

Attendance: Suggestions for Parents

Have a Positive Attitude

- ➔ Believe that your child will get over the problem and let them know that you believe they can handle it.
- ➔ As the parent, you must have the will, determination, persistence, and discipline to address the problem.
- ➔ Be understand and use reflective listening at times when you are not attempting to get compliance. Don't use shame, guilt, insults, sarcasm, or demeaning language. Acknowledge that you know you are asking them to do something hard, but something they can do.
- ➔ The goal is not to eliminate anxiety, but to help your child learn to manage it effectively.
- ➔ Take small steps. Push your child to get out of their comfort zone in other areas of their life.
- ➔ Expect setbacks and relapses, but continue to express clear expectations and encouragement.
- ➔ Don't avoid things or situations that make your child anxious. Avoidance will make things better in the short run, but reinforces anxiety in the long run.

“Believe that your child will get over the problem. Let them know you believe they can handle school.”

-George B. Haarman, PsyD, LMFT

Improve Communication Skills

- ➔ If you suspect underlying psychological conditions for your child's school refusal, ask for referrals to therapists, counselors, or psychologists for an assessment.

- ➔ Talk to the school about a gradual start back to school with the ultimate goal of full attendance. As quickly as possible return to attending some part of the day.
- ➔ Don't ask leading questions. Avoid questions like Are you anxious? Are you worried? Are you frightened? which create an avoidance response. Ask, “How do you feel?”
- ➔ Learn to issue parental commands. Directives must be made with eye contact, simple, clear, specific expectations, rewards and consequences, and not in the form of a question.
- ➔ Respect your child's feelings but don't empower them. The message should be: “I know you are scared. That's OK. I will help you get through this.”
- ➔ Maintain good contact and communication with school, counselor, and teacher. Consistency of Consequences and Rewards
- ➔ Have every school day begin the same way. Develop a “Morning Routine” that is the same every day, and don't allow your child to vary from the routine. A therapist or child specialist can help you develop one.
- ➔ Do not allow excessive questions or conversation from your child to change the morning routine or delay going to school.
- ➔ Be reliable and on time when picking up your child.
- ➔ If you cannot get your child to school, make your house boring. **First Basic Rule: Your child should not be allowed to do anything during school hours that they would don't be allowed to do at school.** Remove all competing activities to school attendance.
- ➔ Reward your child for going to school with undivided attention from an adult doing a positive activity for half an hour every evening.

Getting Out the Door

- ➔ Stay calm. If the child sees your anxiety, anger, frustration, or disappointment, you can make their anxiety worse.
- ➔ Start the night before by:
 1. Go over the Morning Routine with the child.
 2. Decide and lay out clothing (no changes)
 3. Set aside all equipment (shoes, backpacks, books, assignments)
 4. Get the child to bed early enough that they will awake rested.
- ➔ On the morning of school:
 1. Wake your child up two hours before the deadline for bus or school.
 2. Monitor and insist that they are following the morning routine. If they can complete the routine ahead of schedule, the time is theirs to spend as they wish.
 3. Make sure they are dancing “to your tune” and that you are not dancing “to their tune.”
 4. Avoid power struggles. Expect and insist on compliance. Very simply, it is compliance or consequences.
- ➔ Say “when” rather than “if” when talking about their school refusal. “When you are at school today...”
- ➔ Issue a parental directive rather than talk, explain, preach, or beg when attending school is immediate.
- ➔ Listen to your child and encourage them to talk about their fears at appropriate times, not when attempting to get them to attend school. “We can talk about that this evening.”
- ➔ Praise and reinforce achieve the Morning Routine.
- ➔ Use direct statements when it is time to go to school. Don’t ask questions that give them the option of not going to school such as “Do you think you can go to school today?”

- ➔ Learn to ignore statements or behaviors that indicate your child is contemplating or has decided not to attend.
- ➔ Give your child as much control as possible (the illusion of control) but don’t give your child the decision making power about whether or not they are going to school. Ask questions like “Do you want to wear your red sweater or blue sweater to school?” or “Do you want to buy your lunch or take your lunch to school today?”
- ➔ Experiment with upbeat, soothing, or dance music as a way of getting through the Morning Routine.
- ➔ If you become emotional when requiring a child to attend school, ask a relative, neighbor, coach or therapist to take the child to school.

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-George B. Haarman, PsyD, LMFT

Once Your Child is at School

- ➔ Make sure your child knows you will return at the end of the school day, and they are to stay at school no matter what unless Bleeding, Broken, or Burning.
- ➔ Leave quickly. Don’t look back or hover. Do not reinforce their distress by rescuing them from anxiety.
- ➔ Let your child have something of yours to keep in their pocket as a transitional object. For example, a picture, jewelry, trinket, coin.
- ➔ No matter how bad it gets, let them experience the success of finishing the day. Reinforce, reward, repeat.
- ➔ Celebrate their success with time with one or both parents in an enjoyable activity, favorite dinner, extra electronic time.