

HELP FILE

School Refusal: 9 year old

"My son is 9 years old and to cut a long story short was being bullied at his primary school and refused to go. We have since then moved him into another school and for the first week was fine apart from the first day - to be expected.

He has been at the school for a few weeks and is refusing to go to school again. I am at my wits ends and don't know what to do. The teacher is very good but we have to basically pull him into school every day and I have tried everything from being nice, keeping him off, and threatening him, - all to no avail. I would be grateful if you could give me some pointers and to help me.

I have contacted my local Education Welfare Officer and I am waiting on them getting in contact with me.

I look forward to hearing from you."

Jenny Replied

You must be tearing your hair out. It is such a difficult situation. For you, as for most parents, home schooling etc is not an option, not that it would necessarily be the best way of coping with the situation as we all face uncomfortable, unhappy distressing things in life and we are so much stronger for being able to learn to cope - it builds resilience. Most importantly for children when they are ably supported and can acquire the skills to cope, they can prevent this happening again. So avoidance for safety is an option but you have already tried that by moving school so we need to look at enabling him to feel safe at school, especially as he seems to have a very supportive teacher.

There is something you should address before you give attention to my suggestions which follow. How anxious are you about his safety? The answer to this question should guide you to determine whether or not you are unwittingly and unconsciously contributing to his refusal to go to school. Threatened children sometimes pick up their mother's anxiety and automatically play to it, - also unconsciously. If this might be an issue, you will need to get yourself out of the picture in the mornings. Get a friend to take him to school for a while etc.

Ok, with that out of the way:

He needs to understand that there is no alternative and that you need it to work for him and for him to feel safe and happy at school. So he also needs to think about what he can do to make school work for him. It is his problem and he needs not for you to take over but to support him and enable him to cope.

The first step is not to talk but just listen to him. This requires great self control (coping with your own feelings), and skill. The key is for him to feel he can talk with you about how he feels and what is happening in his young life.

Where do you start? I suggest that you make it into a story - tell him you are going to write / tell a story (your aim is for him to fill in the gaps), - don't do it all at once, a little every day at a special time you have together. If he was very young I would suggest you use a puppet to tell the story but just telling the story or writing it together is fine here.

For example:

I have a story to tell you ... about a young boy (give him a name) who and you describe him, first as baby, then as a little boy and his first days at pre-school/kindergarten, school, etc. Then go on to all the important stages, times, teachers, friends, fun times etc leading into the current year and describe a young boy getting sad and afraid,... then,... as you continue the story ask questions: (never why), using what, when, where, which, how, who .. as appropriate, to prompt him to tell about how this young boy could have felt in these sad and unhappy times ... and JUST LISTEN. If you make the boy in the story not him but someone else who he can feel empathy with, he can then start sharing his own story and linking it into the young boy's story. You'll have to pitch the level of sophistication of this approach as appropriate for him.

Do a little every day ... gives him time to think about this boy and what he should do and add his bits into the story.

Don't *you* make the link between your son and the boy in the story, ... let him make that link if he so wishes. Just accept anything he says here.

Telling this boy's story (not exactly the same as your son's but similar enough for him to feel empathy with this young boy), is enabling him to think about it in safety, without anxiety, and be able to try and help this boy - a bit like having a puppet friend, who you talk to and who isn't you but experiences what you do and you can help. In this way you are encouraging him to take steps to correct the situation, which you can then support. This will also help you to maintain the self discipline necessary to allow him to own and deal with the problem himself.

As you go along you could write some of this story down ... and then let him write in some of it too,... it depends if he feels able to, and also wants to help write it. Let him guide you. Writing could help him but only if writing is something that comes easily to him ... otherwise just verbalize the story.

As the story unfolds and the boy faces unhappy situations, you can start asking questions such as ... What do you think he should do? Who do you think would help him deal with this or that situation. Slowly enable your son to start looking at ways of solving this problem. Don't ever tell him what to do. Just tell the story, ask questions, get him involved, and you will find what is really happening and how he is feeling - it will all come through the third person - this other young boy who is sad and hurting at school.

Your aim is to enable your son to find ways of coping with this situation. He needs to feel empowered so he isn't a victim anymore and can learn to deal with negative feelings about school himself. He has to learn ways to cope, to be able to say to

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himself, "I can deal with this!" He needs also to know that at times school can be tough on a person. A new school is always tough on a kid.

I suggest you tell his teacher what you are doing - keep in close contact. She can do things from her side e.g. for the others in his class not to see him as a possible victim. She must also enable him ... NOT rescue him, which keeps him in the victim role. Also she needs to keep an eye on any students who may be victimizing or harassing him and sanction that behaviour - zero tolerance.

I hope this helps ... you are very upset yourself. That's okay ... and quite "par for the course", but you need to manage that so you can support your son and enable him to cope. Everything you do in this way will hold him in good stead for the rest of his life. Finally, see if you can get hold of "How To Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk", by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish. This will help you listen.

Good luck ... I am sure things will turn around if you do this. Do let me know how you go.

Jenny Mackay