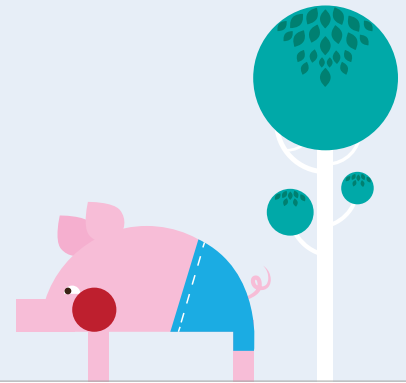


# Understanding Your Child's School Reticence, Avoidance or Refusal



## Children attempt to avoid school for many reasons, including:

- General school-related situations that cause anxiety and distress, such as academic stressors like tests, quizzes or presentations
- School-related social and/or performance situations such as changing peer networks, difficulty making friends, lunchtime isolation, or bullying
- A desire to spend time with others at home
- To get to do fun activities outside of school, especially if the preferred activity relays a feeling of competence

## School reticence

Often, resistance to attending school (school reticence) is temporary. Parents and/or caregivers can usually resolve school reticence by insisting that children attend school, thereby preventing patterns of avoidance from developing.

## School avoidance

*Every Tuesday, Henry had a math quiz; and every Monday night, Henry had a stomachache. Tuesday mornings, Henry's father would have trouble getting him out of bed. Henry would complain about his stomachache and ask to stay home from school. When his father refused, Henry would cry. He would stall by delaying his breakfast, having trouble getting on his shoes and taking much longer to get in the car than Henry's father wanted. By 8 am, Henry and his father were both upset, frustrated and usually yelling.*

Up to 35 percent of children can relate to Henry's situation — often referred to as “school avoidance” — at some point in their academic careers. Absences related to school avoidance tend to be higher after

absences due to illness (of the child or of someone else in the family) or after vacation. School avoidance includes behaviors such as repeated instances of begging to stay home, requests for home schooling, visits to the school nurse with vague physical complaints only present at school, and/or texting or calling home with requests to be picked up.

## School refusal

School refusal is a more serious case of avoidance and is distinguished from temporary school avoidance by duration, severity and levels of impairment and associated distress. School refusal is child-initiated refusal to attend school and/or remain in class and is usually associated with anxiety.

## Addressing school-resistant behaviors

It is important to determine why a child is attempting to avoid school. While school refusal is not considered a disorder, it often accompanies disorders such as separation anxiety disorder, panic disorder and/or social anxiety disorder. If you suspect anxiety is contributing to school refusal, you may be able to better address your child's distress.

If extended school avoidance or refusal is not properly addressed, it can lead to serious consequences such as family conflict and stress, difficulty maintaining peer relationships and/or problems with academic success and achievement in adulthood.

For serious cases of school refusal, exposure-based treatment (a form of cognitive behavioral therapy) is the most common intervention. Treatment usually includes close collaboration with the school, and in some cases, an individualized education plan (IEP) may be indicated.

For more information on school-refusal symptoms and strategies to overcome it, please visit the UCLA Center for Child Anxiety Resilience Education and Support (CARES) at [carescenter.ucla.edu](https://carescenter.ucla.edu).

