

School Phobia

While school phobia is by no means the only or even the main reason why children become home educated it is one of the reasons cited by many. School phobia is a term, which I believe needs unpacking.

School phobia is defined in the following terms:

*"School phobia (fo"be *) is an anxiety disorder of childhood and adolescence, characterised by an intense fear of going to school."*

Worldbook "Rush Presbyterian St. Luke's medical centre encyclopaedia"

We can see from this that school phobia is by definition a psychological disorder caused by anxiety. However the above article goes on to say:

"Such children may be over-dependent on their parents, shy, and emotionally immature. School phobia often reflects other problems in the child's family, such as parental alcoholism, marital conflict, anxiety, or depression."

The primary cause of the anxiety therefore is perhaps surprisingly placed not with anxiety over school but rather in the home and specifically with the parents who have created over dependent and immature children. From the evidence sent to me by parents, it appears that schools will often play down or even ignore problems relating to school. For example parents reported:

"He also came home with loads of bruises and was actually held down in the playground and stamped on and came home with a broken nose !!!!!. None of which the school told me about. One day another mother approached me and told me that she had been helping out in school and that K had been near hysterical for over an hour. The school had not approached me at all."

Another

"He was dragged around the playground and eventually stripped naked. We found out about the incident from the child, not the school. When we confronted the head about this bullying we were told that it was not bullying but harassment. It was inferred that we were making a fuss."

And yet another

"I'd say it's less a case of 'school-phobia' as stress-related illness"

The professionals then go on to attempt to accuse the parents of being behind the problem. One parent reported:

"I have had Munchausen's by proxy bandied at me, been labelled neurotic, over anxious, accused of loving B too much, of playing into his hands and so on. The emotional battering has left me punch drunk"

The definition goes on to say:

"In contrast to normal school anxieties, which tend to alleviate with time, school phobia often requires psychotherapy. The longer the time away from school, the worse the problem often becomes. It is, therefore, important to treat it aggressively, with the most immediate goal being to get the child back into the classroom as soon as possible."

The recommended treatment is aggressive and aimed rather surprisingly not at dealing with the child's needs but at the extraneously determined goal of returning the child to school.

The problem with this is that there appears to be little or no recognition of the possibility that the child's anxiety is real, rather than irrational. The child's anxiety over school is rather incoherently attributed to the home, a place s/he would apparently prefer to be than with the school, the place the child wants to avoid being. One family described it thus:

"Her self-confidence evaporated. Wouldn't anyone sane avoid this type of experience? Such avoidance is an indication of sanity and good sense!"

According to the accepted definition therefore the school and the education system bears no responsibility for school phobia which is the entire fault of the parents who are probably alcoholic, undergoing marital conflict, anxiety or depression.

In the UK the method of "treatment" varies quite widely but reports from a number of home educating parents suggest that strategies include threatening the child with their parents imprisonment or fining for their child's none attendance of school. Precisely how this is supposed to reduce anxiety isn't made clear. For example:

"We were being 'HEAVILY encouraged' to get her through the school gates - or. Apparently, the Board of Governors decision that my daughter was fit for school (they'd never met her) was sufficient evidence for the county solicitor."

Again:

"We saw the doctor and got referred for family therapy, which was not helpful, and R joined a group of other youngsters for sessions, which she said were interesting but not helpful since they were all being geared up to overcome this dislike of school. The thrust seemed to be to get them back behaving "normally" and going to school."

Inherent in the definition is the idea that such children are over dependent upon their parents. For example during an interview with a head teacher a parent reported that the head said:

"'You are very upset Mrs F. Maybe K is picking up on that and is transferring it onto school' "

This leads parents into a "catch 22" situation. When faced with problems with their child's schooling parents are left with three choices. They can either leave the problem entirely to the school to solve, take up their children's cause and assist their child find a solution by advocating him or her with the school authorities or actively support whatever action the LA advocates.



If a parent leaves it to the school then the parent is at real risk of being thought of as an uncaring parent, taken to court for allowing the child to truant and could therefore realistically expect to be fined up to several thousands of pounds or even Jailed and perhaps subjected to a parental guidance order by the courts.

If on the other hand the parent advocates the child's view then the parent is marked down as over anxious him or her self and therefore the probable cause of the anxiety in the first place. Again with this option they may find that they will be subjected to court action.

