

Working Through School Avoidance



What does it look like?

School avoidance, school refusal, or separation anxiety is not uncommon in the beginning of the school year. Children may completely refuse to attend school or create reasons not to go. Many children will complain of symptoms such as stomach aches or headaches, but they tend to be unexplainable, have no physical cause, and disappear later in the day or

on weekends.

Why does it happen?

- **Development** - young children are eager for independence but often still need reassurance from their parents/guardians.
- **Limited understanding of time** - being at school feels like forever!
- **Lack of confidence** - students can be uncertain about their new environment, social interactions, rules and routines.

How to support your child

- **Be self-aware.** Children can quickly pick up on your own uncertainty about their ability to be successful with the transition into school. Be confident that your child will adjust with time.
- **Be firm.** Let your child know that you expect them to attend school. Don't give into their anxiety by letting them stay home or making accommodations like driving them to school/picking them up unnecessarily. This can reinforce and validate their fears by sending the message that adjustments are necessary to prevent their worries from coming to fruition.
- **Hear your child but limit questioning.** It's important for you to give your child a chance to share how they are feeling and the reasons why, however, keep discussions about their physical symptoms and anxieties to a minimum. Regular questioning and probing can make their anxiety worse.
- **Schedule play dates.** Building familiarity and relationships with classmates can help children feel more excited and confident about their school day.
- **Inform school and request help.** Let your child's teacher and the school counselor or school psychologist know that your child is struggling.
- **Check with your pediatrician.** It's natural for children to have some level of fear or uncertainty about starting school, but if school avoidance symptoms are persistent, severe, or impacting their ability to function, it's important to follow up with your child's doctor to ensure there isn't an underlying medical issue.