VERMONT Consultation & Psychiatry Access PROGRAM

Supporting Pediatric and Perinatal Providers

CAREGIVERS GUIDE

SCHOOL AVOIDANCE

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WHAT IS SCHOOL AVOIDANCE?

School avoidance, sometimes called **school refusal**, describes a pattern in which a child has difficulty going to or staying at school. It can happen at any age and may become more noticeable during periods of change or stress, such as:

- At the beginning of a new school year or after a school vacation
- Following an illness or extended absence
- After the death of a loved one or another significant life event
- During transitions between schools, grades, or classrooms

Children experiencing school avoidance may also have anxiety, changes in mood, or physical symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, nausea, or dizziness, particularly before or during school.

WHAT CAUSES SCHOOL AVOIDANCE?

School avoidance is usually a sign that something about attending school feels difficult, stressful, or overwhelming to a child. Children may not always understand or be able to explain what is driving their distress.

Possible contributing factors include:

- Anxiety, depression, trauma, or other mental health concerns
- Bullying, peer conflict, or other difficult social experiences
- Academic struggles or an unidentified learning difference
- A physical, developmental, or learning need that is not adequately supported
- Concerns related to identity, belonging, or feeling accepted at school
- Worries about safety
- Stress or changes at home
- Difficulty separating from a caregiver

WHAT ARE SOME WARNING SIGNS?

You might notice:

- Frequent absences, late arrivals, or requests to leave school early
- Regular visits to the school nurse or calls home
- Headaches, stomachaches, nausea, or other physical complaints that frequently occur around school
- Difficulty getting out of bed or getting ready for school

- Increased anxiety, sadness, irritability, or emotional distress related to school
- Avoidance that seems especially strong around particular classes, activities, people, or days

HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILD?

- **Start by asking what is going on.** Rather than focusing only on, *"How do I get my child back to school?"* try to understand **why attending school feels difficult**. Listen carefully and let your child know that you want to help.
- **Validate their feelings while maintaining the expectation of school attendance.** You might say, *"I know school feels really hard right now, and we're going to work together to make it easier for you to be there."*
- **Consider what might be contributing at home.** Children sometimes worry about a caregiver, family member, or situation at home and may feel safer staying nearby. Think about whether there are family stressors that could be contributing to your child's worries.
- **Talk with your child's healthcare providers.** Your child's primary care provider and, when appropriate, a mental health clinician can help assess physical symptoms and identify anxiety, depression, learning concerns, or other conditions that may be contributing.
- **Partner with the school.** Ask for a meeting with your child's school team to identify the most difficult parts of the day and develop a plan for additional support. For some children who have been out of school for an extended period, a structured, gradual return may be helpful.
- **Keep routines predictable.** Consistent sleep, wake-up, breakfast, and school departure routines can reduce opportunities for stressful negotiations each morning.
- **Praise progress.** Returning to school can be genuinely difficult. Notice and reinforce small steps, such as getting dressed, entering the school building, attending a difficult class, or staying longer than the day before.
- **Keep home safe and supportive, but not more appealing than school.** If your child stays home, respond to their distress with care and understanding while keeping the day similar to a school day. When appropriate, limit high-preference activities such as gaming, social media, or entertainment during school hours.

REMEMBER

Avoidance often reduces distress in the short term but can make returning to school feel even harder over time. Identifying what is driving the avoidance, addressing those needs, and helping your child gradually face difficult situations can help interrupt this cycle.

The goal is not simply to force a child back to school. It is to **understand what is getting in the way of attendance and work with your child, their school, and their healthcare team to help them feel supported and successful at school.**

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