a headache, stomach ache, or that they simply don’t feel well and can’t go to school. Many children with emotional distress will have physical symptoms as well.
* Truancy, where a youth intentionally skips school and hides this from the parents. Such children generally are not afraid of going to school, but they intentionally choose to not go to school. Such a child may have other rule-breaking behaviors such as lying, stealing, vandalism, drug use, or troubles fighting with others.
* Change/transition periods
* Students with school avoidance often report that their avoidance was triggered during certain periods such as:
* A student misses school due to illness, or some other difficulty
* A student misses school due to holidays or other breaks
* A student misses school following transition periods, which can be a stressful period. Typical ones include the transition from elementary to middle school, and middle to high school.

# What can reinforce school avoidance?

Once a child starts to avoid attending school for whatever reason, it can be reinforced, usually inadvertently by other reasons such as:

* Being able to watch TV, play video games and stay at home all day
* Being able to be with the parent
* Being able to avoid the stress that comes with school, teachers, or schoolwork

# What is the impact of school avoidance?

School avoidance carries serious consequences, as proper school attendance is required for future success with school, work and even peers.

For a child that misses school, there is the loss of valuable academic and social opportunities.

For parents of a child that misses school, there is the stress and time trying to get your child to attend school, and many times, it can affect parent’s work.

School avoidance can reinforce itself. As the child misses school, the child falls behind academically. The child also loses connections with peers. The child may become worried about the attention that will happen when the child does finally show up at school. As a result, the child may feel it's easier to simply avoid. And so the problems continue…

The good news, is that there are many things that can be done to help a child with school avoidance. School avoidance must be taken seriously and the earlier that something can be done, the better!

# What doesn’t work?

In the beginning, parents will try all manner of strategies to help their child attend school.

As parents get more exhausted and frustrated, they may resort to harsher and harsher strategies. They may get upset and yell at the child. They may consequence the child by taking away privileges…

The fact that you are reading this handout probably means that various strategies (including harsh behavior strategies) have not been helpful.

Read on to learn about more strategies….

# What emotional or psychological conditions might be seen in youth with school avoidance?

Youth with school avoidance are frequently anxious and fearful, and are afraid of leaving close contact with their parents or caregivers. Typical anxiety conditions include:

* Separation anxiety
* Social anxiety disorder (aka social phobia)
* Panic disorder
* Post-traumatic stress disorder

They may also have mood conditions such as:

* Major depression
* Dysthymic disorder
* Adjustment disorder

Other conditions that may contribute to school avoidance include:

* Learning conditions, such as troubles with reading, math, or English.
* Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or attention-deficit disorder (ADD), which are conditions where a youth has difficult paying attention, unless something is extremely stimulating. Because school can often be boring, they may be distractible in class, having trouble paying attention, have trouble completing tasks, or be disorganized. Not only can ADD or ADHD affect learning, but it can also impair relationships at school and at home.

Whatever the cause, any type of learning conditions will impair school performance, which may lead the child to feel overwhelmed in school, and resist or avoid schoolwork. This can then lead to secondary behavior or mood problems.

# What can we do about school avoidance?

The good news is that there are many ways to help overcome school avoidance.

Find one key member of the school to work with, and ensure that everyone (parents, school and any other professionals) are all working on the same side.

The exact treatment will depend on what the cause of the school avoidance is.

In general though, it usually always involves having the child attend more and more, step-by-step until the child is able to fully attend again.

# Ensure there are no medical problems causing the school avoidance

Especially if the child is complaining of physical illness, have the child seen by the pediatrician or family physician, to see if there is an underlying condition (medical or psychiatric) contributing to the school avoidance. Try to have your child seen by their physician on any morning that s/he stays at home.

You should probably keep your child at home if s/he has any of the following:

* Fever (over 100°F or 37.8°C orally)
* Vomiting (more than once)
* Frequent diarrhea
* Frequent cough
* Widespread rash
* Earache
* Toothache

Other than that, if your child has signs of cold symptoms (e.g., runny nose, cough) but without a fever, it should be okay to send your child to school.

