



Immaculate Heart of Mary
Counseling Center

Counselor Corner

Sometimes kids just don't want to go to school. Whether it's a problem with a teacher or peer, test anxiety, or something else, how should parents handle this?

1. If it's right before school, don't negotiate. Be understanding but matter-of-fact (think of putting yourself on "repeat"). Plan a time to talk more about the problem. If your child refuses to get in the car or exit the car at school, keep calm! Wait it out if you can.
2. After school, try to figure out what's really going on. Ask your child. Look for patterns or triggers like test anxiety, bullying, schoolwork, or homesickness. See if the teacher has noticed any signals.
3. Be aware that anxiety really can cause physical symptoms like a stomachache or headache. That's what stress does! These are often signs that something at school might be making your child upset or nervous.
4. Establish a family rule, like "You go to school unless you're really sick." Define "sick" ahead of time. (Obviously, if you suspect your child really is sick, keep the germs at home.) Be firm in stating that your job is to make sure your child attends school.
5. What your child DOES at home is important. It should not be rewarding! A sick child needs to sleep. A child who refuses to go to school needs a structured day of schoolwork and chores. We'd stay at home too if it meant watching TV, playing, and eating snacks.
6. Importantly, allowing your child to stay home REINFORCES the avoidance of school. It says, "Avoiding the problem is a good solution." It makes it even harder, next time, to overcome that avoidance. What actually works is exposure: most of the time, once your child gets settled at school, the negative feelings leave.
7. Let the teacher know right away if you had great difficulty getting your child to school. The teacher is then alerted to your child's mood and can help your child feel more comfortable.
8. If you have tried these methods and the problem is not resolving, seek outside help sooner rather than later. A counselor trained in working with children can help get you back on track.

Visit IHMCC website for more helpful tips at immaculateheartcounseling.org





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What to Do When Your Child is Feeling Bullied

Bullying happens when someone:

- 1) does or says hurtful things
- 2) on purpose
- 3) even after your child has told them to stop or shown they are upset or frustrated.

Sympathize with your child first, and then try to get the whole story. To do this, engage in ‘active listening,’ – clarifying and repeating without trying to “fix it” or offer your opinion.

Sometimes, especially if you have a very sensitive child, you may need to educate about what bullying is. However, even if you don’t believe the other child is trying to be hurtful, it’s about your child’s perception. Teach your child to tell the other person that the behavior is hurtful. If it continues, now it has crossed into bullying.

Your child needs an ally. Let your child know you’re going to help find a resolution. However, the first step is probably not calling up the other parent. Depending on the age of your child, your first step may vary. You will need to do more investigating and advocating for a younger child, including talking with the teacher, coach, or other adult who is present where the bullying happens. Find out whether these adults perceive the bullying. For an older child, parents should still follow up with involved adults. In addition, this is a good opportunity to teach a child self-advocacy skills, especially standing up for oneself firmly and respectfully and reaching out to the teacher or coach about the issue.

You can also make the most of this opportunity to teach about forgiveness. At the start and end of each day, talk to your child about forgiving. This can help your child can let go of any anger they might take to school (whether or not it’s related to peers) or bring home.

What if my child is the bully? – Talk to your child, teachers, and/or coaches if you suspect your child may be bullying others. This is a good opportunity to evaluate the stress in your child’s life and start to address ways to manage anger and teach better social skills. Help your child make it right again, set up meaningful interactions with peers, and seek help for any emotional or mood difficulties you suspect.

Resources (including tips on stopping cyber bullying): stopbullying.gov; thebullyproject.com





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Friendship

Does it seem like your child is having difficulty making friends? Why do you think this may be? Take a quick assessment:

1. How are your child's social skills? Is he or she able to initiate a conversation or initiate play with others?
2. What is your child's attention span? Is he or she too easily distracted to maintain play or conversation with others? Can he or she follow others' line of play or conversation enough to be included?
3. Does your child have a shy personality? Does he or she warm up better in one-on-one situations instead of in a group?
4. What is your child's general approach to others? Is it more overwhelming? More timid?

Often, parents can pinpoint one or two ways in which they can help their child grow in his or her friendships. If you are hitting a wall, a guidance counselor or therapist may be able to help.

Some quick tips on friendship-building include:

1. "Role-playing" – acting out the initiation and maintenance of play or conversation – where you pretend to be a peer.
2. Setting up individual get-togethers with other children that are short (2 hours or less) and parent-structured (i.e., have a general plan for how the children will spend time).
3. Letting your child's teacher in on your concern to see whether the teacher knows of certain children who might mesh well with your child.
4. Encourage time away from screens. If your child's friendship interactions all seem to take place online or via text, intervene by helping your child set up some face-to-face time with friends. This may require a prep talk on social skills.





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Managing Anxiety and Handling Overwhelming Feelings

Test anxiety, nighttime anxiety, worries about little things or big – here are some quick tips for handling overwhelming emotions.

1. Pay attention to your body. When we are anxious or overwhelmed, we tense up and start breathing more shallowly. This in turn fuels those big emotions. We have to teach our bodies that we are safe, because without feeling safe, we can't think clearly. Two great methods for calming are deep breathing and muscle relaxation. Practicing these daily is very important so we are prepared in the moment! The internet has some great resources for people of all ages. Google search “deep breathing exercises for (children/adolescents/etc.)” and the same for “progressive muscle relaxation” to select one that suits you. A final great way to calm is to mentally visit your “happy place” – take five minutes to fully imagine being in a place that is very safe and secure.
2. Our brains like to pay attention to things we see as a THREAT. This was initially meant to aid in survival. We need to teach our brains to shift away from the feeling that we are in danger. To do this, we can focus on thinking about tangible or concrete things. For example, counting by 2s or 3s or doing math problems in our heads can help our brain shift away from that “fear center.” Similarly, it can help to focus on “grounding” ourselves by noticing our five senses: what is one thing we see, hear, feel, taste, and smell right in that moment?
3. How we talk to ourselves is crucial. If we continue letting our brains think about what we are worried or upset about, we get stuck in the feeling. Think of three or four things you can repeat to yourself that help you “cope” or effectively deal with the feelings. For example, “I’ve done this before, I can do it again” or “I’m going to be fine” are great coping statements. Write them on a notecard so you don’t forget in the moment.
4. We often want to avoid or escape the bad feelings. This feels great in the short term, but it doesn’t work in the long term. Exposure – facing those fears – is really important, but you want to have a plan and a set of skills when you do face them. If anxiety and big feelings are interfering with day to day life, it’s time to seek outside help.

