



# MANAGING SCHOOL REFUSAL



Not wanting to go to school may occur at any time, but is most common in children between the ages of 5-7 and 11-14. Refusal to go to school often begins following a period at home in which the child has become closer to the parent, such as a holiday break, or a brief illness. It also may follow a stressful occurrence, such as the death of a pet or relative or a change in schools. **Here are some ideas to manage school refusal behaviour in your child.**

- Establish **morning and evening routines**. Routines decrease anxiety because they are predictable and structured and thus restore a sense of control to the child. Make sure that you rehearse the routine with your child several times.
- **Do not let your child stay home from school or come home early unless visibly ill**. By allowing your child to stay home, you are not only reinforcing school refusal behaviour, but also limiting your child's opportunity to practice and refine positive coping behaviours. Development and practice of coping skills is extremely important for young children. It also helps them develop positive ways of dealing with stress and anxiety as adults.
- Your child will likely become distressed if he/she is not allowed to come or stay home from school. As a means to help him/her get through this initial distress, you can allow your child **phone you once during the day**. Discuss this plan with your child's teacher and school administration. Make sure that your child is aware that the purpose of the phone call is to "check in" and not to come home.
- Provide your child with a picture of you or some other small **comfort object**. Remind your child to look at or hold the comfort object when s/he misses you.
- If your child does not attend school, the expectation is that s/he completes school work or other tasks (e.g., chores) at home during school hours. **Limit access to reinforcing activities** (e.g., X Box, phone, TV, computer) at home during school hours. Also, **limit time with caregiver**.
- Provide **attention-based consequences** for school non-attendance (e.g., early bedtime, limited time with caregiver).
- Develop a **"goodbye ritual"** with your child to comfort them. The book *The Kissing Hand* by Audrey Penn is an excellent resource for children who refuse to go to school. In the book, Chester is a young raccoon who is nervous about going to school. His mother kisses his center palm and tells him that "whenever you feel lonely and need a little loving from home, just press your hand to your cheek and think, 'Mommy loves you. Mommy loves you.'"
- If your child refuses to go to school for all or part of the day, try a **graduated exposure** technique where your child is expected to spend greater and greater amounts of time at school. For example, have your child commit to spending 1 to 2 hours at school, or attend over the lunch period. Develop a schedule where your child gradually spends more and more time at school.
- **Get the school on board**. Consult with your child's teachers to find out if there are things that can be done at school to make your child more comfortable.
- Try not to give your child **excessive reassurance about their fears**. Reassurance-seeking is used by children to manage fears, and many parents provide it, even though it's excessive, in order to make their child feel better in the moment. Gradually reduce the number of reassurance seeking questions (e.g., "what is going to happen?") your child is able to ask you. If you have already answered your child's question, encourage the child to think about the situation, come up with the answers, and rely on their own judgment.