



# MID-JERSEY PEDIATRICS

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## SCHOOL PHOBIA

### Characteristics:

- A child who misses considerable school because of vague physical symptoms.
- Commonly present with stomachaches, headaches, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, tiredness or dizziness.
- Occurs mainly in the morning and worsens at the time of departure for school.
- Child is otherwise healthy and vigorous.
- 5% of elementary-school children and 2% of middle-school children are affected.

### Causes:

A school-phobic child is usually afraid of leaving home in general. Aside from poor attendance, these children usually are good students and well behaved at school. The parents are often overly protective and close, and the child finds it difficult to separate from them. Even if there is a strict teacher, hard tests, or a bully at school, your child should still go to school while these problems are being resolved.

### Course of Action:

If daily school attendance is enforced, the problem will improve dramatically in 1 to 2 weeks. If the child is allowed to stay home, the physical symptoms will become more frequent. The longer the child stays at home, the harder it will be for him to return.

### Management:

- Insist on an immediate return to school. You must make school attendance a non-negotiable, iron-clad rule.
- Be extra firm on school mornings. If your child complains of the usual physical symptoms, he should be sent promptly to school with minimal discussion. If your child wanders home during recess or lunch, he should be sent back promptly. Crying and screaming should not be a reason to keep him out of school.
- Have your child see a physician if he stays home. If your child has a new physical symptom or seems quite sick, your physician may be able to determine the cause of his sickness. A mild cough or runny nose without fever is not a reason to keep the child out from school.
- Ask the school nurse to let your child lie down for 5 to 15 minutes in the office and regroup, rather than being sent home.
- Discuss your child's fear with him. Tell him you can appreciate how he feels, but he needs to attend school.
- After school, encourage your child to play with his peers. Consider sending him to a summer camp; it can be a turning point.