

Understanding school refusal

School refusal refers to severe emotional upset experienced by a child at the prospect of attending school that can result in significant school absence¹. School refusal is different from truancy in that the child is staying at home with the knowledge of the family and despite their best efforts to enforce attendance. Children who refuse school do not typically engage in antisocial behaviour that is associated with truancy, such as lying, stealing or destruction of property. School refusal is also different from school withdrawal, a term used to refer to circumstances in which the family keeps the child at home for various reasons (eg to support a family member who is ill)².

What are the signs of school refusal?

Most children are occasionally reluctant to go to school or have some anxiety about activities like school camp. It is normal for children to miss some days of school during the year. School refusal is a more persistent problem that might be characterised by some of the following signs³:

- tearfulness before school or repeated pleas to stay at home
- tantrums, clinginess, dawdling or running away before school
- frequent complaints of illness before or during school, such as stomach aches, headaches, dizziness or fatigue
- difficulty attending school after weekends, holidays, school camps or sports days
- long, unexplained absences from school
- periodic absences or missed classes for which no explanation is given
- frequent lateness to school
- long periods spent in the sick bay or principal's office.



What causes school refusal?

There are lots of reasons why a child might refuse school, and pinpointing the cause can be difficult. Often there are a number of factors that contribute to a child's non-attendance. It is important to understand and address underlying issues when supporting children to return to school or attend consistently.

The following factors might be involved in school refusal⁴:

- anxiety about social situations or activities that involve a performance or evaluation, such as sports days, speaking in front of the class or tests
- anxiety around being separated from significant parents or carers
- academic problems or learning difficulties
- peer issues, such as social isolation, bullying or conflict with friends
- difficulty or conflict with teachers
- traumatic events, such as family illness, grief or parental separation/divorce
- difficulties with transition, such as moving to a new school, returning to school after a long absence due to illness or entering/exiting primary school
- rewards inherent to staying at home, such as spending time with a parent, watching TV or playing video games.



What are the consequences of school refusal?

School refusal is a serious issue that is best managed early. Long absences mean that children miss out on important parts of the curriculum, which is detrimental to their learning and development. A week can be a long time in the playground, so frequent absences might jeopardise children's social relationships. School refusal can also create conflict and strained relationships within families as a result of disruptions to their routines, and might even affect income as parents or carers forgo work to stay home with the child.

Children who miss school as a result of refusal might also face long-term problems. Some research has shown that school refusal can contribute to mental health difficulties, emotional and social problems, exiting school early and occupational dysfunction in later life⁵⁻⁶.

What can primary schools do to cope with school refusal?

Primary schools might like to use these strategies to cope with school refusal at the policy level.

- Create a positive school climate in which children feel supported by peers and teachers and have a sense of connectedness to the school community.
- Establish peer support or mentoring programs to increase a sense of belongingness among students.
- Closely monitor student attendance to enable early detection of attendance problems and make efforts to follow up with the student and his or her family.
- Communicate the importance of consistent attendance to the school community.
- Develop effective programs to support children and their families during the transition to school and between schools.
- Ensure school staff have an awareness of the factors that contribute to school refusal and receive support when working with students with persistent school refusal.

Primary schools might like to use these strategies to cope with school refusal at the individual level.

- Work with the family to understand why the child might be refusing school.
- Work with the school's wellbeing team as well as professionals within the broader community to support the child using a united approach.
- Maintain close contact with the family, even during extended periods of non-attendance.
- Acknowledge the challenges faced by parents of children who refuse school.
- Support families to implement a morning routine that conveys expectations of school attendance.
- Provide a flexible timetable to support a graduated return to school – that is, allow the child to attend for a short time as a first step, then gradually return to a full school day.
- Consider the support the child might require upon arrival at school. This might include meeting with a friend at a specific place and time, using a quiet space to settle before school starts or engaging in an activity or responsibility such as a monitor role.
- Provide recognition and positive feedback for any efforts towards school attendance.
- Respond to any school-based needs, such as academic support, dealing with bullying or support with social relationships.



