

School Anxieties

Some children attending school develop severe anxieties, often referred to as school phobia or school refusal. Treated inappropriately, this can lead to troubled children becoming troubled adults. The usual approach is to encourage school attendance. While this can prove helpful in some cases, other families find it inappropriate, plus there is a pre-supposition that

- a) attendance at school should always be the aim,
- b) a child displaying such anxieties is demonstrating inappropriate behaviour – which therefore needs modifying.

There is another view supported by many in Education Otherwise (EO). This suggests that children may be responding *rationally* to an environment which is unsuitable for them. EO suggests that children in these circumstances need the pressure to attend school removing.

What are School Anxieties?

School anxieties can manifest themselves in a number of ways: behavioural problems of various kinds which may be displayed either at home, in school, or both; frequent absences from school or truanting; emotional withdrawal or outbursts; unexplainable underachievement; extreme sensitivity and vulnerability; persistent ill health, from frequent niggling tummy aches and colds, to serious physical conditions; even suicidal tendencies in the most severe cases. Most children find it difficult to explain their problems and so they demonstrate it to us in other ways.

How can you help your child?

Encourage your child to relax. If the child has been suffering for a while then it may take longer to learn but this gives your child a way to reduce their anxiety levels immediately. Parents may benefit too by practising these techniques along with the child. These techniques can be used at school and/or at home. The more they are used the more effective they are. They can be a help while you decide what to do.

- a) Lift the shoulders to the ears and hold for a slow count of five and then let the

shoulders drop loose and relaxed. Repeat several times slowly. This helps you recognise when you are tense and how to let it go.

- b) Breathe in slowly and deeply, feeling the belly expand on the in breath and slowly breathing out fully while relaxing on the out breath. Repeat for five breaths.
- c) Have quiet times alone perhaps in a bedroom listening to some gentle music.
- d) Drink plenty of plain water throughout the day and if possible avoiding/reducing fizzy carbonated drinks.
- e) Eat regular meals that include protein and avoid foods high in sugar.

If these techniques do not help then the cause of the anxiety may need to be removed.

What causes School Anxieties?

School anxieties are often thought by those in educational and psychiatric departments to result primarily from issues relating to the child and family *not* from real problems with school itself. This contradicts the usual experience in EO who find that anxieties and/or attendance problems are most often caused by real difficulties *in school*. It might be bullying; having unrecognised learning differences; being frustrated at the school style of learning; or feeling uneasy in a large-scale institution without the choice to withdraw. The assertion from parents of school-anxious children that the problem is clearly a fear or rejection of school, rather than a fear of leaving home, is supported by the fact that most of the children are happy to attend places other than school.

Of course there are other causes of anxious behaviours which affect school attendance but which do not originate from school. In some cases anxieties can arise from difficulties at home such as illness, death or a divorce in the family. Even so EO suggests that children in these circumstances may need the extra burden (if that is what it is) of school attendance to be removed, at least for a while. When children

are feeling particularly vulnerable, their wishes about what would help them need to be heard, understood and acted upon. This approach can prevent long term problems.

Where a child develops anxieties as a result of serious and harmful problems at home such as emotional, physical or intellectual neglect or abuse, EO would certainly not support home education as an option. Education Otherwise is known to have an active child protection policy, plus the children of home educators who join EO have the additional safety of being part of an active support network. It is important in all cases, however, to be aware that the behaviour displayed by children who have become school-anxious from entirely 'innocent' causes, can easily be misinterpreted. Therein lies the dilemma: is a child stressed and so becoming school-anxious, or are the child's school fears resulting in stress which is affecting the rest of his or her life?

School phobia or school anxieties?

The ideas and experiences of EO members regarding school anxieties clearly contradict the beliefs of many professionals (whose views may, understandably, be coloured by a lack of knowledge and appreciation of the beneficial aspects of home education - this is evident in comments about the assumed social isolation of children not attending school, for example). The two opposing views about the root causes of school anxieties, and the subsequent attitudes about how to respond to these children, are revealed in the terminology used.

When a child is said to be experiencing severe *school anxieties*, the way is open to investigate how the education establishment itself could adapt to children's requirements. A *school phobia* label somehow implies the child has a problem condition, essentially because a true phobia is an irrational fear.

An interesting thought from Roland Meighan, former Professor of Education at Nottingham University, who suggests that "school phobia" may actually be a sign of mental health as it shows an unwillingness to go along with an inappropriate situation - in stark contrast to the underrated problems of the herd instinct. He compares this to "school dependency, a largely unrecognised mental health problem"!

A harmful response to school phobia?

The usual response to school phobia therefore, is to aim for regular school attendance and encourage (require?) the child to adapt and conform 'for their own future good'. The child is forced against their will to attend school. Such an approach is a consequence of genuine concern for the child's education and well-being and is strengthened by the feeling that a child who has difficulty coping with school must have problems. This does not recognize that education can be gained in the home environment and that for their well-being this may be the best place for them.

Whilst the process of securing and maintaining school attendance can be carried out with great care and sensitivity this is not always the case. The assumed importance of attending school is apparently seen by some as justification for a range of treatments and interventions, which families often report to be heavy-handed and lacking consideration for the rights of the parents and the child. In fact many people believe that such 'school phobia' treatments may, in themselves, actually cause great harm.

A research study

Psychiatrists who advise that children with severe school anxieties be made to attend school, often accept that psychiatric referral is common when these people become adults. A research project by Hersov and Berg, both advocates of the view which insists on school attendance, ironically confirms the likelihood of troubled children becoming troubled adults with this conventional response. The following information is taken from **The Abuse of Care and Custody Orders** by Patricia Knox.

