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"I Hate School!"

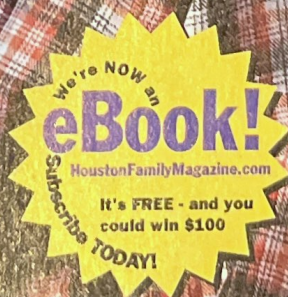
What to Do When
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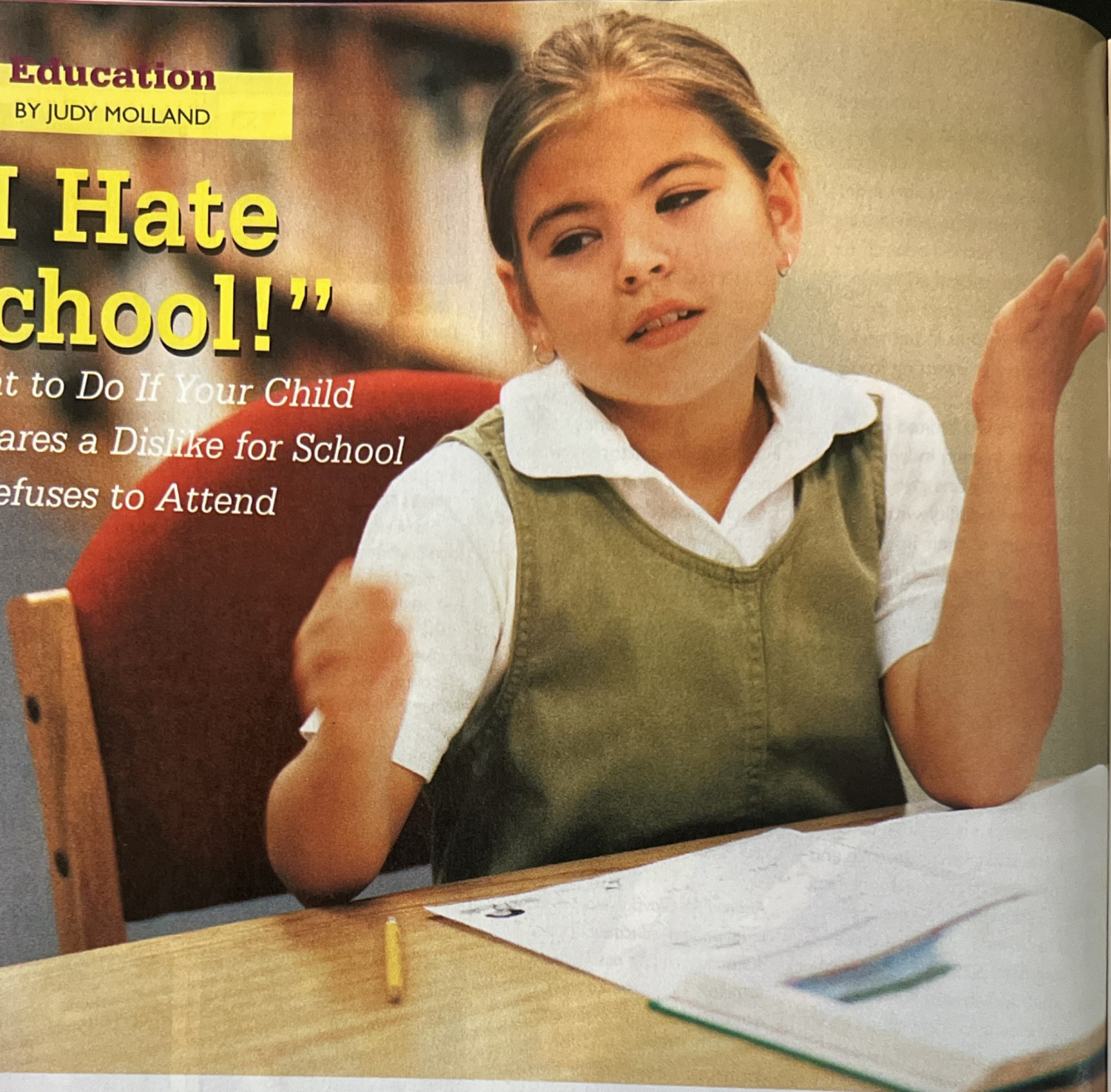
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"I Hate School!"

What to Do If Your Child Declares a Dislike for School or Refuses to Attend



"Mom! I don't feel good!" your child yells from the bathroom, where she has closeted herself for the past 15 minutes. It's 7 a.m., and you have to get yourself and your two children out the door by 7:20, or the day will be a disaster. Worse, it's the third time this month your child has complained of a stomachache. What's going on?

Most children complain about school once in a while. But about 5 percent of kids dislike school so much that they refuse to attend. Christopher Kearney, director of the

Most kids complain about school occasionally. But some children simply dread school, and while their reasons may vary, there's plenty that parents and teachers can do to help.

Child School Refusal Clinic at the University of Nevada - Las Vegas, says the most common incidence occurs among young children going to school for the first time.

