



Overcoming school refusal: A step-by-step guide for families

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Is your child refusing to go to school? Please know - you're not alone. Managing all the demands of family, work and just life in general is never easy, and it becomes even more stressful and more challenging when your child refuses to go to school.

If you wake up every day with a distressed child crying:

- "I'm not going to school"
- "Please don't make me go to school"
- "I just want to stay home and be with you"

Know that you're not alone ... many parents are struggling with this issue.

The aim of this guide is to help families navigate school refusal. It helps you to understand:

- What school refusal is, and how common it is
- Main reasons children don't want to go to school
- Negative consequences of missing school
- A step-by-step guide to overcoming school refusal

What school refusal is, and how common it is

School refusal is when your child is either reluctant or outright refuses to go to school, or stay in school for the full day, because it is too stressful or upsetting for them. It's not a one-off situation where a child asks for a day off school, it's where children refuse to attend school day after day for an extended period of time.

Parents and carers might see their children complaining of headaches or stomach aches, crying and having a tantrum, showing signs of separation anxiety – not wanting to leave the home or the parent or carer or just outright refusal to leave the house to go to school.

While it is difficult to measure exact numbers – it is estimated that between 1-5% of children refuse to go to school – and the rate has increased since the COVID lockdowns when children were forced to learn from home for an extended period of time. School refusal is more common during times of transition, like starting a new school – primary or high school, moving home, or dealing with other big changes in a child's life including health issues, separation or divorce.

Most importantly, if not addressed, we need to acknowledge that school refusal can be highly stressful and have negative consequences for the whole family.



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School refusal is not truancy

We need to see school refusal as different from school truancy – where a child “pretends” to go to school and then 'skips' school without their parents' or carers' knowledge. When it comes to school refusal the child openly tells their parents they don't want to go to school because of the fear and distress it would cause them. Sometimes parents can have successful days and get their child to school, however, generally school refusal is where a child refuses to attend school regularly.

Main reasons children don't want to go to school

To help children overcome school refusal – we need to understand the underlying issues. As a parenting and family wellbeing expert working with thousands of families, it's clear that there are **many different reasons** when a child refuses to go to school. It's important to remember that each child is unique, each family has different circumstances and each school environment offers different student experiences, and for these reasons, understanding why students refuse to go to school can be complex.

To help you uncover and understand your child's reasons for school refusal, here are some of the common reasons a child or adolescent may not want to attend school. It's important to remember that a young person might be experiencing one or a combination of these issues:

- 1. Anxiety and mental health issues:** When it comes to school refusal, anxiety disorders, depression, or other mental health concerns are common.
- 2. Social issues - Difficult school environment:** Young people spend the whole day with their teachers and peers, so experiencing problems with other students, bullying, conflict with teachers, or difficulty making friends at school can all be reasons for not wanting to attend school.
- 3. Academic challenges:** Learning doesn't come easily to some students, particularly those with learning challenges. Struggling to keep up, failing class exams and assignments, or feeling overwhelmed by schoolwork may lead to school avoidance.
- 4. Family issues, life's transition or traumatic events:** Sometimes school refusal has nothing to do with school and everything to do with the young person's home environment or a significant life event. Serious illness, loss of a parent or sibling, separation or divorce or moving to another area can affect a child's willingness to attend school. In some cases, it's not a traumatic event but a life transition into the unknown, like moving from primary school to high school.

Now that you understand the common reasons' why a child or adolescent may refuse to attend school, it's crucial to look at why it is important to try and support children back to school before it goes on too long.



Attending a good school supports child development. What are the negative consequences of missing school?

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When a student misses more than 10% of school days at a good school, they miss out on a lot more than just academics. Here are some of the many potential consequences to a young person's development:

1. Learning gaps and decreased academic performance:

- a. The young person may fall behind in their studies, affecting their academic performance, their development and reducing their confidence in their own abilities.

2. Social and emotional consequences:

- a. Missing school can lead to loneliness and isolation and increase anxiety and depression. Being at home limits a young person's opportunities to develop the social skills to meet and work with peers, nurture friendships and create emotional and social support networks.

3. Limited ability to cope with life challenges:

- a. Attending school on a regular basis provides opportunities for children and adolescents to develop coping skills and resilience by facing challenges, solving problems, and adapting to new situations.

4. Impact on future education and career opportunities

- a. Missing school can have a negative affect on a young person's future learning and career opportunities. For example, they may not have access to higher education or specific career paths they aspire to.

5. Strain on Family Relationships:

- a. The whole family is impacted when children refuse to attend school. It can result in stress for all family members and have a negative impact on relationships with and between parents, siblings, and other family members.

As you can see in the five points above, missing school can have a negative impact on a young person and their whole family both in the short-term and the long-term. It makes sense then, that the sooner we address school refusal and get a child back to school – the lower chance the impact will be negative and long-term. Our step-by-step guide can help



Prioritise your wellbeing and your child's wellbeing.

Step-by-step guide to overcoming school refusal

Perhaps you've tried everything you can to help your child return to school but nothing seems to work. You may be feeling super stressed and even despondent – wondering if there really is a solution and an end in sight?

