

GETTING RELUCTANT KIDS TO SCHOOL

Separation from parents can sometimes be a problem when children go to school.

Developmentally, it is reasonable to expect children from four years upwards to separate from their parents for around five or six hours at a time. Sometimes when family breakdown has occurred or when children have experienced loss or trauma then children can become more clingy to their primary parent, making separation difficult.

This doesn't mean that children don't go to school, pre school or to other places they need to be. It just requires some different strategies as well as special care.

Parents need to reassure children before they leave home that they will be there at the end of the day. It is important for parents to keep their end of the bargain and be on time at the agreed place.

Children take their cues from parents so don't make a big deal of leaving. Hide your own anxiety. This is crucial. Be friendly, be matter-of-fact and leave without showing too much concern, even though you may feel awful inside.

Let your child know what will happen before leaving from home.

Consider having a staff member at school meet you at a specified time to take the child with them. Alternatively, you can make sure a friend of your child is there as well. This can be a useful distraction. Make sure you leave promptly. Ignore much of the noise.

If staff members are involved then they need to be friendly but also careful that they don't pay too much attention so that the behaviour doesn't get some really positive pay-offs.

Later at home talk about the school day. Show interest in what happened during the day and focus on the positive aspects of the day.

Be less concerned overtly about the clinginess of your child but make sure you have plenty of one-on-one time at home.

Practise separation in short doses. That is, leave your child with a friend for an hour or two at a time so they can understand you will be back and they can get by without you.

Recognise the times when she or he separates without too much fuss and point out that they can actually separate easily.

Also be aware that separation can be an attention-seeking behaviour at times. See it as a child's challenge and something they need to tackle and deal with. Place responsibility on them rather than on the parents.

CHILDREN WHO ARE ANXIOUS AND RELUCTANT TO GO TO SCHOOL

Many children become anxious about going to school. The most common age for this type of anxiety is five to six years of age. It is also common in school-age children who are about 10 to 11 years old, toward the end of the last years of primary school.

The reason for the reluctance to go to school can be varied, ranging from social issues with children at school, learning difficulties and relationship issues with teachers. Sometimes the reason kids are reluctant to go to school actually has nothing to do with the school.

They may feel they're needed at home because a parent is stressed or depressed, or because of something else affecting the family. If that's the case, the answer involves addressing the family issue.

School reluctance in its extreme becomes school refusal, where a child refuses to go to school. This refusal shows itself through temper tantrums and crying when it is time to go to school. They may complain about stomach-aches, headaches, nausea and dizziness.

You know these are not real medical problems when they get better later in the morning once the child understands that he is going to be able to stay home.

Managing school refusal and anxiety

The main goal in managing school reluctance is to get kids to school, and not become a school refuser. Unfortunately, when kids seem sick and are trying to stay home from school, it is not always easy to recognize that they are avoiding school. A visit to the doctor is usually a good first step when your kids don't want to go to school. This can help ensure that your child doesn't have a physical condition causing his symptoms.

Here are some tips to help you to manage school reluctance:

- **Point to the positives.** Find something good in each school day that your child may look forward to. Keep pointing out these positive aspects whether it's a favourite activity, class time in the art room or social highlights.
- **Have children go to school with a friend.** The social impact of a peer not only eases anxiety from a situation, but sometimes makes kids put on a brave face in front of their friend.
- **Get someone else to take your child to school.** School reluctance in some cases can be a great way to keep parents busy with them. So if your child acts up for you, but not for another person, then consider having a friend take your child to school for a time.
- **It takes time.** Understand that it may take time for your child to become overtly happy about going to school.
- **Make sure that your child goes to school each day.** When kids stay home its harder to get them to go to school next time. The longer kids stay home, the harder it will be to get them to go back to school.
- **Keep a diary over a two week period.** See if there are any patterns about behaviour, or certain conditions or days when reluctance is more likely.

Your approach as a parent needs to be empathetic and positive. That is, recognise that your child's anxiety is real, but also understand that this is something that your child must face and will conquer. They need encouraging parents who let them know that they can conquer their anxiety, and supportive teachers who can handle children sensitively but firmly.

Children need to feel confident that the adults in their lives are making wise decisions, in their best interests and that they can get through to the other side of their worries.

It's helpful if teachers can link parents up with other parents who have successfully dealt with children who have been anxious and reluctant to attend school.