

SCHOOL-AGE & BIG KID 5+ years

class wars

If your child suddenly begs to stay home, you can figure out what else is going on.

by JENNIFER MANN, Psy.D., author of *The A to Z Guide to Raising Happy, Confident Kids*

A FEW years ago, a mom came to me because her daughter, Lola, was having tantrums and refusing to go to school. She couldn't understand why—Lola seemed to love her teacher and friends and had been enjoying first grade. After some digging, I found out that Lola had recently been home with the flu, where she got extra TLC from her mom and watched as much TV as she wanted. When she had to go back to class, she started throwing fits—she'd realized it was more fun to stay home!

Trying to avoid school by faking sickness, crying and clinging to you, or protesting getting out of pajamas, is very common at this age. It's often just a small step backward in your child's natural progression toward independence, but it can sometimes be a sign of anxiety issues. Whatever the cause, there are many strategies you can use to get her back to school.

➔ Recognize his fears.

We think kindergarten and the early grades are low-key, but for kids, school is hard work! Following rules and practicing new skills takes energy and effort. So if your child just had a relaxing winter break, when he got to eat his favorite foods and cuddle all morning with you—or even if he was home sick, like Lola—he may decide that he'd rather be at home than work hard back at school.

Also, starting at age 5, there's a natural spike in anxiety as children begin to understand that we are

vulnerable. No matter how stable their life is, kids may develop fears about death, injury, or losing a parent—especially if something scary is on the news. They may worry while at school that something bad can happen to their parents—or to themselves—and they won't be there to protect each other. Kids enjoy their new independence at this age, but they're also scared of it.

➔ Reduce the fun factor.

As Lola's parents found, sometimes children want to skip school simply because home is a better place to be. The solution is to make staying home from school boring! When your child complains of a headache in the morning, assess whether she's actually sick. If there's no fever, vomiting, or other telltale signs, try to get her to go to school. You can say, "Let's just try. I can always come pick you up later," since getting her out the door is half the battle. On days when she does stay home, of course you should take care of her, but don't give her any screen time or treats. Once she knows that a sick day isn't a play day, she'll likely be eager to return to class.

➔ Suss out the situation.

Your child may be concerned about a specific problem, from the bus to a bully, but can't quite express or understand what he wants to avoid. If he says he doesn't want to go to school because of a tummy ache, try

to help him connect the dots by saying, "You know, sometimes my tummy hurts when I'm worried about being late. But if I think about how to be on time, my tummy usually stops hurting. What are you worried about?" You might find out a kid is being mean to him in class or he's afraid he'll get taken like he saw on the news. If he isn't able to verbalize what's wrong, ask his teacher.

Once you find the real problem, talk to his teacher (or school counselor), especially if the issue is bullying, about solutions. Often, a bit of extra attention from his teacher—perhaps coming in early to read and talk with her—can work wonders. It may also help to keep a lovey or a picture of your family in your child's cubby.

➔ Address deeper problems.

If your child constantly resists going to school, is so distraught that she can't stop crying, or shows other signs of anxiety like nightmares or a fear of being left alone, ask your pediatrician about seeing a therapist who focuses on childhood anxiety.

Another mom I know realized something was wrong when her daughter was in first grade. Annie had always worried about saying or doing the wrong thing but managed in kindergarten with a nurturing teacher. In first grade, however, her anxiety became so bad she tried peeing herself, hoping her clothes would be too wet to go to school. After two years of therapy, Annie is making a lot of progress and doing well in school.

Keep in mind that being in a new grade is a big step—and a step backwards often accompanies a developmental leap. Empower your child by saying, "This may be a little scary, but you're capable of handling it!" Knowing she can overcome her problems may be one of the most important lessons she ever learns in or out of school. ✖