



Lucy Daniels

Center for Early Childhood

Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

Tummy Aches at School Time

Many children who are reluctant to go to school communicate their feelings through physical complaints, such as headaches or stomachaches. These symptoms may appear before school or appear during the school day; sometimes they resolve during the school day, but other times they do not.

Because there is a school component at Lucy Daniels Center, we learn all about children's feelings about going to school each day. Understanding the meaning of school for children provides the best guide for helping children who are reluctant to attend school.

School can be a pleasant experience: Most children enjoy going to school most of the time because school has many rewards. School provides opportunities for children to:

- spread their wings and achieve independence,
- make friends and socialize,
- learn academic skills and feed natural curiosity, and
- engage in new and enriching relationships with teachers.

Children develop confidence and good feelings about themselves when they grow in their independence, socialization, and learning.

School is also challenging: Every school day presents challenges involving limitations or stresses from the school or home environment. The school social environment is never ideally welcoming, and a teacher cannot provide the support and attention that every child needs at all times. These limitations are usually minor, but can be significant for vulnerable children.

Furthermore, home environments vary in their ability to provide the stability and support to enable children to feel comfortable when they venture away from the nest. Other challenges involve children's internal readiness and development. Socializing and learning are emotionally challenging for children. Children must feel ready to leave the nest and confident that they can function independently with an appropriate amount of teacher assistance. Children must possess the capacities to form social relationships and trust their teacher. They must also have the cognitive abilities to learn and the curiosity and motivation to overcome the inevitable obstacles that accompany learning.

Sometimes the bad outweighs the good: Children resist going to school when the challenges associated with school outweigh its pleasurable aspects. It makes sense to first explore the environmental factors in the situation of children with histories of good school adjustments who suddenly resist school. Perhaps there is an undesirable social situation, an unfavorable child-teacher match or some other stressful classroom situation. Children are sometimes overwhelmed by new academic tasks. The home environment should also be considered. School resistance may occur after a vacation, illness or other prolonged period at home, any of which can make it hard for children to leave the nest again. Children also react to family loss or stress when the usual supports and stability have been shaken. These environmental situations are best addressed by making appropriate environmental changes, identifying the issue with the child, developing good lines of communication, and providing extra support at home and at school.

Sometimes the problem won't go away: Children are usually encountering a difficulty with their internal development when they experience repeated episodes of school resistance. Sometimes the resistance ebbs and flows. Our experience is that children who have intermittent resistance to school may seem to be doing well while they are at school, but actually may not be gaining all that they can from the school experience. Much of their emotional energy is being diverted from regular school tasks to manage the same concerns that emerge during their active resistance.

We recommend that parents rule out the possibility that Alex has an interference in his learning, such as a learning disability. Frustrations in

learning can make school a discouraging place, a place to be avoided. Similarly, some children have difficulty understanding social relationships and making friends; such difficulties can make the classroom an unhappy place.

Children's anxiety over being apart from his or her parents is, in the experience of Lucy Daniels Center's educators and clinicians, the most common reason for repeated or prolonged school resistance. Often, such separation anxiety is expressed in other ways, too. For example, children may worry about the parents' safety, not want to be alone even in the house, resist babysitters and overnights with friends, fear intruders or evil figures, and have sleep disturbances including nightmares and difficulty falling or staying asleep alone.

Repeated or prolonged resistance benefits from a three-step approach. The first is to maintain a kindly but firm insistence that the child attend school. Some parents consider homeschooling, but taking that step for this reason runs the risk of accommodating rather than solving the problem. The second step is to let the child know that his or her parents understand that he or she is not being stubborn, babyish or seeking attention, but rather is having feelings that he or she is unable to work out right now. Parents should reassure their child that he or she will be able to manage these feelings some day, and that they are getting help. The third step is to get help from a mental health professional who can conduct the careful evaluation necessary to determine the basis of the child's difficulties. Such an assessment is necessary to determine the appropriate options to address the situation, which might include a psychotherapy for a child, parent counseling, family counseling, assistance to the school and, on occasion, medications.

School resistance is trying and discouraging for everyone. With assistance and perseverance, parents can be confident that help is available and their child will one day look forward to school with confidence and enthusiasm.