

A LINE ON LIFE

2/1/98

School Phobias *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

Each semester, millions of children look forward to school, reuniting with friends and new academic challenges. However, a minority fear school. They may refuse to go, throw tantrums, or complain of endless aches and pains. About 5-10% of American school children suffer from a mild form of what is commonly known as **school phobia**. About 1% suffer from a more severe form, leading to serious problems and school absenteeism. Chronic school absenteeism leads to greater risk for problems in later life — alcohol abuse, criminal behavior, underemployment and even marital problems.

School phobia is anxiety related to being in school. Beside throwing tantrums and faking illnesses, children may exhibit panic attacks, crying, shyness, petulance and clinginess. These problems typically occur after a long break from school. Some children dread returning to peers, teachers and homework. To avoid being judged by peers and teachers, they want to remain in the relative safety of the home.

Some children have anxiety about their own abilities. They fear anything that tests them — softball games, quizzes and science projects. There may be other specific anxieties that lead to school phobia. One involves a fear of being separated from mother and family. It could also be worries about peer relations or public speaking.

With younger children, school phobias may be caused by **separation anxiety**. The children worry excessively about being away from their families. They fear for their life or their parents' lives. They worry that their parents might be kidnapped, killed in a car accident, or attacked by monsters. To assure themselves, children cling to parents and demand constant attention. Their high levels of anxiety cause muscle tension and stomachaches.

Although these symptoms make them feel too ill to attend school, there is no evidence of a physical illness. School phobias occur more with anxiety-prone children or depressive children with low self-confidence. However, parents may unintentionally increase the likelihood of the problem. This happens when they cater to their child's every whim, coddle and pamper them, rather than encouraging them to be more independent and solve their own problems. In extreme cases, one parent — most likely the mother — also becomes dependent on the company of the child.

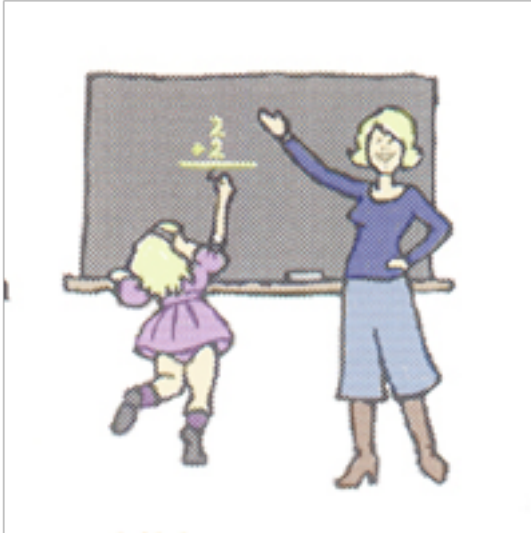
Psychologist Larazo Garcia (Miami Psychological and Behavioral Center) had a 6-year-old client with a school phobia. The boy and his mother spent their time together *"like one unit."* The boy was unwilling to attend school. His mother - single and on welfare — did not push him to go. The child had an acute fear of interacting with peers and unfamiliar adults. He was very obese, which made him feel like a misfit.

"Some children are extremely fearful of being humiliated or embarrassed. Peers' opinions are everything to them and children obsess over how others judge them."

Some school children tend to unmercifully taunt others who are different — obese or skinny, brainy or academically slow, or those with physical disabilities. The victims of this treatment can develop performance-related phobias. This could lead to fears of tests or even being asked questions in class. Their fear paralyzes them to the point where they cannot respond at all.

Garcia used **desensitization** to overcome the boy's fear of separation from his mother. He first got the boy to play with neighborhood children. Later, Garcia brought the boy to school, and they sat in class together for about 10 minutes. Their time in school was gradually increased. When the child noticed that longer separations hurt neither his mother nor himself, he adjusted to school well.

With cooperation from parents and school staff, most school phobias can be conquered.



Of course, any treatment requires the cooperation of parents, teachers and school nurses. They can encourage the child to stay in school. They can allow children to minimize their anxiety by talking about it. Breathing exercises can be used to calm the child. Parents can create regular morning routines to keep children from dwelling on their anxiety or developing school-related aches and pains.

Teachers can help by giving phobic students "[a way to shine](#)." This means they find ways to allow the children to excel, like decorating a school bulletin board. These activities can give anxious children a more positive sense of identity.

Children can be taught coping skills to deal with taunts of others. Rather than passively weeping or responding violently, children can learn to assertively respond with

eye contact and a firm voice. (On a recent television show, comedian Bill Cosby — who has a doctorate in education — added that the children should respond to all taunts with the question, "So?" Continuously repeating that response seems to catch taunters off guard.)

There are behavioral signs that can warn teachers about school phobics. These include crying in class, withdrawal from class activities, and too many visits to the school nurse. However, with a team effort among parents, teachers and psychologists, the problem can be remedied.

* Adapted from Bridget Murray's "School phobias hold many children back," [The APA Monitor](#), September, 1997, pages 38-39.