

Introduction

The purpose of this book is to examine the experiences of parents whose children refuse to go to school and particularly those who subsequently turn to home education.

I am not a psychologist, but approach this subject as a social sciences researcher and as a home educating parent with more than a decade of experience in assisting families considering home education, often in the midst of crisis. Most families contact me via a large website supporting home educating families in the UK or another for families in Europe and elsewhere. I also manage two internet mailing lists for home educators as well as the only specialist mailing list offering support to parents of school refusing children who are considering home education. Another part of my work involves training courses to local authorities who take on the responsibility for monitoring home educating families in England and Wales and some families are referred to me by local authority personnel.

This work has brought me into contact with many families whose children have had difficulties attending school and who have had the label 'school refuser', 'school avoider' or 'school phobic' attached to them. I began to raise questions about these labels when I encountered more and more families whose children were being bullied in school and subsequently refused to attend. In many instances parents were told that the school had no bullying problem and that despite what the child said the problem must lay in the home. This seemed to me to be worth examining more closely.

Having undertaken research into several aspects of home education over the past few years, I've built up a consistent picture of what can happen to children and their families when things go wrong in schools and in many cases the outcomes of

withdrawing so called school phobic children to home educate them.

Using a number of mailing lists supporting home educating families, mostly based in the UK, I asked those whose children had refused to attend school to write about their experiences. The stories interleaved between the chapters and others quoted in this book are all real experiences in the families' own words. The only substantive changes have been to names and places in order to protect the identities of the children, their siblings and their parents. The book is written from the perspective of the UK so most of the stories and the examples of professional practice are taken from the UK, though I have also had responses from families in other parts of the world.

In researching this book I received questionnaire responses from more than sixty families and additionally I received twenty three full case studies, nineteen of which are included here; these include some international experiences, but on balance represent the stories that are most typical of the UK experience of school refusal. In only two of the cases quoted here did the children later return to school and in both of these cases the families were in the USA and received some support from the authorities.

In addition to extrapolating patterns of presentation and practice from the accounts written by parents, I have also looked at how the concept of school phobia has developed since its creation in the 1920s in the UK. I go on to examine how it is diagnosed and 'treated' before moving on to the effects this can have on some families. Finally I examine how the choice to remove children from school to home educate affects both children and families overall.

My aim here is not to prove that home education is a universal 'cure' for all children diagnosed with 'school refusal', 'social phobia' or 'separation anxiety', but rather to suggest that far from being a retrograde step to withdraw a child who is refusing school, home education may considerably help in many

cases. Despite the received 'wisdom' of some authorities home education should not be regarded as a catastrophe for the child's future. On the contrary, I will demonstrate that there is no evidence to suggest that young people who are home educated after being diagnosed with school or social phobia suffer long term problems related to the initial diagnosis.

Mike Fortune-Wood, May 2007

Case Study 1: Emily's Story

It began with her not feeling like going on particular days for no reason. She complained of headaches, cried a lot, got overly anxious at school and began calling herself stupid.

She had a teacher who was middle-aged and was also the head teacher, and so often left the class alone. She had been primarily a head teacher for quite some time prior to coming to the village school and not had much one on one experience with young children for quite some time. She was abrupt, wore severe black suits, and expected 4 and 5 year olds to have the same maturity as 10 year olds. She also would say things to the children, such as, 'You act like a two year old.'

My daughter had enjoyed pre-school pretty well, though she had always had days where she did not feel like socialising and wanted to just stay home and 'veg' out and had to be taken along.

She was excited about moving to the class next door as they got to build large pirate ships, as she had seen the year previously. The teacher however, took all the joy out of it, and indeed, the things like the pirate ship turned out to be rather a con as the truth emerged that staff came in and built it, with the children merely getting to colour on fabric as the teacher could not abide the 'disorder', so the ship literally popped up one afternoon and then, two days later, it popped back down.

The head blamed Emily, saying she was a difficult and immature child who needed to learn her place and buck up. The parent governors admitted to feeling intimidated by her [the head teacher] who responded to our concerns by heaping negative attention upon Emily. She even began making bogus claims, such as Emily was 'smelly', etc. These went unsubstantiated by staff, and nothing came of them whatsoever.

Finally, we removed Emily from school. This resulted in more harassment by the head teacher, and she reported us to social services, claiming that my daughter had smelled bad on one occasion (unsubstantiated, and indeed refuted by other staff); that she had been sent to school with rotten food (my daughter had school dinners); that her uniform was in poor condition, and that, as my husband worked away, she felt our family 'needed support because anything can happen if a parent is left alone with their children'. Social services came to visit, and were mortified to even be there. They felt no such support was warranted, and saw my daughter's old school uniforms for themselves, as being nearly new, and the same as any other child's on average. They also saw she had better than average clothing. Emily also told them what the head teacher had been saying to her.

Following our decision to home educate Emily began to come out of her shell, and to realise she was not stupid and that some people are just mean. She began to really blossom, moving quickly ahead in her academic subjects, and to show a lot of the creativity she had displayed prior to attending Reception. It took over six months for her to feel comfortable walking past a school, and to stop crying if she made any mistakes as she was afraid she would be humiliated and made fun of if other people knew she had to erase a mistake, or mispronounced a word, etc.

A Short History of School Phobia

As we've already seen, school phobia as a concept that has changed substantially over the years as one description or another has become more or less fashionable. The term school phobia has its roots in the 1920s when Cyril Burt, a prominent psychologist and supporter of Eugenics, first described a form of truancy as 'school phobia'. (Tyerman, 1968) Burt argued that some children truanted from schools that had been used as air raid shelters against zeppelin attacks during World War I because they associated their schools with trauma and death. He said that these children became 'neurotic' when compelled to attend such schools (Gabb, 1994). Of course, this effect, even if it was real, could only have lasted for nine years at the most and could not have affected school in places unaffected by military action. Despite Cyril Burt having been generally discredited for falsifying data and other academic felonies in the 1970s, the term 'School Phobia' became established in the minds of academics and psychologists and has remained in use in one way or another ever since.

By the 1930s, Burt's explanation was no longer credible since all those children who experienced bombings had grown up and left school. The authorities needed to find other, more sophisticated explanations. Broadwin began the process by developing various psychoanalytic theories relating truancy to various other complexes. By the 1960s it became popular to suggest that the trigger for the school phobia was associated with anxieties about family or home and this view still has currency today. (Tyerman, 1968)

In the last ten years school phobia has lost its status as a phobia in its own right and has become a 'diagnostic criteria' for the social phobia and has consequentially been renamed 'school refusal'. Local authorities and schools, however, have largely

failed to keep up with the times and in practice a wide range of labels are used.

The Response of Education Authorities to School Refusal

Local authorities have some difficulty in deciding whether school phobia or school refusal is a psychological problem requiring treatment or bad behaviour best dealt with by punishment. For example David Hart, general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, said in 2002 that it was just a 'classic excuse' for not attending classes (*The Observer*, June 9, 2002) Additionally, since the medical treatment is often highly aggressive, stressful and oppositional it often makes little difference in practice whether it what is being offered is 'treatment' or 'punishment'.

What is clear is that the constant shifts in how school phobia is conceived by the experts lends support to the idea that much of how school refusal is seen is little more than a social construct fabricated to legitimise the fashions and political agenda of the day.