



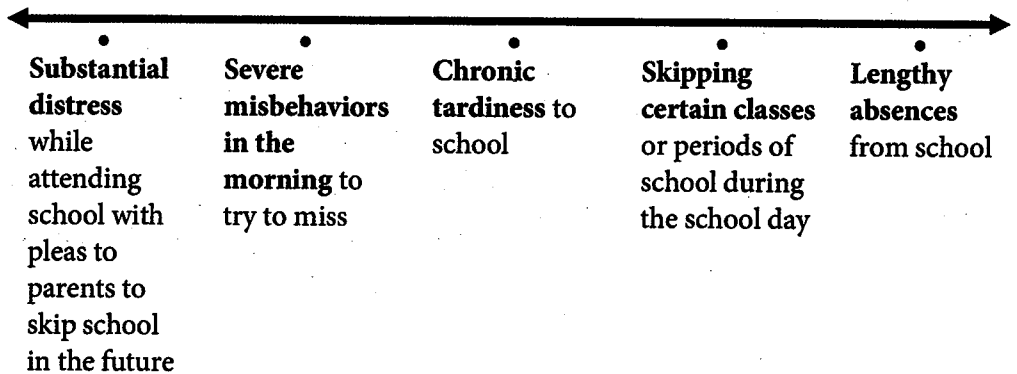
School Refusal

Help! I can't get my adolescent to go to school!

There is a wide range of school refusal behaviors. It is best to address these behaviors early on. This flyer describes strategies for treating school refusal behaviors.

What are school refusal behaviors?

Below is a scale showing school refusal behaviors:



Behavior that falls at the far right end of the scale is severe enough for healthcare providers to call it "school refusal." It is best to address school refusal behaviors before they reach the far end of the scale.

Are school refusal behaviors common?

This is not an unusual problem. About 1 out of every 20 students refuse to attend school or remain in class an entire day. Studies show that some form of ongoing absence from school affects many children each year.

What are the symptoms of school refusal behavior?

Symptoms of school refusal behavior include:

- Anxiety
- Depression and withdrawal
- Fatigue
- Crying and/or tantrums
- Arguing
- Aggression
- Physical complaints such as stomachaches and headaches
- Dawdling
- Refusing to obey and/or to move
- Running away from school or home

What can happen if school refusal is not treated?

There are a number of problems caused by school refusal if it is not treated, including:

- Academic problems and school dropout
- Loss of social interaction
- Family conflict and stress
- Breaking the law
- Problems with jobs and relationships in adulthood

To Learn More

- Adolescent Medicine
206-987-2028
- Ask your child's
healthcare provider
- www.seattlechildrens.org

Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your child's nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.

Why does school refusal happen?

Your adolescent may refuse to go to school for one or more of these reasons:

- To **avoid** school-related situations, such as bullying or a phobia, that cause them to be very upset.
- To **escape** painful social or school-related situations such as performance anxiety, social anxiety, or an undiagnosed learning disorder.
- To gain **attention** from parents and others.
- To get **tangible rewards** outside of school such as getting to sleep late, watching TV or playing video games.
- Because of an **anxiety disorder**. Many children with school refusal behavior are diagnosed with an anxiety disorder.

What should I do if my adolescent has symptoms?

The first step is to take your adolescent to their doctor. If little or no physical problems are found, a school refusal diagnosis should be considered. If the doctor has no experience with this problem, your adolescent will be referred to the adolescent department of a medical center.

What can be done to treat school refusal behaviors?

A plan can be created that includes all or some of the strategies below:

- Teach your adolescent to reduce anxiety by using techniques such as muscle relaxation and breathing exercises. You can find more information in the Deep Breathing and Meditation and Relaxation handouts.
- Slowly reintroduce your adolescent to school. Start with a very small amount of time in school and slowly increase. You will need the school's cooperation to do this.
- Set a regular morning and evening routine.
- Set firm rules about when it is OK to miss school such as for vomiting, fever or bleeding.
- Take your adolescent to school.

Your adolescent's plan may also include:

- Anti-anxiety medicine such as Prozac or Zoloft
- A therapy called cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). CBT teaches your child how to identify problem behaviors, evaluate their causes, come up with a consistent response and then change their behavior based on feedback.
- A social worker to work with you and the school

Reference: Kearney, C.A. (2006). Dealing with School Refusal Behavior: A primer for family physicians. *The Journal of Family Practice*, 55 (8), 685-692.

Seattle Children's offers interpreter services for Deaf, hard of hearing or non-English speaking patients, family members and legal representatives free of charge. Seattle Children's will make this information available in alternate formats upon request. Call the Family Resource Center at 206-987-2201.

This handout has been reviewed by clinical staff at Seattle Children's. However, your child's needs are unique. Before you act or rely upon this information, please talk with your child's healthcare provider.

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