

SCHOOL REFUSAL:

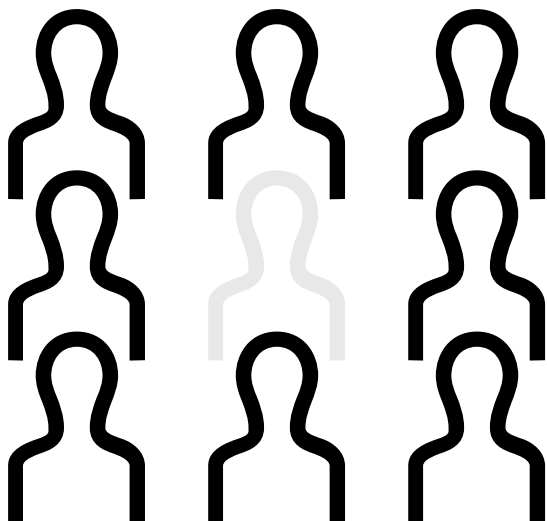
It can start gradually with a pattern of requests from a student: “May I go to nurse?”

It can start suddenly with a phone call: “My daughter is refusing to come to school!”

It can be a series of absences or tardies you identify when reviewing your class attendance: “Hmmm, why is he either absent or late to school most Mondays? What’s going on?”

For educators, identifying and meeting the needs of students who avoid school is confusing and challenging, and there is no formula that works in all situations. Educators struggle to find the right balance between encouraging students to attend and stay in class while allowing them the comfort of knowing they can leave if feeling overwhelmed. We know that the longer the student is out of school or class, the harder it is to return. The student faces questions from well-intentioned peers. Learning experiences are missed, and the assignments pile up. A cycle of stress, anxiety, and frustration mounts.

The Anxiety and Depression Association of America defines “school refusal” as “the disorder of a child who refuses to go to school on a regular basis or has problems staying in school.” A child may struggle to attend school at all or to stay in school or class. The spectrum of symptoms can range from frequent complaints of headaches or stomachaches to outright defiance.



WHEN THE “A” STANDS FOR “ABSENCE”

BY ANGELA CLEVELAND, M.S.ED., M.ED., MA

Warning signs of school refusal

- Frequent requests to go to the nurse’s office, often complaining of headaches, stomachaches, nausea or other physical symptoms.
- Frequent requests to go home or call home. Be aware that some calls home go through unlikely channels. For example, a child may request to call home due to a forgotten assignment or lunch money, but the call ends in pleas to be picked up from school. The school secretary is often the first adult to notice this pattern.
- Patterns of high absence, tardiness or leaving school early. Sometimes a student regularly “misses the bus,” which is something to keep an eye on and can too easily be rationalized as poor time management. Leaving early regularly can also be a difficult pattern to identify since parents/guardians pick the child up for a variety of reasons.
- Watch for absence patterns on days of tests/quizzes or other events that may trigger the child’s stress level. Keep in mind that the stressor is relative; what is stressful for one child may be what another child looks forward to.
- The child may complain about attending school or worry about a family member or home situation while at school.
- A student feeling worried about something specific (like a conflict with peers or class presentation) is not uncommon. A student showing warning signs of school refusal may not be able to articulate a clear reason or may give several reasons they feel may satisfy an adult’s questioning. However, once addressed, the reasons a student gives for school refusal often change.

Addressing school refusal

If you suspect that one of your students may be struggling with school refusal, reach out to your school counselor and administration. It is common for one staff member to raise a small concern that can make a big difference in helping a child and the family address an issue before it escalates.

While every situation is different, there are some key steps to take. It's important to rule out any medical concerns. A medical doctor has access to several screening tools that can help with diagnosis. Also, prescribed medication or even over-the-counter supplements can have side effects that result in increased anxiety, stomachaches or other symptoms that may mirror school refusal. The doctor may refer the child to an outside counselor for support.

If the family seeks counseling assistance, many of the strategies that are being used at home could also be used in school. Deep breathing, taking time to journal thoughts, and the ability to take "breaks" (for example, walk to the water fountain) are relatively easy interventions. The treating professional may request that school staff closely monitor attendance in school and in individual classes.

Sometimes the behavioral specialist in the school gets involved and can help to arrange a system in which family members, school staff, and the child develop a behavioral plan to encourage attendance and keep track of absences to ensure the plan is effective.

One of the most important interventions is having a plan in place to help the child transition into school and feel comfortable and safe. Many children struggle with getting into the building, but once they are at school, they settle in. Creating a welcoming and supportive transition to school often alleviates anxiety. Sometimes this involves starting the school day with a positive interaction. Some children brighten when a staff member greets them each morning. Others feel better leaving homeroom a few minutes early to walk to their first class with a buddy, in order to avoid a crowded, bustling hallway first thing in the morning. For some students, being given the responsibility of feeding the classroom pet or watering classroom plants can be a relaxing way to start the day.

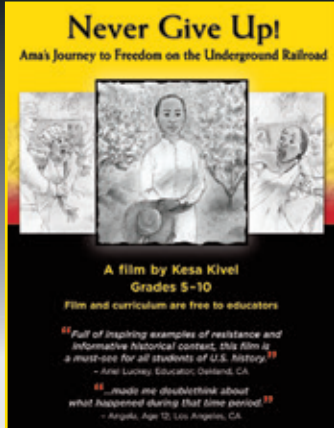
Many educators wonder what the best response from them should be. Should they be empathetic and flexible, allowing the child to leave the room whenever he/she requests to do so? Should they set firm boundaries and require that the child stay in class for at least part of the time?

The unsatisfying response to these questions is "it depends." All children want to know their teachers care for them. For some children, just knowing that they can leave the room immediately if needed is enough to alleviate their concerns. For others, asking to leave is the best way for them to explain that they are feeling stressed, and working through that with them in the classroom is best. Some children appreciate knowing where the boundaries are, and once in class, they settle in.

