

Information for parents – School refusal, anxiety and attendance

Repeated school refusal can negatively impact on your child's learning and development.

What is it?

Anxiety

At some stage, every individual will feel anxious when faced with a difficult situation. During difficult times, you can support your child to cope with anxiety in effective ways and in doing so, enhance their resilience. Anxiety can become a problem when it is persistent and prevents your child from enjoying normal life experiences for a long time.

School refusal

School refusal is when a child regularly displays high levels of distress and reluctance about going to school, leading to prolonged absences. Your child may say that they feel sick, either prior to leaving for school or during the day through repeated visits to the school nurse or sick bay. Behavioural symptoms may include tantrums, crying, avoidance or defiance. It is important to understand the concerns your child may have in order to work towards resolving the situation. As such, the school may advise making a referral to a school psychologist to help.

What can cause it?

- Change of school (including from primary to high school)
- Separation anxiety: the child experiences overwhelming feelings of distress when parting from their parents or family home
- Anxiety about a parent leaving or losing a parent - the child may be fearful that something bad will happen to their parents while they are at school such as:
 - parents divorcing or running away
 - having friends whose parents have separated and fearing that it may happen to theirs
 - fear of a parent becoming ill again after recovering from prior illness
- Family stress

Useful information

Be You - School Refusal Fact Sheet (2019)

<https://beyou.edu.au/fact-sheets/development/school-refusal>

Headspace - Understanding School Refusal (2019)

<https://headspace.org.au/friends-and-family/understanding-school-refusal>

Learning Potential - School Refusal, Australian Government (2020).

<https://www.learningpotential.gov.au/articles/school-refusal>

- Academic pressure or problems
- Poor teacher/student relationships
- Fear of not having friends
- Bullying
- Moving house
- Change in parent's job or experiencing a change in home life

School refusal: strategies for parents

There are many possibilities why children may not want to go to school. It is important not to blame yourself! Instead, acknowledge that school refusal is not a disorder, but your child's way of responding to an underlying fear or anxiety. It is essential for you to be able to recognise early warning signs. There are several steps you can take to help.

1. See a doctor

If your child is complaining of headaches, stomach pains or other symptoms, see a doctor to rule out serious illness. If it is clear that your child is healthy, it is much easier for you to firmly encourage your child's attendance without lingering doubt. In some cases, mental health and wellbeing support may be required.

2. Form a partnership with school

It is important that you have a good working relationship with the school. Talk with your child's teacher or principal to discuss and identify any issues preventing your child from going to school.

3. Talk and listen

Talk to your child about school being a very important place to meet friends, to stay in touch with what other students are doing, and to develop work and life skills. Not attending can add to existing anxieties and mean your child misses out on opportunities to learn how to deal with everyday social problems.

4. Don't allow your child to stay home

Some parents feel that, by allowing their child to stay at home, they will 'settle down' before going back to school. However, this can make going back to school much harder. Give clear and firm messages about the importance of school. It is vital that you can be clear that your child must go to school. Avoid ambiguous messages.

5. Remove perceived benefits to staying at home

- Ban or limit access to the internet, computer games, TV, phones or other devices.
- Keep visitors to a minimum and don't make the day about your child.
- Have some clear expectations about completing homework and home duties.

6. Set up a reward plan

Developing a reward plan for preparation and attendance at school; for example, time on the computer/ internet or an afternoon treat if they attend their first day/s back at school, a shopping trip with parent/family, or invite a friend over on the weekend if they attend the whole week.

Crying and tantrums

Having already established that health factors are not affecting your child, responses to complaints of illness, crying and tantrums should be carefully considered. You should always offer your support to help your child get through this difficult time, but not give into their pleas to stay at home. Ignoring is easier said than done! However, during these testing times, your child needs to see that you are confident in their ability to cope with school and have no doubt that he/she will attend.

Focus on the good things about school

Talk about your child's positive school experiences such as friends, sports, favourite subjects, lunch break, computer access, preferred teachers, etc. You can do this by saying things such as "I know you can do it", "You've done it before, you can do it again". These statements will encourage your child to confront rather than avoid the source of their anxiety. Praise or 'talk up' all efforts that help them return to school or cope with anxiety provoking situations, e.g. staying at school until recess, walking through the school corridors on their own, and other small steps towards attendance.

Talk about school as part of the 'bigger picture'

For older students, help your child research different career and work options and discuss what needs to be achieved at school in order to reach their goals.

Have a stable morning routine

Some stress can be eliminated by organising uniforms the night before, having a shower early, packing a school bag, making lunch, setting an alarm, checking bus time tables or practicing the journey to school the day before. This also assists in forming good long-term habits which will ultimately alleviate their anxiety about going back to school.

Sleep

Your child may develop poor sleeping patterns if they're not attending school regularly (going to bed late at night and sleeping in the next day). Return to a 'school night' sleep routine as soon as possible. If they refuse to get out of bed in the morning, you may need to turn on lights, open curtains and remove blankets. These actions show that you expect that they will be attending school.

Be organised

You can also ensure that you and your family is organised to get your child to school on time. Many students can be embarrassed if they arrive late to class since this can make them stand out when they enter the classroom.

School drop-off/pick-up

When dropping your child off at school, keep goodbyes short and if required, reassure your child that you will be there at the end of the school day. Have a back-up plan for times when you may be late.

Encourage hobbies and interests

Having a hobby or team sport can be a great form of distraction and relaxation. It can also help provide structure to your child's week, giving them something to look forward to either before or after school.

Further assistance

Sometimes you may need assistance from a mental health professional to help your child attend and engage in school. Discuss your concerns with the school for further assistance. If your child requires additional support the school and school psychologist may be able to assist.