# Home Strategies

According to Dr. Gordon Neufeld, what universally helps all children feel more secure is to improve our connection with our children.

Despite the fact that as parents we try our best to connect to our children, the problem with many anxious children, is that they often have **higher than usual needs for connection (and reassurance).**

The good news however, is that there are strategies that we can use to connect to even the most anxious of children.

**Dr. Neufeld recommends some of the following strategies to connect with an anxious child:**

1. Connect through the senses: Spend 1:1 time with your child.
2. Connect through having things in common. Point out to your child how you have things in common. Find things for you and child to have in common.
3. Connect through loyalty. Show your child how you prioritize your relationship with your child first and foremost over other distractions in life.
4. Connect through significance. As a parent, be the most important person in your child’s life. It is true that as kids get older, they often turn to peers to meet their needs. Unfortunately, peers cannot consistenly meet a child’s need as well as only parents. And thus, a child that depends on peers for their source of emotional validation will feel insecure at some level. An example would be the child that worries about what their peers think, and worries about having to please them.
5. Express love and affection. Continue to express love and affection towards your child. It may be verbally, “I love you”, or physically (e.g. hugs). Note that if your child is not appreciative of your love and affection, you will definitely also need to rely on other strategies.
6. Connect through unconditional validation and acceptance of your child. The deepest need that everyone has, is to be loved *no matter what.* To be loved not because we are pretty, smart, nice, or funny, but to be loved regardless of those things. One powerful way to help the insecure child is for the parent to let the child know that they are loved simply because they are your child. One of the most powerful ways to do this is to validate your child’s emotions and feelings. If your child is scared, validate that your child is scared, without trying to give advice, or fix your child’s anxiety.

**Additional strategies include:**

1. Bridge any separations

**Examples:**

* + - * At the end of the day, a child faces the separation from parent(s) when the child has to go to bed. It is thus important to have a goodnight ritual, where you say goodbye, and then reassure the child about the next time you see them.
* Saying good night "Good night, sweetie."
* Reinforcing that you stay connected to them, "You'll be in my dreams tonight."
* Reinforcing that you will see them again, "See you in the morning."
* At the beginning of the day
* Ensure that you say good morning to the child
* In many households, parents may have to go to work. For an anxious

1. Ensure that the child is not trying to be in an inappropriate **parenting** or "alpha" role with parents. Some children are anxious because they feel uncertain that adults can keep them safe. As a result, the child may worry about things that a child should not have to worry about.

# Working with the School

If you have tried various strategies at home, and you are still having difficulties, then you should consider:

1. Seeking professional help
2. Involving the school: Contact the school, and start by speaking with your child's teacher. Depending on the situation, your child's teacher then might also involve others such as: vice-principal, guidance counselor, social worker resource teacher, educational assistant (EA), child/youth care worker, etc.

# Gather Information

Consider keeping a daily log of your child’s school attendance, where you log the morning, and what happened, and whether the child went to school or not. Include a list of rewards and consequences in place. It is helpful for the school and professionals to be able to see what you have tried. It may also trigger ideas for fine-tuning the school environment to complement what is being done at home.

# School Strategies

Inform the school and enlist their help in overcoming the school avoidance.

* For medical concerns: If the child’s symptoms act up in school, try to see if the school nurse or guidance counselor can let the child lie down for 5-15 minutes in the office to rest and feel better, rather than simply sending the child home.
* For anxiety, allow child to bring transitional object, i.e. an object that will help the child feel safer or more comfortable at school.
* Build the child’s school support network, by speaking with the teacher about
* Partnering the child with a peer mentor
* Involving the child in small group work
* Behavioral strategies: give positive consequences or privileges for school attendance, and similarly, ensure that positive consequences or privileges are not given for non-attendance

Often a reward or consequence will only work for a few days and you have to find something new, but you have been able to keep the child in school for a few more days. Help from a skilled, favourite teacher, with the support of the principal and vice-principal, and lots of home-school communication are needed to make this work.

