

# School Refusal

## 6 STEPS TO SCHOOL ACCEPTANCE

*School refusal is most often the result of anxiety caused by irrational thinking. Other emotions are often present but they are secondary to your child's genuine fears. The simplest treatment is the loving reassurance of a caring parent who sets clear and reasonable expectations for their child.*

For many cases step one can be successful in overcoming school refusal.

### **STEP 1. QUIET WELL TIMED ONE TO ONE CHAT**

Pick a time when your child is relaxed and ask them quietly "Have you any reasons for not wanting to go to school?" and ask "Why?". Follow this with direct questions about bullying, school work and anything your child may perceive as a threat. Then check on any threats your child may perceive for you. Many children when questioned will share their fear of something happening to a parent or other at home or to themselves. Be careful not to make judgements or butt into what your child is saying – nod, listen and speak only to confirm details. Remember even if you do this very well they still may say very little or give you information they think you want to hear. Finally ensure you thank them and if needed give reassurance.

### **STEP 2. MEDICAL CHECK**

Ensure there is no medical reason for your child's reluctance. School can be very stressful if you're feeling unwell. Use your visit to the doctor as evidence of your love for your child. Make sure your statements are caring and positive.

### **STEP 3. LOOK FOR OTHER SIGNPOSTS TO CAUSES**

For example:

- Has your child been through a traumatic event such as a car accident that may cause them to fear separation?
- Maybe your child has difficulty learning or simply doesn't enjoy school. A sign for this in a young child can be a lack of interest in drawing and writing at home and/or playing school.

### **STEP 4. TALK TO PEOPLE**

For example:

- The teacher
- The school deputy principal
- The school guidance officer

Go over the facts and try to decide on what they perceive the threat to be-

- Something at school
- Something at home

Look out for misleading information

## **STEP 5. ESTABLISH A PLAN**

If possible make an appointment to go over this information with your school guidance officer. He/she will help you design a plan with back up options and timelines. Many plans will include individual therapy and reward systems. See the 'strategies' section for ideas.

## **STEP 6. START**

Expect set backs but be consistent. Keep in regular contact with school staff.

## **STRATEGIES**

N.B. Some of these may be useful in your child's plan.

- Make clear statements to your child that demonstrate your love while saying what they are expected to do.
- Give a friend of your child's a lift to school so they can go in together.
- Get someone else to take them to school.
- Time the drop off to reduce stress. For example just before the line up bell.
- Don't hang around. Once you have dropped off your child leave. (The school will ring if they need you).
- Set up a daily reward system with simple rewards and a time line with a conclusion. Make sure to include siblings.
- See if you can organise a distraction once your child arrives at school. For example - a puzzle in a classroom for younger children.
- Build social networks at school by getting your child to join local sports teams or organisations.
- If the behaviour is extreme initially expect approximations of the ideal behaviour. (Children who run away or endanger themselves will probably require therapy prior to commencing school).
- Get your child to imagine going to school and what they will do and say. While you talk them through this, provide loving reassurance.
- If you are unable to get them to school – use tactical engagement with him/her and siblings. For example -
  - Give the sibling attending school your undivided attention as you chat to them about what happened at school (do not say aloud your reason for this).
  - Do not punish them for refusing to go.
  - Do not reward them, no videos, soft drinks, etc.
  - Try to get them to do school work. Say, "This is a school day. You need to do school work".

## **If you anticipate problems**

**Desensitise** – Prior to school starting, visit and look at the buildings. Speak in a positive constructive way about school. Give messages about being safe at school just as you will be at home or work.

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