

Listen To Your Child

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I'm an [early childhood educator](#) and I've spent my career listening to children. But I'm also a mom, and sometimes, when it comes to my three teenage sons, I find it almost impossible to listen openly as I do every day in the classroom. When children get older, life gets more complicated and opinions get stronger on both sides. But as tension builds, that's when we have to force ourselves to listen, to be open to the wisdom forged in the crucible of love between parent and child. I learned this lesson the hard way when my 11-year-old started refusing to go to school.

When my third son was 11, he attended the honors program in our local public middle school—in a neighborhood people select because the public schools are good. He came home one day in April and announced that he'd never return, it was “uncivilized” and there was nothing I could do to make him go. He spent two months at home. I'd never been more terrified, or angrier at a school. Son of dedicated early childhood educator refuses to go to school? How? Why? What to do? Was it my fault?



In my panic and embarrassment, I turned to the internet. It turns out that school refusal is not uncommon in children, particularly for ages 5-6 and 10-11, and that it is often a symptom of a larger problem—anxiety about separation, depression, stress related to school incidents like bullying, etc. In other words, a school refuser isn't necessarily a truant, or defiant, or oppositional. These children struggle and suffer, and although there's no diagnosis as a mental disorder, there are psychological hurdles that need to be overcome to facilitate a happy return.

In the field of early childhood, if a child has severe anxiety about entering the classroom over time, we start to wonder whether the child is struggling to learn. Is school hard for him and specifically what poses the challenge? I had been asking my son's teachers all year long, do you think something is wrong? Should I get him evaluated? The answers were consistent if vague. “He has good days and bad days.” “He's selective.” And of course, the ever-helpful: “Maybe he's distracted by your divorce.” No one indicated an academic problem. No one suggested turning over every stone to figure this out.

From April to June he stayed home. Every morning I'd wake him up, beg him to go, and watch him fall back asleep as I left for work. No one from the school called, no teachers came to the door (we lived across the street from school), and I never heard from the principal. He was invisible even in his suffering, and I was alone on this island of aberrance. No wonder he didn't want to attend.

Finally, I got him evaluated which was the first step in our healing. We learned that there were vast discrepancies in his abilities, with incredible strengths and significant weaknesses, the kind of learner who's smart enough to say, “hey, I'm really smart so why the hell can't I do this? What's wrong with me?” Aside from understanding how my son learns, and what he needs, the evaluator pointed out that he simply couldn't return to that school. I needed to listen to him and find him another place, a smaller place, one that focuses on nurturing children back to full participation.

At that point I hired an excellent education lawyer, one who knows the ins and outs of schools for struggling kids, and

how to win a case against the Department of Education (DOE) in New York City. The following September my son was placed in an appropriately small, supportive setting where smart kids, many of them school refusers, come to get back on their feet. The following spring we won our case and the \$50,000 tuition was covered by the DOE.

This story could have taken a very different turn. If I hadn't listened to my son, and I'd insisted that he return to the school, fighting with him, seeing the flaw in him rather than the system, he would be a very different person and I would be a very sorry mother. As an educator, I knew enough to know that there had to be underlying issues, both emotional and educational. I had knowledge, I had resources, and I had confidence in my kid. It was hard for me to find a path out, so imagine how hard it is for most parents who face this problem.

Two years later, as we begin high school, he's asking to return to a general education setting. "I can handle a regular, big high school mom." Of course I'm hesitant that a large setting might bring him back to school refusal. But I have to listen and trust that he knows what he can handle. I'm excited for him to begin a new chapter. Hopefully, he'll get into his high school of choice, one that sees his school refusal as educationally and personally significant, an asset in the real world.

Looking back, I respect his school refusal so much. He actively fought to get himself out of an unhealthy situation. He didn't let himself be limited by a system where the adults insist children attend school no matter what, just because. Good for him.

Let me be frank. This experience scared me to death. And when I look back on it I continue to feel broken-hearted that the school didn't care. I thought I would get arrested for allowing my son to stay home. But there was no choice in it. I couldn't physically force him to go to school so I had to listen. By not accepting the status quo, I was able to validate my son's personhood which was more important than any school record. When a child votes with his feet, even if he can't tell you why, you have to stop and listen even if it's not what you want to hear.

If you should find yourself facing school refusal, follow these steps:

- Be proactive.
- Pay for a full psychoeducational evaluation, a private one, not through the DOE.
- Get legal advice and if your lawyer thinks you will win a DOE case, find the right school. Even if it is summer, don't assume you can't find a place.
- Have the evaluator and the lawyer work together on your DOE case, including the writing of the evaluation that is formally submitted.
- Shop around for an appropriate alternative setting. If you can't afford to lay out the \$50,000 for a year in a small private setting, find a school that will accept you on a payment plan until you win your DOE case.

Move forward knowing that with your help the situation is temporary, highly stressful, but temporary. Have faith in the child above all else.

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