

# Solutions Newsletter

September 2021



Effective School  
Solutions

*Solutions* is a newsletter published by ESS for parents, guardians and caretakers. Each issue highlights an important topic related to children's mental health and provides practical applications for parents in the home environment.

## School Avoidance & COVID-19

September will be the first time in over 18 months that many students in the United States will attend 5 full days of school each week with all their classmates. Teachers and parents alike are wondering if symptoms will worsen for formerly school avoidant youngsters. There is also concern that new cases of school avoidance will be identified due to the various stressors associated with the pandemic, not the least of which is uncertainty and fear related to the surge of COVID-19 Delta variant cases in many parts of the country.

School avoidance is a pattern of refusing or avoiding school, not of schoolwork per se, and is a complex syndrome influenced by temperament, genetics, cognitive factors, and family environment.

It often occurs after a triggering event (e.g., a parent's illness, a bullying incident, a move to a new home or school, or a prolonged absence from school), and in many cases is best understood as an anxiety disorder related to separation anxiety.

A pattern of school avoidance often begins the night before a school day, with the child showing resistance or complaining of illness. Most mornings bring protests and a refusal to get out of bed, or get on the bus, and may include temper tantrums and threats of self-harm. When in school, the student often makes frequent visits to the nurse's office and/or frequently calls home. Students experience uncomfortable feelings such as anxiety or panic when in school, and many develop physical symptoms, such as headaches, nausea/vomiting, trembling, or muscle or stomach pains. These symptoms usually improve once the child is allowed to stay home.

There are many factors that contribute to the development and maintenance of school avoidance, and it is critical to have a mental health professional conduct a comprehensive assessment before deciding how to intervene. The four primary reasons that students avoid school are:

- To avoid school-related stimuli that cause discomfort or anxiety (e.g., noisy cafeterias, bus rides, fire drills, crowded hallways). This is common in younger students and accounts for about 33% of school avoiders.
- To avoid real or perceived social judgment. This accounts for approximately 8% of school avoiders, especially in the 11- to 17-year-old age group, and includes avoidance of bullying, teasing, academic demands such as tests and public speaking, and changing in locker rooms.

- To seek attention from parents or caregivers. Approximately 24% of school avoiders fall in this category, and it is common in 5- to 10-year-old students, especially after a significant change, stressor, or trauma.
- To seek tangible rewards outside of the school environment (e.g., access to video games, ability to sleep in, to work at a job, to use drugs, or to socialize). About 35% of school avoiders are included in this group, and it is most common in 11- to 17-year-olds.

School avoidance has a major impact on a student's education and creates family conflict. Parents can support school avoidant children by:

- Collaborating closely with school-based mental health counselors, e.g., allowing home visits as appropriate.
- Arranging for medical appointments to rule out medical problems if your child is complaining of physical symptoms.
- Creating and sticking with predictable home routines, such as sleep and eating schedules, homework and recreation times, medication regimens, etc.
- Practicing a simple mindfulness technique (e.g., a breathing exercise) with your child every day.
- Encouraging your child to express a wide range of feelings and practicing coping self-talk: "it is ok to be nervous", "I can have uncomfortable feelings and still go to school, enjoy my friends".
- Being careful to not reward school avoidance behavior without meaning to. Praise positive actions and ignore negative ones. Create formal rewards for attending school and consequences for avoiding school. Don't offer too much supportive attention or reassurance to your child while he/she is avoiding school – be matter of fact and business-like and remove access to games, tv, phones, etc. during the school day.