

The American Counseling Association's "Counseling Corner" Weekly Columns

Sometimes School Complaints Shouldn't Be Ignored

from the American Counseling Association

Most children will occasionally complain about school. Every student has days when things don't go quite right. But when complaints are frequent, and more than just the "I don't like school," or "Math is too hard," it may be time to listen more carefully.

There are a number of ways in which a child may be trying to express deeper problems and that he or she needs some help. Children find it hard to say "I'm confused," or "I feel inadequate." Preteens and teenagers especially may have trouble admitting that they're struggling. Instead of saying, "I need help with my schoolwork," they say, "I hate school" or "My teacher is out to get me."

These comments, when frequent, and when combined with other behaviors, are often an indicator that serious school-related problems may exist.

Such behaviors may be your child being reluctant to discuss school and suddenly exhibiting a lack of motivation or confidence. He or she may be angry and hostile in regard to homework and studying, or very defensive or afraid in regard to criticism. A child may start to be withdrawn, avoiding any school-related questions and perhaps act self-condemning by saying things like "I'm stupid" or "I just can't do it."

When these signs are combined with declining or failing grades, it's a red flag that prompt action is needed. Ignoring the problem can affect a child's total well-being as self-esteem declines and negative behaviors may begin to increase.

A first step is to let your child know you understand and empathize with the difficulties being faced. Try talking about your own school struggles, offering academic assistance and complimenting cooperation and progress in order to rebuild confidence. If you find you can't effectively assist with homework or studying, and many parents can't, consider a qualified tutor to help overcome the academic problems.

You should also talk with your child's school counselor. He or she will have seen similar situations and will have the training and experience to offer assistance on how best to help your child. They may even have alternative explanations, from the school's perspective, on why your child is struggling.

School can and should be a positive and enjoyable experience for your student. Being alert for when a child is asking for help, even though indirectly, can bring not only better academic success, but a happier, better balanced child.

"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcornet@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org.

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