

Children Who Will Not Go To School (Separation Anxiety)

Going to school usually is an exciting, enjoyable event for young children. For some it brings fear or panic. Parents have cause for concern when their child regularly feels sick from tension, "plays sick" or with minor physical complaints wishes to stay home from school. Not wanting to go to school is most common in children 5-7 and 11-14, times when children are dealing with the new challenges of elementary and middle school. These children may suffer from a paralyzing fear of leaving the safety of their parents and home. The child's panic and refusal to go to school is very difficult for parents to cope with, but these fears can be treated successfully, with professional help. Refusal to go to school often begins following a period at home in which the child has become closer to the parent, such as a summer vacation, a holiday break, or a brief illness. It also may follow a stressful occurrence, such as the death of a pet or relative, a change in schools, or a move to a new neighborhood. The child may complain of a headache, sore throat, or stomach-ache shortly before it is time to leave for school. The "illness" subsides after the child is allowed to stay home, only to reappear the next morning before school. In some cases the child may simply refuse to leave the house.

Children with an unreasonable fear of school may:

- feel unsafe staying in a room by themselves
- display clinging behavior
- display excessive worry and fear about parents or about harm to themselves
- shadow the mother or father around the house
- have difficulty going to sleep
- have nightmares
- have exaggerated, unrealistic fears of animals, monsters, burglars
- fear being alone in the dark, or
- have severe tantrums when forced to go to school.

Such fears are common among children with separation anxiety disorder. The potential long-term effects (anxiety and panic disorder as an adult) are serious for a child who has persistent fears and does not receive professional assistance. The child may develop serious educational or social problems if away from school and friends for an extended period of time. The parents and child can benefit from seeing a child and adolescent psychiatrist, who will work with them in an effort to immediately return the child to school and other important daily activities. Since the panic comes from leaving home rather than being in school, frequently the child is calm once in school. Refusal to go to school in the older child or adolescent is generally a more serious illness, and often requires more intensive treatment. Unreasonable fears about leaving the home and parents can be successfully treated, and parents should not hesitate to seek professional help. The child's physician can refer the parents to a child and adolescent psychiatrist.

