

## Combatting School Avoidance

For many students, it's common to avoid going to school some days. Between class work, social situations, perhaps a disliked class or teacher; many kids may not want to attend on a given day. However, when this feeling begins to carry into a prolonged period, it can be a sign of a larger issue. Namely: school avoidance. According to Yale, school avoidance is categorized as missing ten percent or more of school days in a given year. This definition does not include those that may have family or medical issues that may prevent them from attending. Rather, it refers to those students who have troubles with school due to challenges related to academic, social, or emotional struggles. Per Yale, as many as fifteen percent of students are school avoidant.

School avoidance can appear in a variety of ways. For many students, anxieties for what school holds in store can manifest as aches, fatigue, nausea, or other physical symptoms. These students might ask to stay home due to feeling sick, or head to the nurse during school in hopes of having a pass to leave. While symptoms of illness should be taken seriously, if it becomes a common trend to be "sick" frequently and intermittently, it could be a sign of anxieties manifesting for the school day. In addition, some kids may struggle to arrive on time, may leave school early, or, of course, may fail to attend in general. This is much easier to identify as school avoidance, although it may result in punishment for their behavior from the school, potentially worsening their avoidance. It's also important to acknowledge the strength and duration of the avoidance. Many kids will be passively resistant to attending school, but unless they take action to avoid school, and do so repeatedly, it is not a strong sign of school avoidance.

It's crucial as parents and educators to learn about what is causing any avoidant behaviors. While there are a large variety of possibilities, a few of the most common are:

- **Academic Pressure** – For many, the pressure to succeed in classes can be hard to cope with. Whether it be a class they struggle with, a fear of failure, or just struggling to focus during classes, many kids can experience strong emotional distress when facing their school day.
- **Social Concerns** – For everyone, social struggles can be very hard to get through. Those experiencing bullying, having rumors spread about them, or struggling to engage with their peers and feel accepted may turn to avoiding school.
- **Mental Health Concerns** – While this is not always the case, school avoidance is associated with those who have conditions like separation anxiety, social anxiety, or depression. These conditions can have a profound effect on a person's life already, and in conjunction with other stressors at school, can lead to avoiding attendance altogether.

If a child or student is identified as being school avoidant, there are a few things to keep in mind for helping them through the situation. First and foremost, establishing a connection between the parents and the teachers can be an excellent first step in determining the reason for avoidance. In most cases, parents and teachers each only see half the picture. A student may not want to feel that they've let their parents down by struggling in school, or they may not have a close enough relationship with

any teacher to vocalize what's causing their anxieties at school. In cases like these, beginning dialogue between home and school can be a vital first step in understanding what is happening. Other actions to take while learning the cause include:

- **Listen** – While they may not always say what is bothering or concerning them directly, they may hint at it or imply it. Keep an ear out and relay that information to others keeping an eye on the situation.
- **Be Understanding** – Don't dismiss what they tell you because of their avoidance. While they may be avoiding school, their own anxieties and the symptoms it creates are real to them. It's important to respect where they're coming from. Treat their physical symptoms seriously, to remain on the safe side.
- **Disincentivize Being Home** – For many, a day home from school means unlimited computer, video game, or phone time. If the child has become school avoidant, restricting these incentives can help decrease their resistance. For instance, using parental controls on a video game console or phone to restrict how long they can be on it, turning off the Wi-Fi, or simply keeping them in eyesight while they're home can all decrease the perceived upside of being home. Additionally, requesting to have homework sent home to them can assist in making them more comfortable with school and avoid staying home being a reward.
- **Act Swiftly** – Don't delay if a child begins showing signs of school avoidance. The longer they're out of school, the harder it will be for them to return. Both due to falling behind in classes, as well as unwanted attention from others because of their absences.

Often, school avoidance can be remedied by implementing strategies on a case-by-case basis for each student. Individual academic and social supports, especially those that can be done discreetly to prevent embarrassment, can help students greatly. However, for some, in-school supports are not enough. For those individuals, an appointment with a mental health care provider can help to understand where their difficulties rise from. Be it a mental health disorder, an attention deficit disorder, or simply benefiting from regular therapy, a mental health provider can be a valuable asset in helping your student feel more capable to return to school.

For more information on school avoidance, please check out the resources below:

<https://childmind.org/article/when-kids-refuse-to-go-to-school/>

<https://www.yalemedicine.org/conditions/school-related-problems>

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/school-refusal-when-a-child-wont-go-to-school-2018091814756>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9686247/>

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/School-Avoidance.aspx>

[https://www.newportacademy.com/resources/restoring-families/school-refusal/#block\\_4ee957bcb4d54efda7f24cf9542c0caa-2](https://www.newportacademy.com/resources/restoring-families/school-refusal/#block_4ee957bcb4d54efda7f24cf9542c0caa-2)