* Improve the teacher-child bond and encourage the child’s feeling of competence: have the teacher provide special tasks or special roles/responsibilities for the child.
* In general, home schooling is discouraged as it tends to relieve the child of the need to attend school

# Talking with your child about school avoidance

First, find a nice time and place to talk with your child, in privacy. You might say, “I’m really worried about you. We need to talk. Do you want to talk now, or later today?”

Asking about stresses:

* “I notice that school has been stressful for you.”
* “School can be stressful for a lot of people.”
* “What makes school stressful for you?”
* ”The usual things can be teachers, the schoolwork, or the other students.”
* “How are things with the teachers?”

Then, ask open-ended questions about the possible stresses:

* “How are things with the school work?”
* “How are things with the other students?”
* “Any other stresses?”
* “Its normal for family or friends to be a stress too. How are things with your friends? How are things with us (i.e. parents)? With your brothers/sisters?”

Another way to ask about possible stress, is to ask what the child would want to see different:

* “Is there anything you wish could be different about the teachers? What is it?”
* “Is there anything you wish could be different about the schoolwork? What is it?”
* ”Is there anything you wish could be different about the other students? What is it?”

# Consider Writing Down Fears / Stress

It can be hard for kids to talk about what is bugging them. It might be easier for the child to write a list of their fears/stresses (their own handwriting is best, even if it needs to be accompanied by a typed transcript). “How about this – it’d really help us if you could make a list of all the things bugging you right now. Do you want to do this on your own, or would you like me to help you with that?”

# Specific Situations that Can Lead to School Avoidance

Social concerns are a common situation, and include:

* **Worrying about what to tell people on the first days back to school –** because school avoidant may not like being the centre of attention, they may not like it when they get back to school and people start asking, “Where have you been?” Tell the child that its okay to say something like, “Oh, I haven’t been feeling well so I needed some time off. But thanks for asking. How have you been?” If the problem was anxiety, then perhaps with trusted friends and relatives the child could tell them the complete reason.
* Worrying about making friends. Because many school avoidant children tend to be shy or anxious, they will need greater encouragement and support in learning how to relate socially to peers. Parents can help by encouraging the child to first engage in supervised, structured contacts with peers (e.g., organized sports or clubs, or having a friend over with close supervision by an adult). As the child becomes more confident and more competent socially, then the child can be given more unstructured, or non-supervised social contacts with friends.
* Teasing or bullying – in this case, treatment would then include a variety of anti-bullying and bully proofing interventions
* Being afraid of a particular teacher. Find out what the teacher is afraid of, and what the child wishes could be different, and then try to problem-solve this with the teacher.
* Performance anxiety (e.g., fear of being called on in class, or fear of public speaking). Speak with the teacher to problem-solve this.
* Social anxiety around public places, e.g., eating in the cafeteria, using the school bathroom, or changing in the gym. In general, strategies to deal with this will involve making accommodations until the child is better able to cope.

Learning conditions, which impair a child’s learning, can make school overwhelming for the child. In this case, asking the teacher’s about the possibility of a learning condition will be helpful. Further testing with a school psychologist or private psychologist might help uncover what specific learning troubles need to be dealt with to help the child succeed in school

# Gradual Re-integration into School by Creating a Step-by-Step Plan

If a child has been avoiding school, and is not attending at all, it would probably be overwhelming for the child to be expected to suddenly start attending 5 full-days a week.

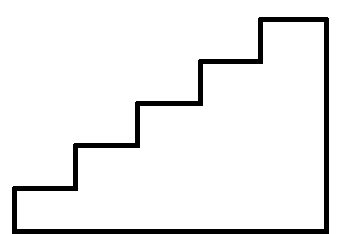
Ideally, one can work collaboratively with the child, parents and school in order to come up with a re-integration plan.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **What You Can Say** | **The Reasons** |
| On a scale between 0 and 10, where 0 is no anxiety, and 10 is the most anxiety, how much anxiety is there? | Identifying and quantifying the amount of anxiety is an important step |
| “What would be 10 out of 10 anxiety?” | Figure out the most anxiety provoking situation, which probably is the ultimate goal, i.e. full school attendance |
| “What would be 0 out of 10 anxiety?” | Figure out what is the least anxiety provoking |
| “What do you think you’re capable of managing now?” | Figure out what the child thinks s/he can do |
| “What’s one little step higher that you’d be able to manage?” | This is the key question – finding the situation which is slightly more stressful than the current situation, which the child can accomplish |

