

“I Hate School!” What Can I Do When My Child Refuses to Go to School?



By [Sara Bean, M.Ed.](#)

“I hate school! I’m not going.”

If you’re like most parents, you probably take the responsibility of getting your kids to school very seriously and get angry and frustrated when they refuse to go. This can easily turn into a power struggle if you feel this is a “battle” you have to “win.” It’s all too easy to react to your own anxiety and emotions about the situation rather than acting in a well-planned, effective way that will get you (and your child) where they want to be.

When your child chronically refuses to go to school, you can start to feel like a hamster in a wheel—putting in a heck of a lot of work, effort, sweat and tears, but not really getting anywhere.

I’ve seen and sympathized with frustrated parents who resort to physically putting their younger child (still in pajamas) into the car and driving them to school, then carrying them kicking and screaming into the building before being left with a staff member. Parents are at their wits’ end with this problem and I get it. The key is not to get drawn into a power struggle with your child over school, but to address the underlying problem. Your child will not learn the appropriate coping skills to change their behavior if you keep engaging in this fight with them. Instead, it will only add to the negativity that of the situation.

I’ve also met parents of defiant teens who respond to their child’s refusal to attend school by yelling, screaming, and taking everything away. These parents are trying to hold their kids accountable, but they’re setting up a dynamic of “I’ve got nothing to lose” in their child’s mind. Their kid actually becomes motivated to refuse school *even*

more because it's one of the few things he can control. Instead, these parents need to get to the root of the problem and coach their child out of it.

Other parents get worn down by their child and simply give up; they let their child become truant or drop out of school because they've had it.

Why Kids Refuse to Go to School

In my experience, most kids who refuse to go to school fall into one or more of these four categories:

- Kids who are being bullied or those who are having trouble getting along with peers, either for the short term or the long term
- Kids who are struggling academically and for whom school has become a very negative experience
- Kids who have problems with authority and following the rules
- Kids who are experiencing some anxiety—separation anxiety, (usually in younger kids), or worry about tests, what's happening at home, or whether or not they'll be picked up that day, etc.

Note: If you suspect your child is struggling with anxiety or depression, it's important to consult a medical or mental health professional for support and direction.

Parents of kids who hate school end up frustrated, exhausted, and grasping at straws. The key is to meet the problem head-on and focus on solutions that will resolve the issue in the long term, which includes teaching your child how to be a better problem-solver with a healthier outlook on their responsibilities.

Also remember that when kids are having trouble socially or academically, there is always something that can be done to make the situation better. The goal is to empower your child to be a confident and creative problem-solver who believes he can have some control over what happens to him.

How to Respond Effectively

When parents get stuck in a power struggle with their child over school—and in that constant negative cycle of fighting, yelling and nagging—school becomes a very negative thing for everyone involved. You will end up feeling like a hamster in a wheel—putting in a heck of a lot of work, effort, sweat and tears, but really not getting anywhere. Rather than reacting out of emotion, try to step back, put your feelings of panic and anger aside, and focus on responsibility and solutions. Ask yourself, “Who is really responsible? What steps can each responsible party (including my child) try in order to change the situation?”

How to Turn Things Around

1) Get to the heart of the issue. Sometimes it is actually a child's lack of problem solving skills that are the root of the issue. For example, your child might be falling

behind in class, but doesn't know how to approach her teacher and ask for help. Spend some time talking with your child to really dig deep into the problem. Ask open ended questions—these usually start with “what,” “when,” or “how.” You might ask, “When do you have the toughest time in school?” or “What goes on for you when the teacher assigns something that seems really difficult?” You might also get input from the teacher and support staff at your child's school as well—they often see things you don't see, and report things your child won't report to you.

