



# Alexian Brothers Behavioral Health Hospital

## *Children/Adolescents with School Anxiety/Avoidance Behavior ◆ Strategies for Parents ◆*

### **POSSIBLE SYMPTOMS OF SCHOOL ANXIETY/AVOIDANCE BEHAVIORS**

- Upset about school more often than other children their age
- Child's feelings/attitudes towards school have negatively changed
- Child avoids certain aspects of school, (i.e. gym class, certain teachers)
- Certain behavior patterns only occur on school days
- Child exhibits stomach aches, headaches, throwing up, etc. especially on school days
- Child struggles with social skills and peer relations
- Child struggles completing academic tasks and becomes easily overwhelmed with home and school assignments

### **STRATEGIES AND INTERVENTIONS**

1. Make school attendance mandatory unless your child has a fever or contagious illness. Avoid calling your child out of school unless absolutely necessary. Children cannot deal with their school issues unless they are present at school. A child's anxiety will increase the more school is avoided.
2. If child refuses to attend school, contact school personnel and report child's refusal to attend school, even if it results in an unexcused absence. Allow child to have consequence from school for unexcused absence.
3. Establish and maintain open communication with school personnel regarding your child's feelings about school, difficulties with school, etc.
4. Create an environment at home that fosters structure and consistency. Expectations should include rules, chores, privileges and limits. This will allow children to learn to structure themselves, as well as understand rewards and consequences. Likewise, expectations should be clear regarding school attendance and homework, as well as privileges and consequences given for not meeting expectations. Based on research, structure, routine and consistency work to alleviate anxiety in children.
5. Routine is essential for children with school anxiety/avoidance issues. A daily schedule that is followed consistently through the eyes both when the child is in school as well as out of school is beneficial.
6. Encourage children to enroll in school extracurricular activities to feel more connected to school. Have child choose at least one activity per school term.
7. Provide positive feedback for successes made at school.
8. Seek support from school and/or external resources when your child first starts displaying symptoms of school anxiety/avoidance.
9. If patterns of academic failure are present, psychological and/or neuro-cognitive assessment and/or intervention may be needed due to possible learning disabilities or neuro-cognitive deficit issues that may be present.
10. Negative peer relations may result in school avoidance/anxiety issues. Contact the school social worker if your child is struggling with peer relations, i.e. bullying, difficulty getting along with peers, etc. Therapeutic intervention on the school level may be needed.



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## Resources:

- Alexian Brothers **School Anxiety/School Refusal Program – 847-755-8516**
- ***Don't Try Harder Try Different.*** Author: Patrick McGrath, Ph.D.
- ***How to Talk so Kids will Listen and Listen so Kids will Talk.*** (2002). Authors: Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish. Publisher: Collins.
- ***Kids are Worth It: Giving Your Child the Gift of Inner Discipline.*** (2002). Author: Barbara Coloroso. Publishers: Collins. New York, NY
- ***Kids, Parents, and Power Struggles: Winning for a Lifetime.*** (2001). Author: Mary Sheedy Kurcinka. Publisher: Harper Collins Publishers, New York, NY
- ***Parenting with Positive Behavior Support: A Practical Guide to Resolving Your Child's Difficult Behavior*** (2006). Authors: Meme Hieneman, Karen Childs, and Jane Sergay. Publisher: Brookes Publishing Co. Baltimore, MD
- ***Setting Limits with Your Strong-Willed Child: Eliminating Conflict by Establishing Clear, Firm and respectful boundaries.*** (2001). Author: Robert J. MacKenzie. Publisher: Three Rivers Press
- ***The Explosive Child: A New Approach for Understanding and Parenting Easily Frustrated, Chronically Inflexible Children*** (2001). Author: Ross Greene. Publisher: Quill Books, division of Harper Collins Publishers, Inc. New York, NY
- ***When Children Refuse School, A Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy Approach.*** Authors: Christopher A. Kearney and Anne Marie Albano. Publisher: Oxford University Press. New York, NY
- Illinois State Board of Education. <http://www.isbe.state.il.us>

### **Illinois School Code – Compulsory Attendance (105 ILCS 5/2601)**

Sec. 26-1. Compulsory school age-Exemptions. Whoever has custody or control of any child between the ages of 7 and 16 years shall cause such child to attend some public school in the district wherein the child resides the entire time it is in session during the regular school term.



