

School Avoidance-Parent Handout

“Ideas for helping kids who are anxious about coming to school.”

Anxiety gets triggered by a combination of things. It always has a genetic and an environmental component, which can be anything as slight as a common cold, or someone looking at them funny. Sometimes it is logical, but oftentimes it makes no sense. It can be frightening to a parent. So after you have reassured yourself that your child really is not hurt or sick, etc. then try some of these strategies:

- Express empathy, then follow it with firm, yet kind, reassurance.
i.e. “I know this is hard. But you can do this. I know you will feel better soon.”
- Help them get a better sense of time, then follow it with firm, yet kind, reassurance.
i.e. “I will see you at 3:40. It’s about the same amount of time as when we drive to Grandma’s house. You will be fine and will learn and have fun at school.”
- Give two viable choices, then follow it with firm, yet kind, reassurance.
Avoid bargaining or asking your child if they are okay with this or that.
“Your choices are to go to class quietly and not disrupt, or you can wait in the office until you feel well enough to go back to class. I’m sure you will be back to class soon. I have work to do. I love you and will see you at 3:40.”
- Be as consistent as possible and continue to repeat your kind firm reassurances, no matter how desperate they become. Anxiety, like gambling, is most strongly reinforced when it is random. If you give in sometimes, when they are really really upset, you have made your child’s belief that they can succeed if they hold out long enough or say just the right thing . . . stronger.
- Extinguishing the anxiety comes quickest when you are consistent and outlast them.
- If you have an issue with how the school or teacher is handling the situation, take that up privately with them. Do not let your child hear you complain about the school or teacher. It is more important that your child knows you believe in their ability to handle situations that are not perfect or even hard. If they believe you need to swoop in and fix hard things for them, their anxiety - even though it is no one’s fault - will get worse. Ideally the parent and school should present a united front.
- Praise and reward them when they succeed.
“I’m so proud of you for going to school happy today! You made it! Would you like to play a game together before we do homework as a reward?”
- Inform your child of your plan for separating - the further away from the classroom, the better. So in the office is better than the classroom, in the car is better than the office, at home is better than school (i.e. the bus or carpool, etc.) Tricking your child into staying only makes the anxiety worse in the long run.

Most of the time, these ideas will work. If, however, after giving it a week or two, it still isn't working . . . don't give up. Try some of these **supplemental** strategies:

- Have your student start meeting with the school counselor.
- Teach physical relaxation skills (Diaphragmatic breathing, deep muscle relaxation, yoga for kids, mindfulness for kids, etc.)
- Teach resilient thinking skills. (Cool thought thinking: 'School isn't over YET!' 'What ELSE do I like about school?' 'Who can do hard things? Me!')
- Arrange play dates with nice students in their class.
- Try sticker charts, contracts, and simple rewards, as well as matter of fact, uncomfortable consequences. i.e. "I'm sorry you needed to do extra chores today. I'm sure you will earn your sticker tomorrow, like you did yesterday!"
- If bringing/getting them to school is too overwhelming for either one of you, make sure staying at home is much more boring and unrewarding than coming to school would be. "School time is a time for working. Here is the window and here are the rags. When you are done with the windows, you can clean the floor boards. As soon as you are ready to go to school ,however, I will take you." Make your voice neutral and matter of fact. Don't use a punishing voice or give them either negative or positive attention for staying home. The key is neutrality.
- If that doesn't work or is not a possibility, we are prepared in the school office to "kindly and firmly" hold your child until you are gone. Invariably the child is happy and ready to go to class within a few minutes.
- In the few cases that it takes longer than that . . . we can re-evaluate together. It might not be simple anxiety when this is the case. Once, there was a student who was happy to sit in the office for several hours several days in a row. It turned out, after re-evaluating together that he had severe sensory issues and was upset by all the commotion of the kids coming into class all at once. So we allowed him to go into class before the other students and put his backpack away and sit quietly at his desk while the other students came in. After that he no longer resisted coming to school!

Experts in anxiety all agree that the only cure is acceptance. So every time a child accepts and pushes through their fear, it decreases. Conversely, every time they give into it, it increases. Our job is to empathically reassure them that we know they can do it. By having faith in them, they will learn much quicker that they can control their fear instead of it controlling them.

Feel free to meet with me to discuss your child's needs or you may email me for some handouts. My email is smiller@dolores.k12.co.us. My phone extension is 3040 after you dial the school @ 970-882-4688.