As the first quarter ends, most students have settled into the school routine of friends, teachers, and classes, and look forward to learning new things. However, for a number of youth, attending school can create high levels of anxiety and they may begin to avoid school or refuse to attend. This newsletter will explore what is termed “school refusal” and offer some strategies for parents.

School Refusal: A Significant Challenge

One of the most difficult situations parents and educators encounter is school refusal. This refers to a child refusing to go to school on a regular basis or even remain in school throughout the day due to significant emotional distress, particularly with symptoms of anxiety and depression. It is important to note that school refusal does not include those children who “cut” school to engage in a preferred activity.

Research suggests that up to 5 percent of youth experience school refusal. It is most likely to start during entry into middle school, but it may occur any time a child starts a new school. It often shows up more intensely after school breaks, weekends, or periods of illness. School refusal may serve many functions for children including: avoiding specific fears related to the school environment (e.g., performing on tests, visiting bathrooms or cafeterias), escaping challenging social situations (e.g., problems with peers or teachers), separation anxiety (stress in leaving caregivers), or attention-seeking behaviors. Besides tearful pleas to stay home, children with school refusal often complain of aches and pains or other physical symptoms. A strong indicator of school refusal is that stress-fueled ailments go away when staying home or over the weekends.

Failing to attend school may have significant immediate and long-term social, emotional, and educational consequences for youth. It is important to address school refusal behavior quickly. The longer a child stays at home, the more difficult it is to get that child to return to school.

Signs of School Refusal

- Tearfulness before school or pleas to remain at home.
- Numerous complaints of illness such as stomach aches, headaches, dizziness, or fatigue.
- Tantrums, clinginess, dawdling, or running away prior to school.
- Frequent unexcused absences from school.
- Recurrent lateness to school.
- Repeated requests to visit the school clinic.
- Frequent requests to call a parent or go home during the school day.
- Absences after school breaks and weekends or during significant days including tests, speeches, or physical education class.
Strategies: Getting Your Child Back to School

- Return your child to school as soon as possible. Missing school reinforces or strengthens anxiety rather than alleviating it. A child may also learn that not attending school allows him or her to enjoy other preferred activities at home (e.g., video games, movies, social media) so the refusal could become more about gaining the tangible rewards than due to distress. Regardless, the longer a child has been out of school, the poorer the prognosis.

- Services with community providers such as a physician to rule out any medical issues or a mental health therapist to assist in develop coping skills may prove to be quite helpful.

- Addressing school refusal can be quite challenging and therefore, it often takes a team approach involving the family, educators including school support staff, and community providers. A team can meet to assess the situation of why your child is not attending school and develop a reentry plan that addresses the steps to be taken at home and school to jumpstart your child’s school attendance.

- Talking with your child about feelings and fears may help reduce his or her anxieties. Correct your child when you hear negative thoughts presented and encourage your child to recognize the good things he or she does instead. Emphasize positive aspects of going to school (e.g., seeing friends, learning favorite subjects, enjoying recess). Ensure your child that school is a safe place with many supportive adults.

- Establish consistent evening and morning routines at home. Keep as similar a schedule as possible during the weekends and short breaks.

- Set goals for school attendance with your child and offer positive feedback and reinforcement for reaching success.

- Work with school staff to determine a plan for any make-up work your child needs to complete upon returning to school so that the work is manageable and not overwhelming.

- Consider a progressive reentry with a modified schedule over a few weeks. It may be helpful for a child to reenter school by attending only a morning schedule at first. Additional time at school or more classes are added as the child becomes increasingly more comfortable until ultimately attending school for a full day.

- Identify the support your child needs upon arrival to school. Set up a safe place for a trusting adult to check-in with your child. Once a staff member is engaged with your child, it is generally best for the parent to exit the situation regardless of the behavior displays of the child. A job or activity for a student to start the school day may also be helpful.

- Identify a safe place for your child to go when feeling stressed during the school day. Some youth benefit from having a “Flash Pass” which allows them to leave a classroom situation without discussion to take a break and/or seek out the support of an identified trusting adult.

Resources...and more

Dr. Kristopher Kearney is considered to be a national expert on the assessment and treatment of school refusal. He has a book that may offer helpful insights to many parents:

**Getting Your Child to Say ‘Yes’ to School: A Guide for Parents of Youth with School Refusal**

Here is a link to an interview with Dr. Kearney in text format:


This article from the American Academy of Family Physicians by Dr. Wanda P. Fremont provides an excellent overview of school refusal:


Here is a podcast on school refusal presented by the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA) with psychiatrist, Dr. Katharina Manassis:

[http://www.adda.org/resources-professionals/podcasts/school-refusal](http://www.adda.org/resources-professionals/podcasts/school-refusal)

From the Research

* Longitudinal studies have indicated that youth with chronic school refusal are at a greater risk in adulthood for economic, social, marital, and psychiatric problems.

* Children with school refusal have benefitted greatly from cognitive behavioral therapy with many reported success rates nearing 70%.