

# When Kids Stop Coming to School: School Refusal and Avoidance Behaviors

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*Children and adolescents may experience fear and anxiety related to attending school. The purpose of this handout is to provide professionals with background information regarding school refusal and avoidance behaviors, including behavioral characteristics, as well assessment and intervention information.*

## What Are School Refusal and Avoidance Behaviors?

In the 1930's the term "school phobia" was coined. In general, school phobia refers to [anxiety and fear related to being in school](#).

There has been little agreement over the term "school phobia." Other common terms that are often used interchangeably with school phobia are school refusal and school avoidance. The term "school phobia" has recently fallen into disfavor among educators and professionals. Professionals have criticized the use of the word "phobia" for these behaviors because they do not meet diagnostic criteria for true phobias.

Many researchers and educators prefer to use the term "school refusal" or "school avoidance behaviors" as an alternative to "school phobia." Therefore, the behaviors commonly referred to as school phobia, school refusal, and school avoidance will simply be referred to as school refusal and avoidance behaviors in this handout.

## What Do School Refusal and School Avoidance Behaviors Look Like?

- Throwing tantrums
- Somatic complaints
- Panic attacks
- Crying
- Shyness
- Unhappiness
- Demands for parental attention
- Irritability
- Clinginess

## Prevalence

School refusal and avoidance behaviors are estimated to affect between 1 and 10% of U.S. school children. More conservative estimates range from 1.7 to 5%. Prevalence rates are often difficult to estimate with school refusal and avoidance behaviors largely in part due to differing opinions regarding diagnostic criteria.

## Causes

Some children refuse to attend school in order to [avoid situations](#) that can evoke negative affectivity (e.g., anxiety, depression, low self-esteem) or to escape aversive social situations. Some children are reinforced for refusing

school (e.g., watching television, playing with toys at home).

Some researchers suggest that school refusal and avoidance behaviors tend to occur in families that are dysfunctional and are experiencing conflict. Events such as divorce, family move, death, or illness of the child or a family member can occasion school refusal and avoidance behavior.

It is important to consider other potential reasons for the behaviors. For example, students may be afraid to read aloud in class, may be bullied by other students, or are exposed to negative classroom environments.

Children who have missed an extensive amount of school due to illness or surgery may experience difficulty returning to the classroom routines as well as academic and social demands. Students who are transitioning (e.g., from elementary to middle school, or middle school to high school; transitioning back from a school vacation such as winter or spring break) may feel additional stress. All of these factors may lead to the development of school refusal or avoidance behavior pattern.

### **Assessment**

Because school refusal behaviors may be maintained by a complex interaction of environmental variables, assessment should begin with a functional analysis of the behavior. Professionals may include behavioral interviews with the child and family, diagnostic interviews, self-report instruments, self-monitoring data, behavior checklists, behavioral observations and family assessment instruments in a [comprehensive assessment](#).

[Learning disabilities, severe depression, conduct disorders, physical illness and health problems](#) may appear to be school refusal and avoidance behaviors and should be ruled out before any diagnoses are made.

School refusal and avoidance behaviors must be identified and treated early so the behaviors are not reinforced over time.

### **Interventions**

[Early detection and intervention](#) are critical in the amelioration of school refusal and avoidance behaviors. If untreated, chronic school refusal and avoidance may result in family distress, academic deterioration, inability to establish meaningful peer relationships, school or legal conflicts, work or college avoidance, panic attacks, agoraphobia and adult psychological or psychiatric disorders.

If the assessment data indicate that school refusal is related to the child avoiding aversive stimuli, systematic desensitization, relaxation training, and gradual school re-entry would be an appropriate intervention.

Training in coping skills may also be a necessary intervention component to consider. Modeling, role-play and other cognitive-behavioral techniques may be effective techniques for children with school refusal and avoidance behaviors.

For children who are refusing to attend school in order to secure parental attention, interventions involving parent training and contingency management are often effective.

Treatments utilizing psychotropic medications should be used with caution due to the possibility of serious adverse

side effects and should be considered after other forms of treatment have been deemed ineffective.

Behavioral interventions such as positive reinforcement, shaping, stimulus fading and extinction have been used alone and in combination with other techniques to reduce school-related fears in children

### Summary

Although school refusal and avoidance behaviors do not occur frequently, their associated negative outcomes can be detrimental to students, families and schools. School-based personnel must work collaboratively to appropriately assess and identify appropriate intervention strategies for students affected by these problems.

### References

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