



SPS Special Presentation:

“A Parent’s Guide to Your Child’s Anxiety and School Resistance”

**Presented by Dr. Barbara Rickler
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Introduction:

Anxiety Disorders and Attendant School resistance is reaching epidemic proportions and is a significant public health problem. Everyone has anxiety, but why are an increasing number of children and adolescents sick from it?

Hypothesis:

1. Our culture promotes overstimulation, immediate gratification and sensation seeking over authenticity and meaning.
2. Social media encourages the development of a curated false self – to be displayed for approval or disapproval, often fostering an “imposter” dynamic.
3. In the past 10-15 years, children have been reared in increasing protective, scaffolded cocoons that may impede the acquisition of age-appropriate resilience.
4. Continuous media coverage and exposure over-represents dangerous and stressful situations for child viewing.
5. Family overscheduling leaves less relaxing, unstructured time or opportunities for adult mentorship and experience with extended families.

Why is There So Much Anxiety About School?

The prevalence of school refusal is one out of ten – in most cases the problem will attenuate with judicious parenting and only a few will actually require professional attention. While some anxiety-provoking event related to academics or socialization may be the most tangible immediate precipitant, the refusal is usually more symbolic of the child's awareness of increasing demands for autonomy. By definition, a phobia is an irrational fear that often is a displacement for a conflict that arouses anxiety. School itself is usually not the source of conflict.

As stated, by Richard Gardner, "The central personality characteristic is the child's grandiose and unrealistic self-image engendered by parental overprotection. The aggrandized self-image is threatened in the more egalitarian school situation. The child craves retreating home where narcissistic gratification is available." The child will have many tangible rationalizations for the desire to stay home – bullying, teacher is mean, work is too easy, too hard or boring. Yet despite these ever present conditions, most children make it to school without difficulty.

Etiology:

School usually represents the first academic and social testing ground for the child. Not only will separation from the parent be required but the child will need to tolerate scrutiny of performance, peer challenges, and the need to delay gratification. Ambivalent parent child attachment and unresolved dependency needs may constitute fertile soil for the seeds of school refusal – particularly if an acute stress is present. Two interesting ironies should be noted:

- 1.) Children with medical problems actually constitute the smallest percentage of school refusers; and
- 2.) School refusers are generally bright, capable students who may only become underachievers from the secondary effects of missed instructional time and depressive functioning. While sometimes this problem arises "out of the blue", there are frequent precursors. Often it starts following a weekend, school vacation or prolonged absence for illness.

Aside from previously mentioned factors:

Genesis of the problem – 4 Predominant Theories

1. School may involve first prolonged separation from the parent >6 hours leads to greater anxiety.

Studies of preschools and adjustment

Qualities of better adaption:

- >2 ½ years old
- No history of traumatic separations (<3 limited cognitive ability to comprehend)
- Previous peer exposure
- Older siblings in school situation

Prevalence of school refusal is independent of daycare attendance – mother's attitude about working is more critical than work itself or the time parent is away.

2. Overvaluing – some children have come to overvalue themselves and their achievement. School threatens this narcissism. These school avoidant children depend on parent to protect them from unpleasantness and reassure their omnipotence.
3. Testing Ground – school represents the first academic and social testing ground where children's performance may be scrutinized.
4. Divorce can have a very negative impact – especially in context of emotional turmoil, parental depression and lessened financial well-being.

Variations on Presentation:

1. At one extreme, child gets ready for school – may even leave the house, but cannot progress any further.
2. Other times, children won't even contemplate going to school. They may stay in bed and threaten self-harm. Anxiety is more frequent than depression.
3. While some children are completely normal in activities other than school – most affected children and adolescents are severely socially impaired. Their increasing isolation may lead to secondary depression.

Ten Take Home Concepts about Anxiety and School Resistance:

1. Definition of anxiety
2. Different types of anxiety
3. How anxiety interfaces with school attendance and learning
4. Historic and epidemiologic background of school resistance
5. Categories of anxiety and school resistance
6. Comorbid conditions and family functioning
7. What parents and school can do
8. Psychotherapeutic strategies
9. Medication and treatment strategies
10. Cultural considerations

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Wellness List for Children & Adolescents

- Learn Meditation & Relaxation Response - ask for available resources
- Practice Yoga and Mindfulness
- Team or individual sport/fitness
- Sleep 9 hours with fairly consistent sleep and wake times
- Nap no more than 20 minutes
- Turn off electronic devices at least 30 minutes before bed - limit total daily usage
- Store/charge devices in non-sleep areas
- Arrange media-free mealtimes
- Minimize consumption of processed foods, sodas, and oversized portions
- Decrease carbohydrate consumption, increase probiotics - try not to skip meals or eat after 7 p.m.
- Increase consumption of proteins and fresh fruits & vegetables, Omega-3's, Vitamin D
- Have a deep conversation with someone you care about
- Reflect on mistakes, make restitution, and move on to better things
- Expect something wonderful to happen each day

*These things will improve mood, concentration, fitness and weight. Additionally, these strategies will help to lower the risk of Diabetes and other Autoimmune Disorders as well as Cardiovascular Disease. Many psychiatric disorders may be impacted by inflammatory and autoimmune responses.

Building Character and Resilience

References:

The Blessing of a Skinned Knee
W. Mogel

The Gardener and the Carpenter
A. Gopnick

Mindset
C. Dweck
(in addition to the book, there's a TED talk)

Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance
Angela Duckworth
(also a TED talk)

The Triple Package (Superiority, Inferiority and Impulse Control)
A. Chua and J. Rubenfeld

Novels about Resilience:

Unbroken
L. Hillenbrand

The Boys in the Boat
D. J. Brown