2) Work on solutions at home and at school. Think of the people who work at your child's school as your teammates. While they often bring a different perspective to the table, I can tell you that most all of them have the same goal—they care about your child and they want to help your child learn and grow, academically and personally. It takes commitment from the staff as well as commitment from you in order to help your child through a challenging time—just because the problem is taking place at school does not mean that you get to sit back and let the teachers handle it. And believe me, I know that most of you are thinking, “Well *yeah!* We know that!” But trust me—there are some parents that don't think that way. So talk to the teachers and work as a team to come up with a plan for home and school. When you are feeling lost about what to do, teachers often have great, effective ideas that you can try—don't be afraid to ask for some guidance. Teachers might also refer you to the school counselor for additional support and ideas.

3) Meet your child where he's at and coach him forward. Change is not an overnight process. Your child will most likely not make a complete turnaround and start liking—or even tolerating—school in the of an eye. Start where your child is right now and gradually increase your expectations over time until you've achieved your goal. Be patient and check in with the school often. Talk with your child often as well to see if things are getting better, and come up with new ideas to try if needed. Continue to draw upon your support system for ideas and possible solutions. Children with peer challenges might need some assertiveness training—a lot of kids don't know how to speak up respectfully when another student offends them. I teach my students to use XYZ statements: “In situation x, when you do y, I feel z.” I then have them follow up the XYZ statement with a request to tell the other student what they want such as a simple “Please stop.” Role-playing the situation with them is an important part of the process that will give them some practice and build their confidence so they are ready for the real deal.

4) Be supportive and use positive incentives. Recognize your child's progress, even “baby steps.” Let your child know you can see she is trying, or let her know you noticed that she cried a bit less (or fought a bit less!) this morning and she's on the right track. Frame your accountability system in a positive way: “For each day that you do _____, you get an extra 15 minutes of computer time.” Or “Once you do _____, you earn your _____ for the day.” Notice I am not saying never to [use consequences](#). I suggest offering extra incentives first and if that doesn't work, make a current privilege dependent upon your child going to school each day. Every time you offer an incentive there is a built-in consequence—they don't earn the incentive. No school today, no _____ tonight and they can try again tomorrow. If they don't go to school at least 4 days out of 5, they don't get to _____ over the weekend. So while it's framed

positively in the first two examples above, there is a consequence, and this can be used with ODD kids as well. Kids who are dealing with anxiety-based issues especially benefit from positive incentives such as earning something special on the weekend once they go to school each day.

5) Be empowered. If you're seeing some seriously defiant behavior and your child does not respond to these strategies after a week or two, then it's definitely time to reach out for some support—locate a therapist or counselor who can help you get your child's defiance under control and educate yourself about your state's truancy laws. The way truancy is defined and handled can vary from locality to locality. Many parents are fearful that they will have to pay hefty fines for their child's truancy, but that is not always the case—there are still counties that focus on holding the children responsible. Don't assume that you know what might happen. Instead, speak with the person who handles attendance issues at your school or call the juvenile justice division at your local courthouse. Once you have knowledge of the system in your area, you can make informed decisions. They might also be able to refer you to appropriate local supports.

Also, keep a record for yourself. In the event that you do have to explain your situation to anyone for any reason, a log of your child's absences, absence reasons, and your response will help you to explain your situation and identify patterns. Contacting the school each time your child is absent is another wise move—let them know when your child is sick as well as when he is straight up refusing to go (and don't lie to cover for your child!). Keep in mind, while these ideas will show that you are an active parent who is making an effort and who is honest and well-meaning, they won't necessarily keep you out of legal trouble.

A lot of this is what James Lehman referred to as “selective attention”—you get more of what you pay attention to. So teach your child how to cope, set up a system to motivate them, and make a big deal out of positive behaviors, ignoring the unwanted behaviors.

I've worked with so many kids who struggled for the first few weeks of school and improved so much over the course of the year. Were there setbacks? Yes, of course! But kids are resilient and they can learn and adjust with some coaching and support from you. Also, don't forget about your school counselor, social worker, or psychologist as they can be valuable supports for you along the way, and can provide information on helpful community resources, too. Working together with your teammates at your child's school you can achieve so much more than trying to go it alone. Speak up, reach out, and ask for help. It might be just what your child needs.