

School Refusal

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While it is developmentally normal for younger children to be anxious about school this normal anxiety typically resolves quickly as the child adjusts to school. Moreover, most parents are able to provide the support needed to help their children overcome their initial anxiety. However, when anxiety about school causes a child significant distress intervention is often needed. This is particularly true for adolescents, who, from a developmental perspective, should have resolved normal fears about school.

To effectively intervene with problems of school refusal and school anxiety clinicians need to clearly understand what is underlying these problems. Children may fear and resist school for a variety of reasons.

Some children may have undiagnosed anxiety disorders (OCD, a social phobia or panic disorder). Others may have experienced difficulties with peer relations or have been victims of bullying. In some instances, children who struggle academically may feel inadequate and resist school because they experience academics as humiliating. Additionally, significant family problems may leave a child or teen fearful about separating from their family. Finally, more serious psychological or psychiatric problems may be present and school anxiety/refusal may be one manifestation or corollary of these disorders:

Presence of Anxiety Disorders

Peer problems (particularly bullying)

Academic difficulties

Family conflicts and problems

Presence of significant psychiatric/psychological problems

Treatment strategies vary significantly depending on a variety of factors including: the age of the child, the child or teen's motivation to attend school and engagement in therapy, the presence of other psychological problems and concerns, and the family's response to the problem.

In working with teenagers we have found that a combination of individual and family therapy is typically most effective. In individual sessions the therapist can work with the adolescent: educate the adolescent about anxiety, identify more effective coping strategies to manage and alleviate anxiety, and motivate the adolescent to work to overcome anxiety and attend school. In family sessions, the focus is often on helping parents provide more consistent and effective support and structure.

Adapted from <http://www.centersforfamilychange.com/blog/?p=67>