This leads me to the view that it is hardly surprising that, as the definition says, parents often exhibit:

"parental alcoholism, marital conflict, anxiety, or depression"

The only action open to the parent is to agree with the professionals, regardless of their own view and actively force the child to attend school. Dr. Monk of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Centre says that the parent must:

"Explain why children must go to school"

And

"Firmly explain that staying home from school is not an option"

This is a common reaction among educational advisors and educational psychologists in this country also, even though it is legally incorrect (as it is in Pittsburgh).

Parents describe how their relationship with their children is damaged by this advice. By recruiting the parent to coerce the child in this way the "professional" has taken away the bond of trust between the parent and child leaving the child vulnerable and the family relationships in tatters. One family described it in the following way

"Now I'm in a boat up the creek, without a paddle, as I have no idea whether the two current professionals are going to play by the legal rules or some they are making up with the LA. That leaves me not knowing if there are any questions I should be asking before the next meeting. In the meantime, my daughter and I are existing day to day, trying to regain the close bond we had before all this happened."

And another

"When we had counsellors, psychologists etc. on the case, I know that he felt himself that there was something terribly wrong with [our child]. We'd all convinced ourselves that he had some dreadful mental problem. Now we are on our own, we treat him like the normal intelligent person that he is - and he has come to realise that he is a perfectly normal person. During this entire horrible period our son became withdrawn and difficult. Life was so stressful for the whole family... Severing links with all the professionals (well meaning though they were) lifted a great weight from our shoulders. He became a different person and, though we've had good days and bad he has approached his studies fairly well. We have begun to feel 'normal' again.... The change in him has been remarkable and his confidence is slowly growing."



The professional community particularly educational psychologists have, I believe, sold out to the idea that the only place where education can take place is the school and that all other considerations, including the child's welfare, should be put firmly into second place to this notion. I even have some evidence that in some cases educational psychologists diagnose school phobia in a child from documentary evidence only without ever actually meeting the child. Thus accepting the view of the school and LA.

The profession as a whole is dominated by those with a vested interest not to question this assumption since so many educational psychiatrists are employed by the educational establishment. I believe that this exhibits professional cowardice and a stunning lack of imagination.

Behind all of this lies a problem endemic in our society. Children's voices are simply not heard. They are systematically ignored, patronised and marginalised. Labelling children who cannot stand the idea of going to a place inappropriate to their needs as irrational and exhibiting underlying psychological disorders is just another way of not taking children seriously. This needs to stop. We must start listening to children.

Whatever the cause, some parents have found a better solution, a fourth option. By withdrawing their children from school and educating them in the relaxed, positive and affirming environment of the home many parents have rediscovered the trusting relationships they once had with their children.

"Home Educating has been an unmitigated success for K. We are semi-autonomous and he is always asking for more things to do. He is hungry about knowledge and is extremely adept at applying new-found information. The change in him has been remarkable, many people have commented on it. He has had two friends from school desperate to keep in touch and he is able to confidently phone and arrange things now,.. He is able to mix better with unknown children and can coherently explain why he does/doesn't want to do something. He will question adults and will happily chat away to people in the street/shops, which is a big step forward. I only wish I had not left it so long to home educate."

Another said

"Our [child] has improved tremendously. But, there's a long way to go. Still, when I recall the stress and tears and despair of a few months ago, life seems almost heavenly."

Home educating parents report that their children eventually recover from their encounter with the "caring professions" and go on to become socially adept individuals.

The above examples (which are just a tiny proportion of the examples sent to me) represent far too widespread experiences to be called isolated examples of bad practice. The commonly accepted definition of school phobia encourages schools to play on the already insecure feelings of the parents of children in distress. Schools distance themselves from responsibility and blame. Parents who react negatively to this process are blamed for the behaviour and labelled over anxious or uncaring, whichever is deemed to fit the bill.

To correct the unjust and medically suspect treatment of these children I would recommend the following



- 1) Children's wishes should be taken seriously rather than labelled irrational.
- 2) It is time the term school phobia was abandoned and the less pejorative and more accurate term school refusal (or some similar term) was adopted.
- 3) Schools should look at the events in school which led up to the refusal and should take seriously their own duty of care.
- 4) It should be recognised that school is not the best learning environment for all.
- 5) The cosy relationship between educational psychology and LA's should be ended.

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All the examples of parents writing has come from real parents of real children who have been labelled school phobic. I have removed their names for anonymity.