## PARENTING WITH PURPOSE: PREPARING FOR ANOTHER SCHOOL YEAR

By: Jackie Rhew, LPC, CADC & Robin Choquette, MA, LCPC

### WHY SHOULD I SET PARENTING GOALS

I often ask parents when I meet with them, to identify goals that they would like to achieve as a result of their parenting. I believe it is important to teach parents to parent out of purpose vs. parent out of emotion. This will allow for a closer and healthier relationship between the parent and the child, by creating structure and consistency in the home, healthier boundaries, and improved communication amongst family members.

### HOW CAN I BECOME MORE SELF AWARE AS A PARENT

Self-awareness is a key ingredient in productive and purposeful parenting. It is beneficial for each parent to understand how his/her parenting style has been developed. Parental skills begin to be established early in our own development, by observing our own parents style of parenting and personal childhood experiences. Especially parents reactions to pivotal and/or traumatic events that have occurred during childhood play a role in what we come to accept as a way to respond to a child. Furthermore, it is critical to develop an understanding of one's own current emotional functioning, such as ability to form relationships and boundaries, communicate effectively with others, manage emotions, and tolerate distress.

This self-awareness will be useful when trying to understand how parenting tactics and reactions are influenced by emotional factors vs. goal directed parenting.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER TO INCREASE SELF AWARENESS

- o Describe some of my earliest memories of parenting tactics that my parents used.
- o Describe earlier childhood memories that may impact how I parent today.
- o How would I describe my emotional function?
- o How well do I form and maintain relationships with others?
- o Describe my relationship with my child(ren).
- o How do I tolerate and manage my emotions, particularly distress?
- o How well do I communicate with others?
- o How well do I communicate to my child?
- o What values would I like to instill





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# PARENTING WITH PURPOSE: PREPARING FOR ANOTHER SCHOOL YEAR

## NOW THAT IM SELF AWARE HOW DO I SET GOALS?

Parents are not given an instruction manual when a child is born, however it is important to create and implement an action plan when gearing up for the undertaking of parenthood. Much like in a job, goals allow for performance reviews, goal updates and modifications when necessary. Similarly, it is vital to set goals for parenting and identify values that are important to the family when designing the action plan, so that parents may monitor their objectives.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER WHEN DESIGNING GOALS

- o What am I hoping my child to learn as a result of my parenting?
- o What values would I like to instill in my child as a result of my parenting?
- o What types of personality traits would I like my child to develop?
- o What kind of relationship would I like to have with my child?

Answering these questions may assist a parent in developing strategies that support the goals. In doing so, the parent may be more motivated to implement these strategies, as well as feel more confident in parenting. It is important to review the goals often with the child, so that the child begins to learn the values being withheld within the family. Common traits that are mentioned include independence, responsibility, self confidence, compassion, kindness, trustworthiness, and respect.

## EMOTIONALLY REACTIVE

Parenting can trigger many emotions, in turn, causing parents to use language that reflects those emotions, such as frustration, anger, sadness, guilt, etc. As one begins to become more self-aware, he/she can more easily identify intense emotions, thus shifting from emotional reactive state to a more purposeful state. An anxious parent repeatedly questioning his/her child regarding a difficult situation that the child is facing may convey anxiety and self-doubt through the use of language. While the questioning may stem from the parents own anxiety regarding the situation and/or concern over the child's ability to manage the situation, the child may be receiving a message of uncertainty and self-doubt. Simply teaching the child how to handle the situation and then providing cues to remind the child that the parent is there for support may convey confidence and a belief in the child's abilities. Often, a silent response can be as powerful AS many words put together.



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## A PARENT'S GUIDE TO SUPPORTING THE ANXIOUS ADOLESCENT

- As a parent, be mindful and aware of your own anxiety and how it manifests in parenting. Every individual has anxiety, but it is critical that as a parent you understand how your anxiety impacts your responses to your child
- Identify goals and objectives for parenting (e.g. assisting your adolescent in becoming more motivated, self confident, independent)
- Set and review clear weekly expectations, privileges, and goals
- Develop a plan with your spouse and/or other caregivers...be consistent in your approaches to parenting!!
- Attend support groups and/or seek out therapy for your adolescent and your family if you feel overwhelmed and need additional help