## Example of a Hierarchy for dealing with School Avoidance

Attending School 5-days a week

Attending School 3-days a week, for half-days



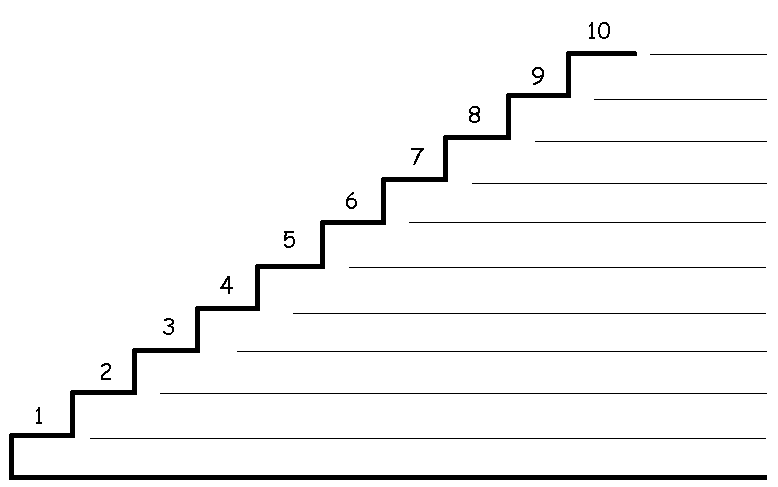
Attending School 1-day a week, for one class

# Principles of a Hierarchy

* Find out what would make person the most anxious, and set that as the ultimate goal, or the top step
* “Name something that if we asked you to do it, would make the worry 10 out of 10?”
* Find out what would be the least worrisome, and make that as the lowest step
* “What’s something you can do, that’s 0 out of 10 worry?”
* Agree that if the child tries a harder step and can’t manage, that they can always go back to the current step again – but agree that the child cannot go back to the bottom step.

# Template for a Hierarchy

This is a blank hierarchy that the child/parents can fill in. Start at the lowest step with the easiest goals, and put the hardest goals at the top (e.g., attending school for full days, five days a week).



# Ensure Appropriate Positive and Negative Consequences for Desired Behaviors (i.e. Attending School)

If a child is meeting their expectations for attending school, ensure there are appropriate, positive consequences. For example, privileges such as being allowed to watch TV, go out with friends, etc.

If a child does not meet his/her expectations for attending school, it can be helpful to ensure there are negative consequences, e.g. removing privileges, or adding extra chores (such as helping a parent with more chores at home). It is important to not inadvertently reinforce a child’s school avoidance. For example, if a child does not attend school, ensure that the child isn’t simply sitting at home playing video games or watching TV all day!

# Tips for School Mornings: Handling Medical Complaints

Assuming that the child has seen the doctor, and there are no significant contributing medical problems, then consider the following suggestions:

* If the child complains of feeling unwell
* Have them get up and get dressed anyways, and eat breakfast
* If the child persists in complaining about a temperature
* Have the child lie down on the couch for a few minutes, then take their resting temperature
* Check to ensure that the child does not have a temperature or fever, i.e., if the child’s temperature is below 99.5 F, or below 37.5 C, then s/he can still go to school

For a variety of minor complaints, one can try the following:

* If the child complains of a headache, then offer headache remedies (e.g., acetaminophen)
* If the child complains of stomach ache, then offer Pepto-Bismol or ginger ale
* If the child complains of a sore throat, offer cough drops
* Tensor bandages for muscle aches

Offering these things is a symbol of the parent’s concern, which can be followed with an empathetic statement such as, "I know you aren't feeling well and that is a bummer, but still you need to go to school while you are getting better."

