

School Refusal

by Yvonne Scott-Frasor

School Refusal – two simple little words but they carry so much weight within the school environment. I hadn't ever anticipated this being used to describe my bright, humorous, playful son. For personal reasons, way too long-winded to go into here and probably not what I'd do with hindsight, my son had been away from me during the day from about eighteen months: first with a lovely childminder and then at a small private school from the age of three. For family reasons he moved into the local school at seven and settled very well. It was just prior to the SATS fiasco and his form teacher was of the 'old-school' and had a strong relationship with all her students.

During the last two years at primary school I began to notice that my son was always 'complaining'. Someone had said this, done that, he'd been kicked, thumped, and didn't want to go to school anymore. I tried to deal with each thing as it happened but it was so frustrating – the school were telling me one thing, my son another and who was I to believe? I'm not one of those mothers who think their children can do absolutely no wrong – although I think he would have had a better time of it if I was – but neither could I see what he hoped to gain from making up stories. He'd always been happy at school, loved learning new things.

The first rumblings of discontent on the part of my son came with the arrival of two new teachers to the school, both of whom he would spend a year of his school life with. They were both probably well-intentioned and pleasant enough people but unfortunately we just didn't hit it off. At the end of 1999 my son's father and I finally split up and within a month my mother had died. Everyone, without exception (until I put them right) put down my son's change of behaviour and temperament to the split between me and his father. I knew, however, that it was the loss of his Grandma that he was finding the most difficult to deal with. Life at home was much more settled and relaxed and we really enjoyed each other's company.

In his second to last year at primary school I had a few meetings with the Head teacher and my son's form teacher to discuss his behaviour – it took three of these meetings before I discovered that in order to gain some peace and quiet, in a class that this new teacher was having difficulty controlling, my son had found it worked to his advantage to be awkward, going so far as to refuse to do anything, and then being sent to the library to work. I don't think it went down too well when I pointed out that they were actually reinforcing his 'unacceptable behaviour' by rewarding him with the peace and quiet he sought.

So we muddled along, through the final year, with the dreaded SATS doing untold damage to all the children and I looked towards secondary school with some trepidation.

At the time I was working at the local secondary school in an admin capacity so knew most of the staff and the general set-up. My son's head of year was a friend outside of school too so I was hopeful that he would have a lot of help to settle in. Sadly this was not the case. There was a lot of bullying and I seemed to be constantly called upon to 'sort things out' by staff in the reception office, only to be then told by his form teacher that it didn't help that I was always 'sticking my nose in'. It was a no-win situation and after having to take him out of school for a week because of the bullying I decided to seek employment elsewhere thinking this might help matters.

I have to say at this time I was being swayed by the powers that be: Form Tutor, Head of Year, Pastoral Support etc conspired to make me think that my son:

- had attachment problems
- needed to toughen up a bit

- was attention seeking
- was developing school phobia

I tried very hard to work with the school, as they were asking; threatened my son with every sanction I could imagine to get him to school and saw our relationship falling apart to the point that he would hardly speak to me.

The summer holiday loomed so I booked all my holiday and we had a week with friends in London at the beginning of August and a week together at home at the end of the summer break with me working part-time in between. Even friends noticed how sullen and unhappy my son appeared, hardly ever laughing and very rarely even smiling.

For the few weeks that I worked part-time he spent a lot of time on his computer building a webpage and I was very impressed with his efforts and the fact that he wanted to share what he was doing with me. That hadn't happened for a long time. During the last week we had a lot of fun together, went round the galleries in town, shopping and trips to the cinema and we talked! I realised that inside my son still existed, I hadn't lost him; he had a wicked sense of humour, a fantastic laugh and was very bright.

Naturally we talked about the return to school but I think, without realising it, I'd already decided that if things carried on from the last year I was taking him out. I hadn't worked out what I was going to do about work etc, but there was no way I was losing my son to this awful 'system'.

Within a week he'd had his wrist broken and after being pushed around whilst wearing the temporary cast I became the 'mother from hell' and we entered a downward spiral. I was always in meetings or excusing him from school and floundering.

The decision to remove him came from a conversation with his Head of Year who said "I've spoken to the Deputy Head, there's nothing more we can do, he suggests you take him to your GP if he's having trouble coming into school and we can refer to Education Welfare."

I knew about home education and had by now joined EO so had the book! For me the hurdle was what to do about work. I was only in my first six months of the job and was anxious about 'rocking the boat'. Luckily I had a lovely boss who was very understanding, supportive and willing to reduce my hours. I'd spent time researching school refusal/phobia which had led me to Mike Fortune-Wood's website. Light bulb moment; there was absolutely nothing wrong with my son. He was reacting exactly as I would to a situation that was intolerable.

I decided to ask my son how he would like his days to be. His answer was 'like the summer holidays, when we do all the interesting stuff.' So I explained about home education and we agreed to give it a try. After all, it couldn't be worse than the past few years.

He was deregistered towards the end of 2002. It was a life-changing day and now we celebrate that day. By Christmas my son was smiling and was much more relaxed. Sadly I couldn't say the same for myself, I was now into a long and drawn out saga with the LEA who threatened me with a School Attendance Order. I gave up work and it took me far longer to 'de-school' than it did my son, but I got there in the end.

March 2003 found us sitting outside on the swing seat in some unusually warm weather. I was reading Bill Bryson newspaper articles to him. He was laughing out loud and then, because he was laughing so much he was crying, a magical moment! The anxious, tearful, moody, difficult young man had slipped away to reveal the son I knew I had and thankfully had not been lost for good.

The first six months were probably lost, fretting over what I thought he ought to be learning and doing. Gradually I began to relax and 'go with the flow'. I was surprised by how much he was interested in and how articulate he was when describing something he had seen, done or read.

Suffice it to say following his interests has been exciting, enjoyable and extraordinary. Most importantly he's developed at his own pace without peer pressure or needing to conform.

Now, he's 16, he's often out and about with friends and I'm learning to take more of a backseat. He's given his permission to quote the phrases he used about himself when writing to his tutor on one of the courses he's doing:

- Interactive Game-Player Extraordinaire
- Night Owl
- Any colour, as long as it's black
- Everything should be done to music

The answer is 42