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Toni Boos, PsyD, LCP, Compass Health ([00:14](#)):

Question: What is school refusal? My kid won't go to school. What's going on? **[\(VIDEO\)](#)**

With school refusal, there is severe difficulty getting to school that results in prolonged absences. It's not just a one-off, not attending school, but it's really something that is **impairing the child from getting to school over a period of time**. So, usually we look at if a child's not been in school or struggles to attend school consistently for about two weeks, that would be a good time to look into some formal interventions, whether that be individual therapy, a group-based therapy program, but we're looking at patterns here, whereas with truancy, it might just be a one-off. They decided not to go to school that day. With kids who struggle with school refusal, another **key factor is there's severe and significant distress associated with going to school**. So even talking about school on the weekends or in the evenings, triggers distress in the child, anxiety, depression, maybe anger outbursts, and you don't see that with kids with truancy who just don't go to school because they don't want to necessarily.

Another key point is with school refusal oftentimes parents are fully aware of this, so they know that their child's staying home, they've done everything they can to try to get their child to go to school that day, and they just weren't able to. Whereas with truancy, the parents aren't usually aware. I think a helpful point to know too, the research shows **there's four main functions and reasons** why kids refuse school. And some kids, present with multiple of these functions and some it's more one versus the other. So, some kids refuse school simply **because school produces a lot of negative affect**. It's uncomfortable and they want to avoid those feelings. I work with a lot of kids who don't even know why maybe they are uncomfortable about school. They feel uncomfortable in their bodies. They have more stomach aches. They just will say, I just don't like it. I hate it. I really don't like school. So it produces negative affect and they refuse so that way they don't have to experience that negative affect and they can feel comfortable

at home. We also see a lot of kids who refuse school solely **to avoid social situations that are distressing**. So these are more kids with severe social anxiety who avoid because the social dynamics, the peer pressure, that is just too much for them. We also see kids who refuse school to **get attention from parents or caregivers**. So this **could be even negative attention** oftentimes refusing to go to school results in a lot of fights and arguments with parents, but even that negative attention is reinforcing to the child and they enjoy having more time with that parent and getting more attention or nurturance. We see a lot of kids who avoid school to **get access to things that they don't have at school**. They avoid school to play video games for longer periods of time or to watch TV or to be able to play outside more. Being able to do things that are enjoyable that they wouldn't be able to do at school.

In the treatment, we're trying to focus on all of those things. **We're trying to focus on helping kids use skills to tolerate the distress of school and also work at removing any additional attention or access to fun things like electronics when they're not in school.**

Question: What does school refusal look like? Countless absences, major meltdowns, daily trips to the nurse's office. Is all of this school refusal? [\(VIDEO\)](#)

It's helpful to **think about it on a spectrum**. Of course on the one extreme, we have kids who haven't been in school in weeks or even months or maybe they've been out for a long time and they're only coming once a week, so very sporadically. That would classify as school refusal. **Also classifying as school refusal is kids who get to school most days but are spending a lot of time outside of class**. So whether they are outside of class, stuck in the bathroom, outside of class, in the nurse's office, very frequently, outside of class in the social worker's office, for long periods of time and pleading to try to go home. So a lot of physical complaints, a lot of requests to call home, call parents get picked up early.

That would also be considered school refusal. And then **sometimes we also even consider school refusal as kids who get to school, but only after a huge meltdown in the morning**. So, maybe there's an hour of pleading and begging and trying to get them out of bed and tears and really a lot of struggling. They eventually get there, but every day is a big struggle and it's really challenging. That could be considered school refusal as well. So all of those things can be considered school refusal and **we think about wanting to identify a pattern. If it's happening for a week or two weeks, that's a good time to reach out for some support from a mental health counselor.** I would say, even if it's happening less than that maybe just a

few days. It never hurts to let the school social worker, school counselor know what's going on just so they're in the loop and can lean in and support.

Question: How do I provide support without accommodating? My kid is so anxious about school. Can't I just let him stay home sometimes? (VIDEO)

So being supportive again, looks like those validating statements.

"I can see you're really anxious about this. I know school can be kind of scary and I believe in you and I believe you've got this."