The objective of Hersov and Berg's study, which involved 100 school phobic children, was to investigate different ways of making these children go to school. Such methods may include verbal persuasion, from gentle encouragement to threats of fines and court; man-handling the children into school; drug therapy; periods of time spent in residential psychiatric units away from 'the unhelpful influence' of families; even to removal from home into care (which the Children Act 1989 disallowed unless there are issues other than a child receiving an inadequate education).

On the basis that approximately half the group did eventually go back to school, the study was proclaimed a success. There appear to be several major flaws in this research:

1. The fact that some children did *attend* school seems to be considered of greater importance than the *quality* of any education received or the child's well-being. Countless research projects show that people are simply unable to learn effectively under stress. Even worse, how many were at school either feeling utterly powerless and stunned into quiet submission, or ranting noisily about the injustice, digging themselves even further into trouble?
2. Dr Berg claimed that school-phobic children should not be allowed to be educated outside of school i.e., be home educated. It is unclear where this assertion comes from as Dr Berg did not actually investigate the possible success of this option in his research. Proper research techniques would have required the establishment of a control group of a further 100 school-phobic children, and positively encouraging them to learn at home.
3. An assumption seemed to be made that the majority of children in this study had a predisposition to mental ill-health, which may have contributed to causing their school anxieties, so that the school anxieties served as an indicator of mental instability and vice versa. But, might it not be that the children were actually showing a severe but reasonable stress response to intolerable circumstances?

It cannot be in order to start a study of this nature on a questionable premise. The aim of the study was to move children towards school attendance, not to investigate reasons why they had such a negative response to school; but an understanding of underlying causes must greatly affect the form of assistance.

4. The parents' distress during the episode of school anxieties generally appeared to be blamed as a *cause* of the child's anxieties, rather than a *consequence* of seeing their child so unhappy; again, surely this is a questionable assumption which undermines the results?

The apparent misunderstanding of the above points served as justification for the extremely high number of children in Dr Berg's study, 66% in fact, who came through the research displaying signs of mental problems.

This is unacceptable to many people. EO believes it is the inappropriate treatment of children who are anxious and vulnerable that causes further anxieties, and if allowed to continue can result in long term mental ill health. Sadly, the type of approach undertaken by Hersov and Berg is still prevalent. Many psychiatrists and psychologists still choose never (or rarely) to suggest that a school-anxious child be home educated.

Home education – a solution

Many children develop mild school anxieties at times, when going to school proves difficult. This does not necessarily mean they should be home educated, particularly if the family does not wish to follow such an option. Sympathetic support may be all that the child needs to start attending school happily again.

Even so, all families ought to be aware of the alternatives to school attendance, especially when it becomes obvious that a child is showing signs of more serious school anxieties or school refusal. If anxieties are taken seriously in the early stages, it is possible to prevent long-term problems developing.

Parents who do decide to home educate soon realise that their child is going to need time to recover fully, although immediate signs of relaxation will be very encouraging. There is usually a need for a quiet period initially for the child to settle down; this includes being cautious about pushing the child too soon to go out and join clubs etc. to socialise; this will come in time. Improvements in the child's situation will occur at the child's pace, and need not satisfy any national standard.

Parents are legally obliged to educate their child according to the child's individual needs. Often people initially find the thought of educating their own child overwhelming or frightening but later realise it is easier than they assumed it would be. Educationalists agree there are many successful approaches to education; families certainly do not have to mirror a school approach. Often people find the autonomous method, of the child leading the learning, so natural and stress free.

The book **Free Range Education** by Terri Dowty provides more information on this subject.

How does home education work?

It is common for school-anxious children, after beginning home education, gradually to reveal more and more to their parents about their difficulties in school. Sometimes parents feel alarmed that the whole truth was held back, but children are often reticent initially because they feel there is no 'escape' from school. Also, children are often quiet about their concerns while in school because they find it hard to articulate their real feelings; or they feel intimidated, scared and worried about what might happen to them, especially when they sense - which they do - that most of the adults involved want them to conform to a particular outcome, i.e. school attendance. Youngsters are surprisingly conventional; many do not like going against the grain, and the worry is that they may start to believe a 'fault' somehow lies in themselves and their family.

Children may need gradual, gentle and non-intrusive encouragement to talk about their feelings. Immersing themselves in creative and expressive artistic pursuits, giving vent to their feelings of despair, anger and frustration, and going for long walks, can all be soothing and therapeutic.

Parents report that when children with school anxieties are removed from school they do get better, recovering their physical and mental health, sense of well-being, interest in learning and ability to attend education establishments at a later date if they so wish. An increasing number of education officials, teachers, and psychological experts who have witnessed this for themselves, in consequence recommend others in similar need to contact Education Otherwise. It seems therefore that it is not the children who are 'failing'; but that they are being failed in some way.

Many children choose never to return to school, *as a positive decision*, having found home education to be excellent. In fact the most usual comments from parents are, "why did we not do this before, my child has blossomed" and "I wish I had known about home education earlier". Most parents who turn to home education having had problems in the school system, soon become converted to the group who home educate by preference.

The Abuse of Care and Custody Orders
by Patricia Knox.

Free Range Education
by Terri Dowty.

Educating Your Child at Home
by Jane Lowe and Alan Thomas.

**A range of books are available from
Education Otherwise
www.education-otherwise.org**

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