

Maryland School Mental Health Alliance*

School Refusal Information for School Clinicians

Definition

Signs of school refusal typically reflect some form of anxiety: separation from a parent; test performance; bullying; lack of peer acceptance; obsessions or compulsions. The child or adolescent may display a variety of behaviors in order to avoid going to school: temper tantrums; body aches or sickness; school-specific phobias. A transition may precede the onset of school refusal; the transition can be major (e.g. divorce, new school, death of a loved one) or quite common (e.g. long weekend, vacation, poor subject area). Finally, children and adolescents exhibit signs of school refusal to varying degrees; some skip for entire weeks, while others attend only parts of the day.

Why do we care?

When compared to their developmental peers:

- Students who display symptoms of school refusal have lower levels of academic performance.
- Students who display symptoms of school refusal develop more disruptive behaviors.
- Students who display symptoms of school refusal are more likely to develop depression.
- Students who display symptoms of school refusal are more likely to engage in delinquency.
- Students who display symptoms of school refusal exhibit higher levels of anxiety.

What can we do about it?

- Actively seek out parents of children who display symptoms of school refusal. Learn more about the home environment to see if recent transitions may relate to pattern of school refusal.
- Conduct a differential diagnosis that accounts for potential barriers to learning, such as dyslexia, attention-deficit/hyperactivity, hearing and vision impairments, anxiety, etc.
- Work with caregivers to establish an incentive system for attending school on a regular basis. Evaluate and alter the system as needed to meet the family's most pressing needs.
- Speak with teachers and other school personnel to create a more complete picture of the student's school refusal behavior. Assess the learning environment according to the student's strengths and weaknesses.

Helpful Resources

- AACAP Facts for Families: http://aacap.org/cs/root/facts_for_families/facts_for_families
 - School Refusal: <http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/noschool.htm>.
 - Moving: <http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/fmlymove.htm>.
 - Starting School: <http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/82.htm>.
- School Refusal Treatment: <http://www.emedicinehealth.com/articles/68427-6.asp>.
- School Behavior: http://www.schoolbehavior.com/conditions_anxietyseparation.htm.
- School Refusal Information:
<http://www.dominionhospital.com/CPM/School%20Refusal%20Brochure%20one%20page.PDF>.
- Fremont, W.P. (2003). School refusal in children and adolescents. *American Family Physician*, 68(8), 1563-1576. Retrieved February 10, 2006 from <http://www.aafp.org/afp/20031015/1555.html>.

**Developed by the Center for School Mental Health (<http://csmh.umaryland.edu>) in collaboration with the Maryland School Mental Health Alliance.*