# Tips for School Mornings: Being Firm

During mornings, you may wish to avoid asking your child how s/he feels in the event that only encourages the child to complain.

If your child is well enough to get up and be around the house, s/he is generally well enough to go to school.

It is typical that one parent is often firmer than the other parent; in those cases, try to have the firmer parent try to enforce things, and see if there is any greater success.

**Remember that ultimately it is the parent that should be making the decision about staying home, not the child. If you find that it is the child making the decision, and you feel powerless as a parent, then contact the school social Yorker and/or local health professionals to help restore your parental authority.**

# Avoid Further Isolation

Many children with school avoidance may start to avoid other activities as well. Try to keep the child from becoming withdrawing even further into their home base. They may try to avoid leaving the house or being involved in any kind of social activity. If possible, arrange simple social outings with peers or with extended family. If not, just get them out of the house into fresh air and sunshine - for a drive or a walk or to visit a store - anything to keep them moving and from withdrawing completely into themselves.

# What can we do about truancy?

In the event that the child is avoiding school due to truancy, the key is setting clear limits and consequences for behaviors.

Positive behaviors should be clearly defined, and positive consequences clearly defined.

Negative behaviors (i.e. skipping school) should be clearly defined, and they should be defined such that they can be monitored. Consequences for negative behaviors must be clearly defined, and enforceable consequences must be available.

# When should we let the school know there is a problem?

Contact the school if:

* As a parent, if you are noticing that the child is missing school due to any behavior problems such as tantrums, or refusal to cooperate with the normal routines of a school day, e.g. child refuses to get dressed, or get in the car

Feel free to ask early on for a referral to either the school social worker or psychologist.

# When should we get professional help?

Contact your child’s family physician or pediatrician if:

* The school avoidance lasts for more than 1-2 weeks
* If you have any concerns at all about a possible medical condition
* If you have any concerns at all about a possible emotional or behavioral problem: if your child appears to have fears or separation problems, or if your child appears depressed or sad, or withdrawn
* If you have any other particular questions or concerns

# Resources in Ottawa

When a child’s problems with school avoidance are becoming excessive, then there are various resources that may be helpful.

* Seeing a psychologist
* Seeing a counselor
* Seeing the pediatrician or family physician

Support groups in Ottawa include:

* Parent’s Lifeline of Eastern Ontario (PLEO). PLEO is a voluntary, nonprofit self-help group to assist parents and families of children and youth being treated for mental illness. Web: <http://www.pleo.on.ca>.

# Readings

* School Avoidance: Children Who Are Anxious and Reluctant to Attend School by David R. S. Philbrick, Kath Tansey, David Philbrick, 2000.
* Elaine K. McEwan, When Kids Say No to School: Helping Children at Risk of Failure, Avoidance, or Dropping Out, 2000

# Weblinks

<http://www.aboutourkids.org/aboutour/articles/refusal.html>

# In summary

School avoidance is a serious problem that can occur for many reasons. Often, it is one thing that triggers the school avoidance (e.g., being overwhelmed with schoolwork, or problems with bullies), and it is another thing that reinforces the school avoidance (e.g., being able to avoid school and watch TV all day).

Treatment will depend on the specific cause.

In addition, treatment generally involves working with the youth to come up with a gradual, step-by-step plan to get back to school.

In the end, school avoidance is very treatable, and the rewards are great!

# References

King NJ, Tonge BJ, Heyne D, Pritchard M, Rollings S, Young D, et al. Cognitive-behavioral treatment of school-refusing children: a controlled evaluation. J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry 1998; 37:395-403.

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# About this Document

Written by members of the CHEO Mental Health Information Committee. Special thanks as well to:

* Parents Lifeline of Eastern Ontario (PLEO) PLEO is a voluntary, nonprofit self-help group to assist parents and families of children and youth being treated for mental illness. Website: http://www.pleo.on.ca.
* Catherine Culpeper, Social Worker, Ottawa-Carleton District School Board.