

## Reading List

### For Young Children

*The New Teacher* by Miriam Cohen  
*The I Don't Want to Go to School Book*  
by Alan Gross  
*The Teacher From the Black Lagoon*  
by Mike Thaler

### For Parents

*School Phobia and Other Anxieties in Youth* by Ron Kerner  
*The Fears of Childhood* by E. Sarafino  
*When Your Child is Afraid* by R. Schacter  
*The Parents Guide: Solutions to Today's Most Common Behavior Problems in the Home* by Stephen McCarney and Angela Bauer

## Community Resources

Individual, family and group counseling available through:

**Community counseling agencies** (Blue pages of phone book—fees based on ability to pay)

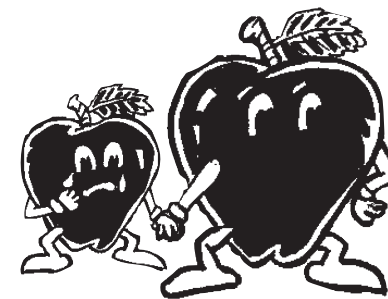
**Private therapists** (Yellow pages under Psychotherapists, Marriage, Family Counselors and Psychologists)

*This brochure is a resource provided by Lincoln Public Schools School Social Workers . . . because Families Matter.*

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# When Children Won't Go To School

## Dealing With School Avoidance



For most children, going to school is usually an enjoyable and exciting event, however, for some it brings fear or panic. School avoidance is a persistent and unrealistic fear of going to school. The school avoidant child will appear anxious and may have a variety of physical complaints (e.g., sleep difficulties, headaches and stomach problems). Parents have cause for concern when their child regularly wishes to stay home from school with minor physical complaints. Children age five to ten who behave this way may suffer from an intense fear of leaving the safety of parents and home.

Parents are often at a loss as to how to help their child. Words of encouragement, attempts at rewards and threats of consequences are ineffective. Family members often look to teachers and school staff for support in resolving the problem. Helping a child with school avoidance is challenging for all the adults involved.

## What is School Avoidance?

Although it is not uncommon for early elementary school aged children to express some fear or hesitation about going to school, for the majority of children this fear causes no real problems and quickly subsides.

School avoidance involves a child feeling acute anxiety at the thought of going to school. One child may refuse to go to school, another may go but leave once he or she is there. Some children will walk to school with a parent and then refuse to go in the door. Parents may see their child trembling, crying or showing other behaviors which indicate extreme anxiety. Often these symptoms will temporarily disappear if the child is assured that he or she does not have to participate in school activities or attend school at all. However, the symptoms will reappear immediately the next time the subject of going to school comes up. Keeping a child home only makes school avoidance worse. A good rule of thumb is, in the absence of any medical problems, parents should not let their child stay home from school.

## Be Aware

School avoidance masks the actual source of the anxiety. (The primary fear is not the fear of attending school, but rather a fear of separation from parent.)

A child can sense when a mother or father is worried about the separation; this anxiety compounds a child's own fears.

If a child is more apprehensive leaving mother, then ask father or other relative to take child to school (or vice-versa).

Parents may have difficulty coping with a child's panic.

Parents need extra support. (Talk with school personnel and other supportive people.)

It is the parents' responsibility to get the child to school. It then becomes the school's responsibility to work with the child once she or he is there.

Some fears may require professional assistance.

School avoidance differs from truancy in that a truant student does not experience the anxiety felt by school avoidant children.



## Prevention for Preschoolers

**Visit** the school with your child; tour the building and other areas your child will use (lunchroom, playground, bathroom, etc.).

**Take** your child to meet his or her teacher, school counselor and school principal.

**Talk** positively about experiences your child will have upon going to school.

## Do

- ✓ React immediately by insisting that your child attend school. (Give the consistent message, "You will go to school.")
- ✓ Reassure the child that he/she can handle it.
- ✓ Rule out any medical conditions.
- ✓ Read a story about how a boy or girl overcomes or copes with a fear.
- ✓ Establish a carpool. (The example of a peer going to school without tears can be powerful.)
- ✓ Get support for yourself.
- ✓ Encourage your child to develop outside interests.
- ✓ Work as a team with the school.
- ✓ Seek outside assistance if necessary.

## Don't

- ✓ Don't give mixed messages by giving in sometimes.
- ✓ Don't excuse your child from school.
- ✓ Don't arrange homebound teaching.
- ✓ Don't focus on your child's anxiety.
- ✓ Don't tell your child that he/she does not have to participate in school activities or does not have to attend school at all.
- ✓ Don't ask for a change of teacher or classes (new situations aggravate anxiety about separation from parent).
- ✓ Don't suddenly change expectations as new demands will precipitate anxiety.