Now it's time to ask for help. You don't have to do it alone. It's important for parents and carers to seek the help of teachers and professionals who have dealt with school refusal and been successful in the past. Working together can help parents, teachers and professionals to understand the key issues the child or adolescent is experiencing and then develop strategies to help the child overcome the challenges and return to school.

You might have noticed the in the section above the heading was “Attending a good school supports child development”. Sometimes, the solution to school refusal isn't about getting the young person back to current school environment but may require home-schooling for a time or changing schools to create a more supportive environment that will nurture your child's development.

Addressing a child's reluctance to go to school requires a thoughtful and collaborative approach from parents, caregivers, educators and sometimes mental health professionals.

Here are some steps to help you, your child and your family:

Prioritise your wellbeing and your child's wellbeing

- School refusal can be super stressful for parents and carers. So, to be able to support a child who is distressed, parents need to take care of their own mental health and emotional wellbeing. Make sure you get enough sleep, good nutrition and exercise and ask for support from friends, family, or a support group. Consider seeking therapy for yourself if the situation is becoming overwhelming.
- Empathise with your child and show you're there to help in any way you can. They're not alone. When you're mentally and physically well, you're in a great position to help your child and be a good role model.
- School refusal can affect the whole family – even the children who are going to school. Make time to check-in with all family members to see how they're managing and schedule in time for the whole family to have fun to support family wellbeing and take the focus off the stress of school refusal.

Open and nurturing communication with your child to understand the issues:

- Be gentle with your child – remember they're having a really tough time – they're not trying to give you a difficult time. Remember your child needs help to navigate the world and doesn't have the knowledge and experience adults do. So be there, ask open questions and listen to their concerns, fears, or reasons for not wanting to go to school. Give them space to speak rather than offering solutions – find out all you can.
- Acknowledge your child's feelings and let them know you are there to support them rather than dismissing their feelings. This is not about sharing solutions this is about understanding the issues - academic challenges, social interactions, bullying, or other issues that underly your child's refusal to go to school.

Work with the school and seek professional support if needed:

- As a parent you've probably done all you can on your own to help your child back to school. You don't have to manage this alone – seek help. In many cases of school refusal – parents and carers need the support of teachers and other professionals – so ask for help. As a team, you can work together with your child to identify and overcome each of the underlying issues contributing to their reluctance to attend school.
- It is important to involve your child. Together with your child, you can create a plan to overcome any academic challenges, social interactions or bullying your child might be experiencing. Involve your child in finding solutions to empower them to express their needs and preferences. This will help your child feel a sense of control and support them to develop problem-solving skills and autonomy to overcome their school refusal.
- If the reluctance persists, you could seek support from a mental health professional to provide strategies to address any underlying mental health concerns. You can also seek support services and support groups in your local area. Speak with school counsellors, your local doctor or health professionals to guide you to the right support for you and your child.

Set realistic goals, monitor progress and adjust:

- Overcoming challenges takes time and patience. It's important to set realistic goals that are achievable for your child when it comes to returning to school. By creating achievable steps (like attending 1 lesson rather than a whole day or going to the school library) you'll be able to celebrate small victories to build a child's confidence and ability to take bigger steps all the way to success.

By assessing your child's progress it is possible to make small adjustments to help your child achieve the next step and overcome the issues underlying school residuals one at a time child achieve the next step and overcome the issues underlying school residuals one at a time.



Overcoming challenges takes a team: Parents, teachers and other professionals.

Be gentle on yourself and with your child....

Remember that school refusal is complex and can be the result of many different factors. So, it's important that you feel supported and focus on your self-care, your child's wellbeing, and the wellbeing of your whole family as you work towards a solution.

The best outcomes for parents, children and families happen when there is an effective collaboration between the child, the parents and caregivers, educators, and if needed, mental health professionals. You don't have to do it on your own – get the support you need.

So, be patient, be gentle on yourself and your child and together with empathy and understanding work towards your child being able to attend school regularly again – hopefully with a skip in their step!

Persistence and flexibility are key – continue to try different approaches until you find the strategies that support your child's positive return to school and family wellbeing or another solution that supports them to continue to grow.

I hope this guide has been helpful.
My sincere best wishes to you and your family
Dr Rosina

Dr Rosina McAlpine,
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Resources

For further information and support you can access these comprehensive resources

School Refusal: Every School Day Counts New South Wales Dept of Education. The resource has been produced to assist education staff and the families that they work with in identifying and supporting children and adolescents who are avoiding going to school in the context of mental health difficulties. This resource provides basic information for primary teachers, high school teachers and parents/caregivers in understanding School Refusal and what can be done to help support children and young people who are refusing to attend school and experiencing mental health challenges.

https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/en/home/student-wellbeing/attendance-matters---resources-for-schools/School_Refusal_Every_School_Day_Counts.pdf

Research Paper **School refusal** Parliament of Australia

https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/library/prspub/9124340/upload_binary/9124340.pdf