You've got your social worker there, you've got your friend there, your brother or sister or whomever, and reminding them that they can do hard things, that they can do this, and they have support there.

And at the same time, reminding them that there's still that expectation to go to school. So, you can be anxious and you can still get to school. And, sometimes I like to encourage parents to separate the emotion from the behavior and sometimes that feels a little bit better, especially when we have to implement consequences. Separating the anxiety from the refusal behavior because our kids can be anxious and at the same time, refusing school can be an unacceptable behavior in our household.

Just like anger, right? Our kids can be angry and it's not okay to hit your siblings or to hit mom and dad so you can be angry, but you can't do this behavior. Same thing with school refusal. You can be anxious and in distress and it's not okay to stay home from school and you've got all these supports. It's always okay to offer little rewards and incentives after the child's made it to school. So we always say after, because we don't want to give them the fun Starbucks drink before school because then they might still say, "I'm not going." So we want to wait until after to provide that reward and incentive. It's always okay and supportive to help your child use coping strategies in the morning. So doing deep breathing together, doing a meditation video together, doing some positive self-talk, hyping them up, that's always supportive.

Consulting with the school team is another way of being supportive as well. So saying, "I know school's hard, which is why I think it's really important to loop in your social worker and we're going to have a meeting with him or her and talk about ways that you could take breaks at school if you need them." Or, find who your point person is at school if you're feeling really distressed so you know who you can go talk to in the building. All of those ways are really supportive.

And, I think it's important to note that **when we start to over accommodate or enable, that looks more like us allowing our kids to stay home from school or not holding a limit if they refuse, maybe picking them up early or emailing their teachers for them or even sometimes doing their homework for them, things like that. We really don't want to do that because it's just a short-term band-aid for a longer term problem.** So in that moment we might pick them up early and they'll feel better, but then the next morning when they have to go to school, their anxiety or distress is right back up there where it was, if not even higher. We know **avoidance only makes anxiety worse**, so we don't want to put a band-aid over it. We want to find longer term solutions and sometimes it can be hard to differentiate between being supportive and being over accommodating. And I think something that's always helpful to ask yourself is, **"Would I be doing this for my child if they weren't anxious or if they weren't struggling with depression or this other thing?"** And if the answer is no, then it might be a sign that you are maybe **over accommodating in that way, and we want to start to peel that back.** We do know that over accommodating only feeds anxiety and makes it worse. It's not a long-term solution and it can also cause a lot of distress for parents in the family system as well because we're maybe changing our schedule to make sure we're always available to drive our kids instead of take the bus. It really stretches us then. It doesn't help anyone.

Question: What steps can I take to deter my child's school refusal? How am I supposed to get my kid to school when she flat out refuses to leave the house? [\(VIDEO\)](#)

Always using supportive statements with kids. **We want to validate their emotions and hold the expectations.** So saying, "I can see you're really anxious and it's an expectation that we're going to school today." **By holding that expectation, it sends the message to our kids that we believe that they can tolerate the distress or the stressors of school.** By giving in and letting them stay home, it's saying, "You're right. School's too hard and you can't handle it, so I'm going to let you take the day off." And we don't want to send that message to our kids. We want them to believe in themselves. And so they really need to see us holding firm with that expectation. Another thing is **giving space can be effective too, especially if your child is dysregulated** to the point of yelling, getting physically aggressive. **We don't want to have too much back and forth conversation in those moments because we know our kids aren't thinking logically and rationally at that point.** So, it's better to just say,

"We've got 20 minutes until we need to leave. Remember the expectation is you go to school. That's how you earn your privileges today. So I'm going to let you make your choice and I'm going to go to downstairs and get breakfast ready. I'll see you in 20 minutes and just walking away and giving space."

I think **another important reminder is anxiety can be contagious**. And oftentimes our kids, when they are refusing school are pretty anxious. And so it's important to check in with our own levels of anxiety in the morning too. And **as calm and cool and collected as we present as parents in front of our kids who are anxious, the better the outcomes will be**. So even if we have to fake it till we make it and present as calm, even though inside we're not calm, that will help significantly because it will help our kids co-regulate in those moments and remain calmer themselves too.