Parents can do a lot to allay this fear, says Jerlean Daniel, deputy executive director of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). First, Daniels suggests, consider whether you are inadvertently putting pressure on your child. Second, in the case of first-timers' fears, it's often help-

ful to take your child to school ahead of time. That way, he or she can get to know the building, the teachers and even the route to school. In most cases, first-timer's fears subside within a few days.

But if your child continues to consistently express a dislike for school or refuses to attend, Kearney recommends taking the child to a doctor for a thorough checkup. A physician may be able to pinpoint other reasons for your child's anxiety or

determine if there's a health problem involved.

Problems at School

While some kids are terrified of setting foot inside the school door, your child may be one of those who's been there for a while, but announces one day, out of the blue, that she hates school. Here are some possible reasons for this outburst, along with strategies to help you and your child move forward in a positive way:

• Learning Issues –

When your child declares a hatred for school, it could be that she is having trouble learning. It's also possible that she is bored at school, because she is underchallenged, or underachieving.

"Whatever the reason, make that appointment with her teacher to determine what is going on," says psychologist Harvey Mandel, co-author of *Could Do Better: Why Children Underachieve and What to Do About It*. Mandel also advises getting your child's hearing and vision checked if you suspect a problem. A child may not be able to read the board or hear the teacher clearly enough and not even realize it.

• A Teacher Problem

– Perhaps your child hates school because of bad chemistry with his teacher. There may be a simple solution: "Having the teacher and child sit down for lunch together can often improve the relationship," notes Carole Kennedy, former president of the National Association of Elementary School Principals. Every child wants his teacher to like him, and if he doesn't feel that, he won't be able to learn well. In the worst-case scenario, you can look into moving your child to a different classroom.

• **Bullying** – A sudden reluctance to go to school or ride the bus, along with a declaration of hating school, could indicate that your child is being bullied. If you suspect this, find a private opportunity to talk to your child about it, advises Bob Chase, author of *The New Public School Parent*. And if your child is so

upset that she refuses to go into much detail, try talking to her friends, their parents or your child's teacher. Contact school officials immediately if you discover that your instincts are accurate. Most schools now have a zero-tolerance policy on bullying and will act quickly to try to resolve the problem.

• **Loneliness** – It may be that your child hates school because he feels he has no friends. David Underwood wondered why his fourth-grade son disliked school so much, so he decided to sneak in and watch him one day. To his surprise and dismay, he saw his son skirting the edge of the playground at recess and sitting alone in the school cafeteria at lunch.

"Speak to your child's teacher about this," urges psychologist Nancy Flowers. "There are a lot of things teachers can do."

Parents can help too by encouraging their child to participate in school clubs or activities and by inviting over peers with whom the child feels comfortable.

The Pressure Is On!

Rather than one individual issue, a child who develops a hatred for school may be responding to the growing pressure of simply being a student. Test anxiety has become far more prevalent over the past few years with the increase in high-stakes, standardized testing, particularly in the early grades. As a result, educators worry that many children who used to love school are growing to hate it.

Seventh-grader Lauren Schwartz is one of these students. "We spend half

Resources

Books

• **Could Do Better: Why Children Underachieve and What to Do About It**, by Harvey P. Mandel and Sander I. Marcus, Jossey-Bass, 1996.

• **The New Public School Parent**, by Bob Chase with Bob Katz, Penguin Books, 2002.

• **What Happened to Recess and Why Are Our Children Struggling in Kindergarten?** by Susan Ohanian, McGraw Hill, 2002.

Web Sites

• **KidsHealth Web site of the Nemours Foundation** –

www.kidshealth.org/kid – Offers numerous resources for parents and kids on a variety of health issues, including test anxiety.

• **National Association for the Education of Young Children** – www.naeyc.org – Provides information for parents, with particular focus on the quality of educational services for all children from birth through age 8.

• **The National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest)** – www.fairtest.org – Works to end the misuses and flaws of standardized testing.

the year getting ready to take these dumb tests," she complains, "just so we can get to the next test, and the next test. I want to enjoy school, but there's no time to do that anymore."

Lauren lives in one of the states where students are required to take standardized tests every year from second through 11th grade.

To counteract the academic pressures that students face, Daniel urges parents to reassure their children. "Parents play a really important role," she says, advising us to talk our children through their nervousness about tests, helping them to stay calm – in effect becoming the child's coach.

Some parents have even taken their involvement a step further. "High Stakes Are For Tomatoes" reads the slogan created by parent and teacher Susan Harman, and now used on Web sites across the country. In many states, parents are organizing to question the reliance on high-stakes standardized tests to measure both chil-

dren's and schools' abilities. (For more information on this movement, check out the Assessment Reform Network of FairTest, an organization that works to end what it sees as the misuses and flaws of standardized testing, at www.fairtest.org).

Keep Talking

Ultimately, parents and teachers are in the best position to help a child who doesn't like school. Talk with your child about why school has become unpleasant, and keep talking. Meet with the teacher and work together to try to change the child's attitude, to make both learning and the classroom an exciting place to be.

As Maria Montessori, founder of the Montessori education philosophy, once said, "One test of the correctness of educational procedure is the happiness of the child."

Judy Molland is the education editor for *United Parenting Publications*.