

Why Johnny doesn't want to go to School

My independent five-year-old didn't want me to take her to school her first day of kindergarten. Instead, she rode the large yellow school bus with the rabbit sticker plastered on the side, identifying it from the long row of identical buses that would soon line the long circular drive behind the school. I followed in my SUV rapidly snapping pictures of the back of the bus, and then the side of the bus, as it made each turn, not wanting to miss a single detail of this momentous occasion.

Katy stepped off the bus flanked on each side by her closest friends, Holly and Sarah. The threesome had lived on the same cul-de-sac since the age of two and now they embraced this new adventure called kindergarten together.

Mrs. Higgs greeted each student at her classroom door and without the least hesitation; Katy turned and waved good-bye. It was that simple. By mid-morning, Katy told her teacher matter-of-factly, "I'm ready to go home now." When Mrs. Higgs informed Katy that she would be at school for the day, Katy burst into tears. The transition that first week of school was not the self-confident image Katy had exhibited as she boldly left for school her first day. Katy struggled with separation from the safe, secure, steady environment of home. School days passed quickly with fascinating science units, field trips, and the joys of learning to read, write and count to 100- followed by a long, active, summer of swimming, bicycling, and playing with friends.

The next fall, Katy's first grade teacher was young, pretty, and kind-hearted. A homey setting with a rocking chair on a large circular rug, and a basket filled with books warmed the classroom. Each day after lunch, the children gathered on the rug encircling the teacher as she sat on the rocker and read stories. And every day Katy wailed, "I want to go home." Her crying was so disruptive the teacher asked the school counselor for help. She sat in the classroom with Katy and then took Katy to her office. She read her the book, "The Kissing Hand" by Audrey Penn about a little raccoon that did not want to go to school because he would miss his mother.

In the story, Mrs. Raccoon shared a secret that had been passed to her by her mother. As she pressed a kiss into Chester Raccoon's palm he felt his mother's kiss rush from his hand, up his arm and into his heart. This special kiss would not wash off and would be with him throughout the day and if he missed his mother he simply put his palm to his cheek. As Chester stood and thoughtfully looked at the front of his school, he suddenly turned and told his mother, "Give me your hand." He leaned forward and kissed her palm.

For the remainder of first grade, each morning Katy opened our front door, paused, held up her palm, and I kissed it. Then I held out my hand and she gave my palm a kiss. This reassuring ritual provided Katy the courage to make it through the day.

There are numerous articles about why Johnny can't read or write, but what about why Johnny doesn't want to go to school? Child psychologist Cathy Gattuso said, "Some apprehension is natural the first few days of school. Beyond the first week may indicate your child is having difficulty transitioning into the new environment. You don't want to get into a habit of taking a child out of school because of stomachaches and other ailments."

Steve Hamman, former Assistant Director of Special Education for Austin ISD has experienced dealing with a student's individual needs professionally and personally.

He and wife Kathie who is also a licensed professional counselor met with their child's principal and counselor. Their child struggles with anxiety and panic attacks which has been a lifelong impairment. They suggest parents request a meeting right away to express concerns and to develop a plan of action. "A plan for our child involved her starting her day in the counselor's office for a period of several weeks that involved a transition plan to the classroom."

Symptoms of separation anxiety will typically resurface after a long holiday or summer break. Through trial and error, Steve and Kathie developed strategies and interventions that worked for their child. Their daughter wrote a note to herself the night before school to reaffirm that the next day was going to be a good day.

"As a [young] child we found it wasn't very effective to talk through the challenges but better to implement interventions. Talking through situations before, during and after events has become more important in the teen years."

"We sought out a therapist who specializes in anxiety disorders and had experience with children. We found it really important to check with several sources and highly recommend selecting someone who has been recommended by someone the family trusts."

When a child is having difficulty attending school, Cathy Gattuso and the Hammans suggest seeking professional help for the child and parent or primary caregiver.

Cathy Gattuso is a Licensed Social Worker in Austin, TX. Steve Hamman is the Special Education Program Specialist and Monitor for Texas Education Agency and Adjunct Professor, Department of Special Education at the University of Texas. He is the former Asst. Director of Special Education Austin ISD. Kathie Hamman is a Licensed Professional Counselor and Licensed Chemical Dependency Counselor at Northwest Counseling and Wellness Center, Austin, Texas and the Former Program Manager, LifeSteps of Williamson County, Substance Abuse Prevention Agency.