



# Reaching Out

Norristown Area Communities That Care for Youth

Keeping Youth Safe & Drug Free

FALL 2006

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## Children Who Won't Go To School

You may have tried it yourself as a kid. The mysterious illness that hits just as the school bus comes around the corner is familiar to most of us. The "illness" subsides after the child is allowed to stay home, only to reappear the next morning before school. In some cases, the child may simply refuse to leave the house.

Going to school usually is an exciting, enjoyable event for young children, but for

some kids it brings fear or panic. Parents have cause for concern when their child regularly feels sick from tension or "plays sick" to stay home from school. Professionals call this school refusal.

School refusal is most common in children ages 5-7 and 11-14, which are times when children are dealing with the new challenges of elementary and middle school.



These children may suffer from a paralyzing fear of leaving the safety of their parents and home. A child's panic and refusal to go to school can be very difficult for parents to cope with.

Refusal to go to school often begins following a period at home in which the child has become closer to the parent, such as a summer vacation, a holiday break or a brief illness. It also may follow a stressful occurrence, such as the death of a pet or relative, a change in schools or a move to a new neighborhood.

The difference between truancy and school refusal is very important for parents to understand.

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## Norristown Truancy Abatement Program

A recent Daytime Curfew Ordinance issued in the Municipality of Norristown makes it against the law for school-aged children enrolled in elementary or secondary schools to be in any public place in Norristown during school hours. Citations will be issued to parents and business owners that serve truant youth.

This change in the law will assist local school and police officers in an initiative that began on Monday, September 11, 2006, to vigorously enforce state and local truancy laws.

Norristown Area CTC is available to assist families dealing with truant youth. Please call CTC at 610-630-2111 with your concerns.

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School refusal is an unreasonable fear of school. This may include anxiety, temper tantrums and depression.

The child will pretend to be sick or simply say that he or she does not want to go to school. The child usually wants to stay home because he or she feels safe there. With school refusal, parents are aware of the child's absence from school and the child has permission

to stay home. The child may even express the willingness to complete schoolwork, but will do so at home.

Truancy, on the other hand, is noted by a lack of anxiety. The child is not afraid to go to school, they are simply not in-

terested. They have no interest in schoolwork. They will try to conceal the absence from parents. Frequently there is an antisocial



or delinquent behavior that may be accompanied by disruptive acts, stealing, lying, and hanging around with antisocial peers. During school hours, the child generally goes out somewhere. Also there is a lack of willingness to conform to academic and behav-

ioral expectations.

Fortunately, school refusal is maintainable. It is important that a collaborative effort is made for treatment once school refusal is recognized. The child, parent, teachers, guidance counselor, and family physician should all be involved.

Some of the treatments for this disorder include educational support therapy, parent-teacher intervention and various levels of counseling. Treatment helps both the child and the parents understand that there is nothing to be afraid of.

For information about a FREE family counseling program offered through Norristown Area CTC, please see page 4.

## Five Strategies to Encourage School Attendance

1. Let your children know that you value education. Insist they go to school every day.
2. Talk with your child about school. Is your child struggling with schoolwork, classmates or other problems? Ask how you can help.
3. Discuss your concerns with your child's teachers. Ask them to help you with a written



- plan to help your child succeed.
4. Does your child need a tutor or assessment for special services? Ask for referrals to community programs, and don't hesitate to use mediation or counseling services.
5. Get to know your child's friends and their families.

## What Can Parents Do About Truancy?

You are not alone. Many families are concerned about their children's school attendance, and help is available. Talk to the staff at your child's school. Teachers, principals, counselors, and social workers at your child's school may be able to help you understand why your child is truant. Visit the school to understand what's going on during your child's day.

Ask the school staff how they can help you. The district may offer extra programs and services, such as tutoring or alternative settings, that would help your child with attendance.

Reach out to other family members and friends. Talk to

other parents, especially the parents of your child's friends. They may have information or ideas that can help.



Connect with professionals for advice. Community programs, school social workers, family counselors, therapists, and clergy can all offer insight and support.

Monitor your child's attendance:

- Request your child's attendance records from your child's school.
- Ask the school to contact you immediately if your child is absent without a valid excuse.
- Periodically check in with your child's teachers to find out how things are going for your child.

If you have concerns related to truancy, Norristown Area CTC can help. Please call CTC at 610-630-2111.

Materials for this article taken from [www.pacer.org](http://www.pacer.org)

## What Can Parents Do If Their Child Is Being Bullied?

- Believe the child. Do not over-react. Listen calmly.
- Gather the facts. Find out who was involved, when the bullying took place, etc. This will help you decide what course of action to take.
- Consider whether your child might be doing something that encourages others to pick on him/her. You may need to help your child change a behavior and learn a more acceptable one.

- Build your child's self-esteem. Help your child find activities to participate in that build the child's confidence.



- Encourage your child to stay with a group of children and avoid being alone.

- Encourage your child to stay calm. Bullies love power and controlling someone's emotions fuels this need.
- In some situations, adult intervention is necessary. If the bullying is occurring at school, seek the help of your child's teacher, guidance counselor or other school personnel.

Materials for this article taken from [www.moralintelligence.com](http://www.moralintelligence.com)



## Keeping Youth Safe & Drug Free

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**Communities That Care (CTC)** is a risk-focused approach to reducing adolescent problem behaviors through community mobilization and planning. Local citizens and community leaders work together to identify the risk factors that increase the likelihood of problem behaviors developing, and enhance the protective factors that can shield youngsters from problems. The risk and protective factors are used to implement a comprehensive plan to step ahead of the problems with far-reaching and long-lasting solutions.

## Communities That Care Offers Free Family Counseling Program

SPARKS (Strong Parents Actively Raising Kids Safely) is a family counseling program that strives to help parents understand their children's behaviors, while helping to create a strong family unit at the same time.

SPARKS aims to improve family relationships through a better understanding of individual family members. "Parents will learn how to increase their family's strengths while improving cooperation, communication and conflict resolution skills," says Maris Menin, LSW, MSW, SPARKS family counseling coordinator. Strengthening family relationships will ultimately lead to improved, positive behaviors in children," says Menin.

The SPARKS family counseling program uses the Brief Strategic Family Therapy (BSFT)

model, which is a "model program" for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the Society for Prevention Research. BSFT has demonstrated great success nationally in helping parents intervene in a pattern of truancy.

**Through funding from Norristown Area CTC, SPARKS is available at no charge to all Norristown Area School District families with children 6 – 17 years of age.**

Family counseling sessions are held at Family Services' Eagleville Office (3125 Ridge Pike, Eagleville) and at the Norristown Police Athletic League, 1101 Harding Boulevard.



Families who recently completed the SPARKS family counseling program can't seem to say enough about the over-

whelming improvements within their family's dynamics: "I thought the program was excellent...very informational." "The sessions helped my family maintain focus on what we needed to do to get through

our difficult times." "This is an excellent program. My children (ages 6 and 8) responded better than I expected."

To learn more about SPARKS or to make an appointment, please call Maris Menin, LSW, MSW, at 610-630-2111, ext. 260.