## TIPS FOR SUPPORTING THE CHILD WITH SCHOOL ANXIETY/SCHOOL REFUSAL

- Write out clear expectations, privileges, and consistent consequences and review them with your child (keep expectations simple and consistent)
- Stay calm-be aware of and manage your own anxiety, look confident (practice your game face!)
- Avoid a lot of talking and reassurance, especially around expectations
- Avoid power struggles- remember: don't put your hands on your adolescent as this can escalate the situation quickly!
- Give choices
- Be *mindful* not *reactive*, practice good emotional management, appear confident
- Focus on outcomes and goals for parenting
- It is alright if your child becomes upset, they need to be held accountable for how they manage being upset, and still need to be held to expectations. Avoid excessive talking and power struggles: state expectations and walk away, do not feed into somatic symptoms
- Be clear about acceptable reasons to miss or be tardy from school (for help, check guidelines in your child's school handbook-fever above 100 degrees, etc), remind your child how they can cope with symptoms and manage discomfort without avoiding school
- Always update school personnel if there are any significant concerns or events that have happened outside of school
- Let school personnel know if your child is reporting any significant problems regarding medication(s) that he or she is taking



## STRATEGIES TO IMPLEMENT AT HOME

Write out the expectations, privileges, and routine. Review these guidelines daily to ensure consistency, discuss progress at that point. Discuss obstacles and ways to problem-solve obstacles. Be aware of strategies that will support implementation, as well as aid success. Do not engage if your child is not using appropriate communication skills and age-appropriate behaviors (ie: a teen crying and screaming), cue the child to take some time and resume communication when he/she has calmed self down. The child/adolescent has a choice in how he/she manages his/her emotions. Allowing inappropriate behaviors continues to foster emotional immaturity.

**WARNING: AVOID EXCESSIVE TALKING AND REASSURANCE**, especially in morning and in route to school. Children and teens do not respond when parents spend too much time "talking at" them. **BE CONSISTENT AND KEEP EXPECTATIONS CLEAR AND CONCRETE.**

## SCRIPT EXAMPLES (START PLANNING THE NIGHT BEFORE SCHOOL, ESPECIALLY ON SUNDAY NIGHTS)

- "The expectation is that you attend school daily and on time"
- "I will wake you up at 7 am tomorrow and give you a 15 minute warning, then I will come in again. At that point you have 30 minutes until you have to leave for school"
- "If you choose not to get up, then (the privilege) will not be earned"
- "I would like to come up with a plan so that we can keep track of the homework you are completing and help you stay organized"
- "If you refuse to go to school, I will have no choice but to call 911 for assistance"
- "I expect you to go to bed at a specified time so that you can be awake and ready for school"
- "You are not allowed to text me from school to discuss going home. If you choose to bring your phone to school, you will not utilize phone to seek reassurance"
- "You cannot call me during the day to pick you up if you are upset. If you are sick, then you can seek out the nurse to get your temperature taken. I cannot pick you up unless the nurse gives me permission to"
- "It is expected that you will work through experiences that make you uncomfortable and elevate your anxiety, but the more you do the activities that you fear, the more able you will be able to handle difficulties at school"



# Alexian Brothers Behavioral Health Hospital

## Parent & Family Newsletter

**Inside this Issue:**

- **Understanding School Anxiety and School Avoidance Behaviors**
- **Picky Eating or Something More?**

**Who We Are:**

Alexian Brothers Behavioral Health Hospital provides a safe, supportive, and therapeutic environment for children and adolescents who are dealing with stress, anxiety, and depression. Our programs can help your child learn and practice healthy behaviors. Therapeutic interventions focus on improving coping skills through behavior recognition and verbal processing, with an emphasis on improving interpersonal communication and understanding how behaviors impact others. We believe in treating the whole person – psychologically, emotionally, physically and spiritually. Our unique programs are designed to provide the most intensive level of treatment in a least restrictive environment.

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**What Parents Want to Know:**

**Understanding School Anxiety & School Avoidance Behaviors** By Jackie Rhew, CADC, LCPC & Robin Choquette, MA, LCPC



As the school year approaches, many parents and children face anxiety rather than excitement about the school challenges that are ahead. For some, the increasing social demands and academic pressures have left many children and adolescents feeling an intense stress to perform, often resulting in overwhelming anxiety and sometimes avoidant behaviors. For many adolescents, these factors can cause children to

experience feelings of failure, decreased levels of confidence and diminished levels of motivation.

School Refusal behaviors have become increasingly more prevalent, resulting in frustrations for many parents and school professionals. Individually the symptoms may be misleading and frequently go unnoticed by parents.

Children that have excessive absences from school, even if these are medically excused often report having school anxiety. Children frequently exhibit physical symptoms when they are anxious. These symptoms include:

- stomachaches
- headaches,
- nausea
- digestive diseases

*The good news is that there are many things that parents and school professionals can do to assist students with school avoidant/refusal behaviors.*

Parents will find that they are seeking endless medical care for physical complaints, without resolve. If the child appears to be less symptomatic during holidays and summers, it may indicate these symptoms are anxiety related.