Author Janet Lansbury said, "In my world there are no bad kids, just impressionable, conflicted young people wrestling with emotions and impulses, trying to communicate their feelings and needs the only way they know how." As educators, it's sometimes very clear when our students are struggling, but other times the struggle is silent.

A colleague of mine once told me that she approaches every child and every adult with the mindset that we all have our struggles in life, and every battle is a big one to the person fighting it. One of the best things about working in a school is that we all stand together and fight the good fight every single day for, and with, our students.

UNDERGROUND RAILROAD FILM
Never Give Up!
Ama's Journey to Freedom on the Underground Railroad



Never Give Up!
Ama's Journey to Freedom on the Underground Railroad

A film by Kesa Kivel
Grades 5-10
Film and curriculum are free to educators

"Full of inspiring examples of resistance and informative historical context, this film is a must-see for all students of U.S. history."
-Ara Looney, Educator, Oakland, CA

"...made me doubtless about what happened during that time period."
-Angela, Age 12, Los Angeles, CA

Grades 5 - 10
FREE to educators!
"A MUST-HAVE"
-School Library Journal
"HIGHLY RECOMMENDED"
-Video Librarian
www.nevergiveupfilm.org



Finding Answers In Nature New STEM School Field Trip Program!

Somerset County Park Commission
Environmental Education Center

Tour themes include:
Adventures in Stickiness (grades 3-5)
Architecture (grades 6-10)

Connects with NGSS
Contact 908.766.2489 ext. 332
kbender@scparcs.org

www.SomersetCountyParks.org

Favorite strategies

Many people ask me about my favorite strategies to use with my students who are struggling with school refusal. Here are my top five favorites:

1. Take a break! Take a walk to the water fountain, or go to the restroom. Sometimes when the anxiety mounts, a quick walk and change of scenery can clear the mind.
2. Deep breathing and muscle relaxation, either alone or together, make a huge difference. Sometimes we don't even realize our body's response to stress, and making a conscious effort to relax not only eases the tension but focuses the mind on something other than the stressor.
3. Visualization. It's best to visualize a special, familiar place and think of all of your senses as you bring this place to mind.
 - Hearing – What does your special place sound like? What are the big sounds you first notice and the quieter sounds in the distance?
 - Smelling – What lovely smells can you find in your special place? Do you smell chicken noodle soup boiling on a stove or the crisp, crunchy autumn leaves?
 - Seeing – What are the big and small details in your special place? Picture every small object from the single grain of sand, blade of grass, or other tiny detail.
 - Touching – What do the things in your special place

feel like? What are the unique textures you experience as you run your hands over them?

- Tasting – What tastes touch your tongue? It could be real taste of food or an imagined taste of salty ocean water or sweet honeysuckle.
4. Write or draw in a journal. Just getting the feelings out of you and onto paper can feel like you are easing a burden from your shoulders. Some people like writing about their day, others draw pictures, and some do a combination of pictures and phrases that capture what's going on.
 5. Create a "Power Playlist" of songs that make you feel confident, powerful and like you and take on the challenges of the day.

Here are some examples:

- Smash Mouth - "All Star"
- Katy Petty - "Roar"
- K'naan - "Wavin' Flag"
- Sara Bareilles - "Brave"
- Andy Grammer - "Keep Your Head Up" 🎵

Angela Cleveland is a grade 5-6 school counselor at Auten Road Intermediate School in Hillsborough, NJ. She has been a counselor for 14 years, and is the author of "I'm No Scaredy Cat...But I'm Afraid to go to School!" (Available in print and e-book.) Angela Cleveland can be reached at ACleveland@htps.us.

school refusal myths



Myth: School refusal is a widespread problem.

Fact: School refusal typically affects 2 percent to 5 percent of school-age children. It often involves a time-intensive collaborative response from school staff to help the children and their families when a problem arises.

Myth: School refusal most commonly occurs in middle school.

Fact: The most common ages when it occurs are around ages 5-6 and 10-11. It typically occurs around the time of big changes or school transitions.

Myth: If a child exhibits school refusal, it will appear only at the beginning of the school year.

Fact: According to the National Association of School Psychologists, it can occur with greater frequency after periods of not being in school, including summer, weekends, or breaks in the school year.

Myth: School refusal is always a sign of bullying.

Fact: While there certainly can be issues going on with peers or academics, it is more frequently associated with a major life change. This includes moving, the death of a loved one, divorce, or other stressors.

Myth: School refusal is just a student being defiant.

Fact: Just because you can't see the problem does not mean the child is seeking attention. For some children, the refusal looks like

an emotional tantrum and others respond with quiet resolve to stay home. Regardless of how school refusal is expressed, telling a child that he/she is making it up for attention or being defiant invalidates the child's feelings and fails to address the real issue.

Myth: There is no way to prevent school refusal.

Fact: While many cases involve a seemingly sudden onset, fostering a positive school climate where all children feel accepted, respected, and listened to makes a tremendous difference. A child may be internalizing stressors, and if he/she can identify at least one adult to talk to, it can stop school refusal in its tracks. Sometimes children who have experienced a traumatic event, such as a loss in the family, want to stay home and stay close to family and familiar surroundings for as long as possible. The longer a child stays out of school, the more anxiety builds at the thought of returning. It's best to return to the routine of school sooner rather than later. The school can put supports in place to help ease the transition, but the transition back should not be delayed too long.

Myth: Children experiencing school refusal struggle with it their entire lives.

Fact: From a one-time incident to a rocky transition period, if addressed properly, the prognosis is very good. Learning effective coping skills helps children struggling with school refusal not only in moment but for the rest of their lives.