



# STAR-Center LINK

On the web at: [www.wpic.pitt.edu/research/star](http://www.wpic.pitt.edu/research/star)

Spring, 2005

As summer quickly approaches, STAR-Center would like to thank all of our readers for your continued support throughout the past year. Nearly 1,000 of you joined us for our 2005 conferences. We have begun planning next year's conferences so please let us know if you have suggested topics.

In addition to several announcements, this month's issue features an article on school refusal. We hope you find it helpful.

Please note that STAR-Center Outreach can now be reached at:

**412-687-2495**

Our new fax number is:

**412-687-2943**

Have a safe and happy summer.

-Ranisa Rubin  
*STAR-Center LINK Editor*

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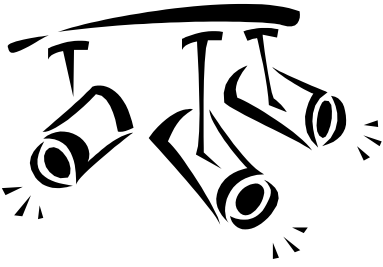
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## "My Stomach Hurts" How To Deal With School Refusal

*Mary Beth Rucki, MSN, APRN*

For as long as schools have existed, there has been the problem of kids not wanting to go to school. The purpose of this article is to provide an understanding of school refusal and offer several treatments for this serious emotional problem.

The term "school phobia" was coined in 1941 (Johnson, et al.) and was defined as "an emotional disturbance in children, associated with great anxiety, that leads to serious absence from school...a deep-seated psychoneurotic disorder... differentiated from the more frequent delinquent variety of school truancy."

Today we tend to use the terms "school avoidance" or "school refusal," which describe the behavior rather than indicating an actual disorder. In fact, school avoidance/refusal is not a recognized disorder in the psychiatric community. But it can occur in the presence of any number of recognized illnesses, most commonly various anxiety disorders or depressive disorders. In broad terms, school refusal can be defined as "child motivated refusal to attend school or difficulties remaining in school for the entire day" (Kearney and Silverman, 1996). Others define the term as a "difficulty attending school associated with emotional distress, especially anxiety and depression" (King and Bernstein,

2001). School refusal is prevalent in approximately one to five percent of all school-aged children (McShane, Walter and Rey, 2001; King and Bernstein, 2001) no matter what the gender, intelligence level, socioeconomic status, race or age of the student.

There is a variety of thought about why children and teens do not want to go to school, what exactly they are trying to avoid, and how best to deal with this. Some common problem areas that have been identified include:

1. Separation fears - Some children or teens do not want to go to school because they fear being separated from their attachment figure (usually mom or dad). They may have fears that something is going to happen to their parents while they are in school.
2. Academic difficulties - If academic difficulties are present, it is important that these be assessed and dealt with, whether through tutoring, individual education plans, or other appropriate interventions.
3. Conflict with peers - This issue also has to be dealt with directly with the school. No amount of treatment with children and teens is going to make them want to go to school if they are being harassed, teased, or bullied.

4. Specific fears related to school - This can include many things, such as fear of certain teachers or fears of being scolded, wanting to avoid certain classes (i.e., gym), various social phobias such as fears of speaking in class, eating in front of others, talking to peers, etc.

There are various treatment approaches for dealing with school refusal, though no one treatment is viewed to be the best. There are behavioral approaches (including relaxation training, contingency contracting, and exposure), cognitive therapy, family therapy, and medications. Some recent studies have shown that the use of multiple treatment strategies can be effective, especially when a return to school is the goal, and also when parent and teacher training is part of the treatment plan. How parents approach this problem has an enormous impact on whether these children and teens get back to school. Teacher support can also be extremely helpful.

One complicating factor in dealing with the problem of school refusal is that many children and teens have difficulty identifying and articulating what they are fearful of. They may not be aware of any anxiety, only stating that they do not like school or do not want to go. Often their fears can be manifested in physical symptoms, such as stomachaches, headaches, or other somatic complaints. With these patients, it is important to try to take a rehabilitative approach to treatment. That is, therapists should not promise to get rid of their pain, but rather that they will help them

function with it. The emphasis is on coping and competency. It should be noted that with these children and teens, it is essential that they have a complete physical evaluation to rule out/treat any disease process. Collaboration with the school, medical providers, and parents is extremely important.

School refusal is a problem that is stressful for children, families, and school personnel. Failing to attend school has substantial short and long-term effects on children and teens' educational, social, and emotional growth. It is crucial to identify problems early and provide appropriate interventions to prevent further difficulties.

## REFERENCES

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- King, N.J. & Bernstein, G.A. (2001). School refusal in children and adolescents: a review of the past ten years. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 40:2, 197-205.
- McShane, G., Walter, G., & Rey, J.M. (2001). Characteristics of adolescents with school refusal. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 35: 822-826.



## Online Mailing List

STAR-Center is also very pleased with the number of readers who have subscribed to our new online mailing list. If you have not already done so, please visit STAR-Center's website, <http://www.wpic.pitt.edu/research/star/>, to **sign up to receive notification each time an issue is available**. You will not receive the newsletter as an attachment. When a new edition is available, you will receive an email with a link to the online location. You can print it or read it online. We already have many subscribers, and we hope more will join us over the summer. If you have any questions or problems with subscribing or accessing the site, feel free to e-mail our web administrator at [star2@msx.upmc.edu](mailto:star2@msx.upmc.edu).

## Research Opportunities

### *Familial Pathways Study*

This family study has been funded by the NIMH (National Institute of Mental Health), and is being conducted by the University of Pittsburgh and Columbia University. This is not a treatment study, but a longitudinal study of how problems with depression and suicidal behavior may run in families. We are seeking families with a parent who may be experiencing depression currently or in the past, with at least one biological child at home who is willing to participate. All family members who participate in the study will be compensated for their time. To learn more about this study or to see if you are eligible please call 412-246-5621 or toll free at 1-888-633-2917.

### *Treatment of Adolescent Suicide Attempters*

Do you know a teenager who recently made a suicide attempt?

If you have a teenager between the ages of 12 and 18 who is depressed and has recently attempted suicide, he or she may be eligible to participate in a research study at UPMC. Participants must not be drug- or alcohol-dependent or be involved with the legal system. Female participants cannot be pregnant or breastfeeding, and they must be willing to use birth control if they are sexually active. Participants will be compensated for their time. For more information or to find out if you qualify, please call 412-246-5608 or toll free at 1-888-633-2917.

## STAR-CENTER'S WEBSITE

Our website is growing! STAR-Center is continuing to update and add to our site to provide viewers with more information. Check back regularly for new articles and presentations on the latest research in the mental health field. We will also be posting some of the presentations from this year's conferences.



Services For Teens At Risk  
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*This material is made available for educational purposes only and as part of an effort to raise general awareness of children's mental health issues. This information is not intended to be, and is not, a substitute for direct medical or psychological care based on your individual condition and circumstances or those of your child. While this site may contain descriptions of pharmacological, psychiatric and psychological treatments, such descriptions and any related materials should not be used to diagnose or treat a mental health problem without consulting a qualified mental health care provider. You are advised to consult your mental health provider about your personal questions or concerns.*

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We're on the Web!  
[www.wpic.pitt.edu/research/star](http://www.wpic.pitt.edu/research/star)

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## ***WE ARE AVAILABLE IF YOU NEED US:***

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### **WPIC Emergency Services:**

(412) 624-2000 (Available after regular business hours and on weekends and holidays)