Setting goals for parenting is a great way to achieve success. Identifying clear goals for parent and child is beneficial in generating a plan that is uncomplicated and achievable. Set the boundaries and enforce limits. Negative behaviors that are reinforced are likely to be more difficult to reduce. Sometimes it is necessary to create a written plan that clearly defines concise expectations, privileges and consequences. Parents should reinforce positive desired behaviors. Create routine and structure within the home environment that is consistent without being rigid will significantly reduce contagious anxiety.

Parenting with self-awareness is vital and can be a great asset. Children model what they see, so teaching by example is a tool parents can easily utilize. When a parent recognizes their own anxiety and can demonstrate healthy ways of coping, the child learns and incorporates those same strategies.

*More information on the next page....*

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## Picky Eating or Something More?

By Valerie Luxon, Child Eating Disorder Program

Many children have irregular eating patterns. Some children display behaviors commonly known as "picky eating". These picky eaters are unwilling to try new foods and have a limited range of foods they will eat. Dealing with a picky eater can be frustrating and worrisome for many parents. Often times, with some encouragement from parents these children can expand their food repertoire without developing more serious eating difficulties.



Parents can help their children become more balanced eaters. Parents can introduce new foods to their children. It may take several tries for a child to try a new food so patience is necessary. It is important for parents to remove the power struggles from the dinner table and to refrain from bribing the child with dessert or other rewards for trying new foods. Parents can allow the child to help select the food and help prepare the meal. This may help the child to become excited about trying new foods. Sticking to a meal and snack routine and reducing in-between snacking can also be helpful. Parents should not prepare a special meal for the child as it may reinforce the picky eating. One of the most influential ways a parent can help their child is by modeling healthy, balanced meal themselves.\* Occasionally, a child's picky eating may be a sign of something more serious that requires attention. Some children may have a fear of certain foods; choking, vomiting or gagging that causes them to avoid eating. Others may be using food as a way to manage their emotions. When are these behaviors a sign of a more serious disordered eating problem?

Early treatment of these behaviors may prevent them from developing into an eating disorder. If a parent is concerned that their child is displaying some of these warning signs they should take the child to a professional experienced in working with children with disordered eating patterns for an assessment. For more information, you may contact the **Child Eating Disorders Program** at Alexian Brothers Behavioral Health hospital at 847-755-8058.

\*Children's nutrition: 10 tips for picky eaters. www.mayoclinic.com 2010.

### Warning Signs for an Eating Disorder may include:

- Sudden/unexpected weight loss,
- Hoarding/hiding food,
- Restricting food choices (i.e., only low fat foods, no meat),
- Preoccupation with food/weight/body shape,
- Eating in secret,
- Loss of control over eating,
- Consuming large amounts of food in a short period of time,
- High levels of anxiety surrounding meals and food,
- Frequent stomach aches,
- Excuses for not needing to eat,
- Excessive exercising,
- Weighing self often, and
- Changes in personality including isolation and withdrawal

## Understanding School Anxiety & School Avoidance Behaviors

(Continued)

The parent and child need to be actively involved with the school. Parents that keep lines of communication open with school professionals, not only are more knowledgeable of their child's school experience but also model how to get their needs met. Having the child participate in school activities increases the child feeling connected with peers and school. Some parents have found requiring involvement in school activities can be helpful and will increase positive school experiences for their child.

Signs that school refusal symptoms are emerging or present may include the aforementioned behaviors, in addition you may notice a decreased motivation associated with negative feelings towards school. Some possible factors to take into account when assessing school refusal issues may include medical, psychiatric, learning disabilities, sleep disturbances, bullying and other peer related issues. If the avoidant behaviors are reinforced or left unaddressed, they may become a part of the child's pattern and influence his/her school experience. Recognizing and understanding school anxiety behaviors is a start to interrupting the avoidant behaviors. If a child you know is demonstrating school anxiety behaviors, you may contact us at **800-432-5005 for a free assessment.**

### Quick Reference Guide to Youth Services at ABBHH

	Inpatient		Partial Hospitalization Intensive Outpatient		Outpatient	
	Child (ages 7-11)	Adolescent (ages 11-18)	Child (ages 7-11)	Adolescent (ages 11-18)	Child (ages 7-11)	Adolescent (ages 11-18)
Mental Health		X	X	X	X	X
Addictions				X		X
Eating Disorders		X	X	X	X	X
Self-Injury		X	X	X	X	X
Anxiety & OCD		X	X	X	X	X
School Refusal			X	X	X	X
Family Options Program					X	X

For more information check our website at [www.abbhh.org](http://www.abbhh.org)