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Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

Managing School Refusal

Parents are often perplexed when something, such as the enjoyment of school, suddenly changes for a school-age child. Let's consider some of the possible reasons for a child's distress over attending school.

Security of home: Children face the challenges of school bolstered by their internal strength and confidence as well as the security they continue to derive from their family. If worried about things at home, children may have less of a foundation of support to draw on while at school. Feeling less secure, the inevitable challenges of school are more difficult and potentially emotionally painful. To protect themselves, children often try to avoid a situation that creates painful feelings. There are many home situations that can affect a child, including marital discord, parental physical illness or emotional change, move of home, illness in the extended family and financial pressures.

Every classroom is different: Although many things about the overall structure of schooling remain constant, every classroom presents a new experience. When moving into a new classroom, children meet a teacher with a new style and personality. As with any relationship, children will "click" with some teachers better than others.

For example, we recently worked with a child who developed sudden school avoidance because his teacher expected him to handle problems and conflicts more on his own than previous teachers, who had tended to quickly come to his aid. This child was on the timid side and felt overwhelmed by the need to be more assertive. His current teacher's approach was very reasonable, but asked too much too soon from this child.

Every child beginning a new classroom also will be with some new classmates, many of whom are strangers in the beginning. He or she must learn new routines, and the nature of the academic work may be different. Just because a child has comfortably negotiated these changes in the past does not mean that the child will do so each and every time.

Imagine that we adults had to change jobs every year. Someone might very well adjust comfortably most of the time, but it is possible that they might confront a particular work environment that did not suit them. Perhaps they were uncomfortable with the person in the next cubicle, or their boss had a style that made them (but not everyone) feel unsuccessful. They might have a problem with that particular work experience, but not necessarily with work. It is possible that a particular is facing this type of common situation.

A worrisome event: Whenever a child suddenly loses the ability to function as successfully as before or develops new symptoms, it is always prudent to consider the possibility that there was a particular upsetting event that caused the change. In a school setting, bullying or some other negative peer interaction is a common, potentially upsetting event. There are many other possibilities, fortunately rare within a school setting, including inappropriate discipline or physical or sexual abuse.

A problem from within: So far, we have been considering the possibility that a child is mostly reacting to something that has changed in his or her environment, whether at home or at school. There is another possible source of a child's distress: from inside the child.

Children respond to things that happen to them. However, they also have their own inner life. They have their own dreams, aspirations and worries; they have their own way of understanding their past, present and future. They can suddenly take leaps of emotional and social growth because of their particular perspective on the world. Or they can develop sudden encumbrances, including behavioral changes or symptoms, also based upon their inner perspective.

We can make this a bit clearer with an illustration from another child. Beginning in third grade, this child developed a strong dislike for school.

Previously, she had seemed happy and successful. It turned out that this young girl was worried about growing up; she felt, for a number of reasons, that things would not go well for her if (!) she grew up. Third grade, for her, signified the beginning of growing up. By protesting the class, she was protesting growing up and, in her mind, somehow magically remaining young, therefore guaranteeing her security and happiness.

If a child is avoiding school partly for internal reasons, the reasons are likely to be different from those of this girl, because each child interprets the world in his or her own way. It also is likely that the child would have little awareness of what these concerns are and might require professional assistance to work them out.

What can a parent do?: We recommend that parents maintain a gentle but firm hand at their child's back. Parents need to convey their confidence that their child will find his or her way through this situation. Avoiding school will only erode a child's confidence.

Parents should work to keep communication open and recognize that their child may not understand why he or she is having these troubles. School "being dumb" may be as far as the child can take the discussion. However, parents should encourage their son or daughter to keep thinking about the reasons that school is "dumb," and convey their confidence that he or she will be able to better figure the problem out.

We recommend that parents seek a middle ground between showing their interest and asking too many questions. A general question about whether anything upsetting has happened might give a child permission to tell parents about something that is hard for him or her to talk about, without putting incorrect ideas or worries in his or her head. Parents might also ask their child's teacher if she or he knows of any troublesome event or relationship.

Growing up is never totally smooth, and if parents maintain confidence, expectations and communication, they will give their child in these circumstances the best opportunity to overcome and even grow from what usually is a temporary bump in the road.