



BETTER TOGETHER:

A BACK TO SCHOOL GUIDE FOR PARENTS/GUARDIANS

The Mental Health Association of Monmouth County recognizes the beginning of the school year brings relief as well as apprehension. Some students may embrace the structure of a school day while other students may chafe at what they feel are overwhelming rules and responsibilities. As parents or guardians, you can probably already anticipate how your child is going to react to the summer break ending.

This guide addresses some of the concerns raised by parents and guardians during our work throughout Monmouth County schools. You can also find more information about local resources available to you and your family.

WHY PARENTING MATTERS:

Parents and guardians are the primary influencers in shaping a child's character, values, and attitudes. Experience teaches us this can be a challenging task, but it is not one we have to undertake alone.

On the final pages of this guide, you will find a list of local resources that can provide further support.

Asking for help is a sign of effective and good parenting - a skill we can pass to our children.

IS THERE ANYTHING I CAN DO IF MY CHILD REFUSES TO GO TO SCHOOL?

School avoidance or refusal is common, especially with elementary and middle school students. Even children with no record of attendance issues can suddenly create multiple reasons why they should stay home.

A mental health day here or there may not sound like something to worry about, though parents and guardians should be careful of encouraging school absences as patterns may emerge quickly.



If your child is starting to protest against going to class, what can you do?

Be proactive. Try these steps below.

1. If your child complains about physical symptoms (e.g., stomach- or headaches), take them for an evaluation by your family doctor. This demonstrates your child's distress is important, but these complaints are likely a reflection of their emotional distress. It's important to rule out that nothing physical is going on.

2. Talk with your child about why they may not want to go to school. You might find their reasons are rooted in fear:

- Something may happen to you or another family member.
- School performance.
- Another student or teacher.

3. Listen to their response. Your initial reaction may be to assure them their fears are unfounded, but we do not recommend this. Validate your child by acknowledging their fears may be immobilizing.

4. Assure your child that you want to help them work through their fears so they can get back to regular school attendance.

5. Let someone at your child's school know what's going on. A collaborative relationship can make things easier. If you need some type of academic accommodation, such as a schedule change, the sooner the school is involved, the easier it may be to obtain the support your child needs.

6. Shift your behavior. Experts reinforce a step-by-step approach that starts with you.


- **Stay firm.** Do not yield to morning complaints about physical symptoms. Asking "How are you feeling today?" can lead to further problems. Be matter of fact: the day is starting, and your child needs to be ready for school.
- **Avoid prolonged goodbyes.** A simple "Have a good day!" avoids opportunities to rehash reasons for school avoidance.
- If your child stays home, do not make it a vacation day.

7. If your child's refusal to go to school has been going on for some time, consider a gradual reentry process:

- Get dressed for school.
- Get dressed and drive by the school.
- Get dressed, drive by the school, and sit in the parking lot.
- Attend a class or stay for a half day.

8. School reintroduction is a gradual process that might include small reinforcements, such as increased play time, to encourage your child to meet their attendance goals.

9. At any point during this process, it might be helpful to consult with a mental health professional, especially if your child's worries worry you. School attendance is critical to your child's development, but refusal can escalate quickly. The sooner you identify the problem, the easier the solution may be.



MY CHILD SEEMS TO HAVE INCREASED ANXIETY. HOW CAN I HELP?

Panic attacks are like a false alarm in your body's early-warning system. Although they are not dangerous, they can feel scary.

Panic attacks are unexpected episodes of severe anxiety, and the individual experiencing them has the perception they must face or do something they are unprepared for. The body responds by setting off a fight, flight, or freeze response that includes physical and psychological symptoms.

The physical symptoms can include faintness or dizziness, shortness of breath, hyperventilation, stomach upset or nausea, heart palpitations, and fluctuations in body temperature.

There are lots of reasons your child may be experiencing panic attacks, and a consultation with a mental health

professional may be the most efficient way to figure out their challenges.

What is important, however, is knowing how to respond when your child has a panic attack. Consider the steps below:

Remain calm. Your child probably feels out of control, so your ability to remain in control can be reassuring.

Encourage and demonstrate deep breathing. You can find tips online that review deep breathing, but the simplest technique is inhaling from your abdomen to the count of three, then slowly exhaling for three seconds. A change in rhythm signals the brain to relax. After all, the brain is the source of those anxious symptoms.

Develop distracting strategies. Other distracting strategies can work because they redirect the brain's attention to something else. Try activities that engage one of the five senses, including:

- Exercise
- Healthy eating
- Playing a game
- Speaking to someone
- Bathing
- Changing location
- Engaging pets

If your child experiences panic attacks at school, work with them to create a list of distractors they can do in the classroom. A school counselor can help and provide a safe space if the symptoms become too overwhelming.

Seeking professional help can also give you and your child more tools to manage and prevent panic attacks.



WHEN SHOULD I SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP FOR MY CHILD?

Think about your child's physical health. When is a visit to a doctor or a dentist necessary?

Intervention for emotional changes works the same. If you notice a change in your child's behavior, mood, or appearance, consider the following:

- Ask questions. "I've noticed you don't seem like yourself. You're not eating as much, you have lower energy, and you're picking fights. How are you doing?"
- Be clear with your observations. We may shorthand our concerns with statements such as "I'm worried about you." Give specific examples of the behaviors that are concerning you.
- Listen to your child. If they say anything that's vague, ask for clarification. "I understand you are feeling depressed. What does that mean for you?"
- Acknowledge their concerns and do not minimize their distress. For example, avoid statements such as "You'll feel better after a good night's sleep."
- Ask if there is anything you can do to support them. They may be able to provide suggestions. They may not.