How does KidsMatter Primary help?

KidsMatter Primary supports schools to promote mental health and wellbeing among children. The four components of KidsMatter Primary support the efforts of schools to reduce and manage school refusal.

Component 1: Positive school community supports schools to focus on building a positive school culture that provides safety and security for children, promotes a sense of belonging and supports the development of positive relationships. Children are more likely to attend school regularly when they feel supported and valued as an important part of the school community.

Component 2: Social and emotional learning for students helps schools to think about how to embed the teaching of social and emotional skills into the curriculum, with opportunities for children to practise these skills across a range of contexts. Armed with a range of skills for managing difficult emotions like anxiety, children are less likely to avoid school.

Component 3: Working with parents and carers encourages schools to build strong relationships with the families in their community and create opportunities for families to get involved. Partnerships between school staff and families enable early detection of problems with school absence and ensure that everyone is on the same page about supporting attendance. Regular communication between schools and families during periods of non-attendance helps everyone work together to support the child to return to school.

Component 4: Helping children with mental health difficulties supports school staff to recognise signs that a child might be experiencing social or emotional difficulties and take appropriate action. School refusal can be a sign of anxiety or another mental health issue like stress or trauma. Recognising and responding to school refusal means that school staff might pick up on issues that would otherwise be missed. It also allows for referral to other services or professionals that can help support children who are refusing school.



What can you do at your school?

Schools can use a variety of strategies at the policy and individual level to reduce and manage school refusal. Your school probably has practices for managing this issue already. The following questions might guide your thinking about other things your school can do to manage school refusal issues.

- What policies and practices do you have in place for reducing school refusal?
- How will you identify and address the underlying issues when school refusal occurs?
- Who can support you to identify and address the issues contributing to a child's school refusal, either inside or outside the school community?
- How does your school work with families to address factors contributing to a child's school refusal?
- How do you ensure communication with the family is maintained when a child is absent for a long period?
- What steps could you take to ensure that children are enthusiastic about school and feel a sense of connectedness to the school community?
- What could your school put in place to manage the increased risk of school refusal during transition times like starting primary school, starting as a new student, returning to school after a long illness or moving to secondary school?



For more information

- **How anxiety problems affect children**
A KidsMatter Primary information sheet about the effects of anxiety in children and tips for anxiety management.
www.kidsmatter.edu.au/families/mental-health-difficulties/anxiety/anxiety-how-anxiety-problems-affect-children
- **Truancy and school refusal**
An article for families by Raising Children Network.
www.raisingchildren.net.au/articles/truancy_teenagers.html
- **Every Day Counts**
A range of Queensland and Victorian Government resources on attendance for schools and families, including information sheets, guidelines, policy planning tools and videos.
www.education.qld.gov.au/everydaycounts/
www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/health/pages/studentattendance.aspx



References

1. Berg, I., Nichols, K., & Pritchard, C. (1969). School phobia: Its classification and relationship to dependency. *Child Psychology & Psychiatry & Allied Disciplines*, 10(2), 123-141.
2. Kearney, C. A. (2001). *School refusal behavior in youth: A functional approach to assessment and treatment*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
3. Kearney, C. A. (2008). School absenteeism and school refusal behavior in youth: A contemporary review. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 28(3), 451-471.
4. Fremont, W. P. (2003). School refusal in children and adolescents. *American Family Physician*, 68(8), 1555-1568.
5. Flakierska-Praquin, N., Lindström, M., & Gillberg, C. (1997). School phobia with separation anxiety disorder: A comparative 20-to 29-year follow-up study of 35 school refusers. *Comprehensive Psychiatry*, 38(1), 17-22.
6. Silove, D., Manicavasagar, V., & Drobny, J. (2002). Associations between juvenile and adult forms of separation anxiety disorder: A study of volunteers with histories of school refusal. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 190(6), 413-414.

Schools can use a variety of strategies at the policy and individual level to reduce and manage school refusal.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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