

THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids:
A Letter for Parents by the
NYU Child Study Center

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I DON'T WANT TO GO! HELPING THE SCHOOL RELUCTANT CHILD

Why do children resist going to school?

A new situation often causes anxiety and sometimes real fear. Some children are fearful of new experiences, while others thrive on them. We are about to start a new school year, and many children will be concerned about it. A proportion of them will be so paralyzed by discomfort that they will refuse to go to school.

In preschool age children, apprehension and discomfort are regularly due to the child's fear of leaving the mother. The young child does not express specific worries, but merely experiences distress which can be very severe; crying, pleading for the parent to stay, and preventing the child from engaging with the group or in activities. It is a heartbreaking sight. These children are demonstrating separation anxiety. Probably, the child will also be distressed if left with unfamiliar babysitters or in other people's homes for play dates. It is also often the case that the child will resist being left alone at bedtime. If a preschool age child has difficulty letting go of the mother at the beginning of the year, it is not a source of concern. However, if it persists (there are mothers who are unable to leave the child for a whole year), we are dealing with more than ordinary separation problems.

Elementary school children can have similar problems. If these are transient, and occur at the very beginning of the first few years of school, or if the discomfort dissipates once the youngster is settled in class, there is no cause for concern. However, some school age children are reluctant to go to school for extended periods of time or remain uncomfortable throughout the day. In this age group, separation anxiety is also the culprit. However, school age children's more advanced cognitive development affects how they experience this anxiety. The children now express worries about something happening to the parent, the house being broken into, etc. Children are now able to anticipate events, and it is not only the actual separation that they fear, but also its anticipation. Therefore, children who are reluctant to attend school are distressed the night before school and often have stomach aches (or other physical symptoms) in the morning before leaving for school. A clue that there is no medical illness is that the symptoms do not occur during holidays or week-ends.

We tend to think that school reluctance due to fear is restricted to young school children. But such is not the case. It often starts in 10 to 11 year olds who previously had no such problems. In these instances, the anticipated change from lower to middle school is the usual precipitant. In many children, the development of separation anxiety follows a loss, such as the death of a loved one, or more often ordinary losses, such as a move, or a change of school. Events experienced by most children. Therefore, we have come to think that some children are especially vulnerable.

What can I do as a parent?

- If your child expresses concern about starting school, accompany your child on a visit to the school and meet the teacher before school starts.
- It is very helpful to be able to enlist the school in helping the child feel less anxious. Identify a person who will assist you in implementing a system that will facilitate the child's ability to get over his/her anxiety and, most importantly, involve the teacher.
- Do not deny the child's anxiety or worries, but acknowledge them and reassure him/her. For example: "I know you're worried I won't be there to pick you up, but there's no reason to worry. I'll be there."

- ❑ A child with separation anxiety breaks the heart of any compassionate person. Yet, the best remedy is to help the child to not give in to anxieties. As much as possible, you should prevent accommodating the child by allowing him/her to avoid separations.
- ❑ But, you may ask, how can I do that if my child is so unhappy? Try to find ways to enable the child to go to school. For example, a child is likely to feel reassured if times are set for him or her to call the mother from school. In extreme cases, mothers may stay with the child in school, but for a specified length of time which is gradually reduced.
- ❑ It is most important to tell the child exactly what s/he is to expect. There should be no "tricks" or surprises. For example, a child may be told that he should try to stay in school for only one hour, but after the hour he is encouraged or asked to stay longer either by the school or parent. This will backfire. The child will eventually refuse future arrangements for fear that they will be modified arbitrarily. Part of being anxious is anxiety about the unknown and the "what if?"
- ❑ Punishment does not work, but kind, consistent, rational pressure and encouragement do.
- ❑ Do not quiz the child about why s/he feels scared. The child often does not know why. By not being able to provide an explanation, in addition to being anxious, the child feels guilty about not making sense of what is happening. Better to acknowledge that the fears make no sense and that the child has to fight them.
- ❑ Be open to hearing about how your child feels. However, lengthy discussions about the child's problems are not always helpful and can be experienced as a burden by the child. The focus must always be that you want to help your child be free of worries and fears.
- ❑ A child's reluctance to go to school can be irritating to parents. Expressing resentment and anger is counterproductive. And you won't feel the urge to do so if you adopt specific strategies to assist your child.

When should I seek professional help?

If your child is not flourishing, is visibly unhappy, has physical symptoms before leaving for school, or develops sleep problems it is time to seek professional help. Do not berate yourself if you cannot come up with ways of eliminating your child's difficulties. As a parent, one cannot have the objective, dispassionate view of a trained professional. Seeking help is not a sign of failure, quite the contrary.

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ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the understanding, prevention and treatment of child and adolescent mental health problems. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with mental health problems including anxiety, depression, learning or attention difficulties, and trauma and stress related symptoms.

We offer a limited number of clinical studies at no cost for specific disorders and age groups. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212)263-8916.

The NYU Child Study Center also offers workshops and lectures for parents, educators and mental health professionals on a variety of mental health and parenting topics. To learn more or to request a speaker, please call (212) 263-2479.

For further information, guidelines and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center's website, AboutOurKids.org.



**Changing the Face of Child Mental Health
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