If you have **any** concerns that your child may be thinking of taking their own life, **you must** ask the question: "When people feel the way you've just described, sometimes they think life isn't worth living. Have you ever had those thoughts?"

Listen to their response. If they say "Yes," remain calm. Even if they deny suicidal feelings, you must keep this on your radar.

At this point, you may decide you want professional help to address your child's emotional changes. This approach is comparable to when a child experiences physical symptoms and you are not sure how to help them feel better.



Monmouth County Resources

The following resources are Monmouth County specific and may fit the needs of your child and your family.

New Jersey Children's System of Care (CSOC)

The New Jersey Children's System of Care (CSOC) is a division of the New Jersey Department of Children and Families. CSOC provides support to youth with behavioral health or developmental disability diagnoses regardless if they are involved with child protective services. It also provides coordinated access to substance use treatment services for eligible youth.

PerformCare contracts with the State of New Jersey's Department of Children and Families to facilitate residents' access to publicly funded services for youth up to age 21 through the statewide New Jersey Children's System of Care (CSOC). PerformCare provides a family-centered, community-focused single point of entry for New Jersey's eligible children and families to obtain available behavioral health, substance use treatment, and developmental disability services. PerformCare can be reached 24/7 at (877) 652-7624.

Specific services offered through CSOC:

- **Mobile Response and Stabilization Services (MRSS)** If your child is in crisis and experiencing escalating emotional/behavioral health symptoms, PerformCare can send a clinician to your home or to an agreed upon location in the community within an hour to help stabilize the situation and offer additional services, as needed. PerformCare can also help you locate the nearest psychiatric screening center or contact emergency services.

- **BioPsychoSocial (BPS) Assessment** A one-time, in-home assessment that is completed by an independently licensed clinician and, upon completion, submitted to PerformCare for review and determination of appropriate behavioral health services. A BPS may be offered if a youth has no current treatment provider and if the youth has moderate-to-severe emotional/behavior health concerns that do not require immediate assistance through MRSS.
- **Care Management Organization (CMO)** A higher level of behavioral health service that CSOC provides for youth ages 5-21 who are displaying/experiencing significant emotional and behavioral health concerns that place them at risk of removal from the home or psychiatric hospitalization. CMO has the ability to connect your family to in-home or out-of-home services if needed. These intensive, therapeutic services work to stabilize youth and allow them to remain safely in the home and community.
- **Outpatient Therapy** Provided by a licensed professional in an office or clinical setting. This type of therapy can be tailored to the needs of the youth and include individual, group and family sessions based on the presenting problem.

Family Crisis Intervention Unit (FCIU)

The Family Crisis Intervention Unit (FCIU) at the Mental Health Association of Monmouth County provides services to youth ages 10-17.

FCIU provides the family with a Crisis Clinician, who reports to the child's home within 24-hours of referral. An assessment is conducted, and family therapy and support are provided. Additionally, the Crisis Clinician may refer the child/adolescent to receive one-on-one support from a Wraparound Therapist who would meet with the child. Wraparound services can be conducted at the Mental Health Association of Monmouth County offices, in a child's home, in the community, or in the child's school.

FCIU referrals are accepted from both school staff and directly from parents or other community agencies. FCIU supports youth in struggling with mental and emotional wellness, parent/child conflict, school avoidance, and juvenile justice concerns. FCIU can be reached at (732) 542-6422. Parents may also access the 24-hour hotline at (732) 996-7645.

Psychiatric Emergency Screening Service (PESS)

Should your child need an immediate assessment for risk to self or others, the child clinicians at Monmouth Medical Center are sometimes able to coordinate visits to your home or via telehealth to help reduce the fear and anxiety associated with bringing your child to a psychiatric emergency room. These clinicians will screen your child for risk and make appropriate recommendations or suggestions for treatment. This may include outpatient therapy, group programs, case management organizations, intensive outpatient programming, Partial Hospitalization or hospitalization.

Monmouth Medical Center is a state-designed emergency screening service for Monmouth County. Crisis intervention, stabilization, mobile outreach, crisis hotline, and family crisis services are provided. Services can be accessed through the Emergency Department or by calling the crisis hotline at (732) 923-6999.

Other Types of Mental Health Support Programs

Other programs for families, children and adolescents include:

- Private Practitioners
- Group Programs
- Intensive Outpatient Programs (IOPs)
- Partial Hospitalization Programs

Parents who notice a change in their child or need additional support may seek out therapy from private practitioners, including licensed counselors, social workers, psychologists, or psychiatrists. Some therapists may be contracted through your insurance, while others may be entirely out of network. Your school may already have a list of private practitioners in your area who specialize in your area of concern.

Group therapy may also be beneficial to your child, especially if they are struggling with grief, anxiety, or need to develop stronger social skills.

Sometimes our children need a little more than what a private practitioner can provide and are referred to either an Intensive Outpatient Program or a Partial Hospitalization Program. An Intensive Outpatient Program is a group that meets for a few hours after school or during the evening more than once a week. IOPs are typically used in connection with other support services, such as individual therapy or medication management, for a collaborative and comprehensive approach to treating the child's challenges.

A Partial Hospitalization Program is when a child needs more support during the overall school day. Youth who qualify for partial hospitalization programming usually need additional and more intensive therapeutic services beyond what an IOP or private practitioner can provide at that time. They may be experiencing psychiatric or other mental health symptoms that are negatively impacting their ability to function daily.

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