

School refusal: children and teenagers

Key points

- **School refusal is when children get very upset about going to school, and they won't or can't go.**
- **Children might refuse to go to school because of worries about leaving home, learning difficulties, social problems or other reasons.**
- **The best way to get children back to school is by working as a team with the school.**
- **If school refusal is related to issues like anxiety or depression, children might need mental health support.**
- **It's good to acknowledge children's feelings about school, but let them know that you expect them to go back to school.**

What is school refusal?

School refusal is when **children get extremely upset at the idea of going to school**, and often miss some or all of the school day. This distress doesn't go away.

School refusal can mean that **children have trouble going to school** or trouble leaving home – they might not go to school at all. Children who refuse to go to school usually spend the day at home with their parents' knowledge, even though their parents try really hard to get them to go.

School refusal can be an issue for children in primary and secondary school.

School refusal is **not a formal psychiatric diagnosis**. It's a name for an emotional and/or behaviour problem.

Signs of school refusal

If your child refuses to go to school, you might feel that school nights and mornings are a 'battle of wills'. Your child might:

- cry, throw tantrums, yell or scream
- hide or lock themselves in their room

- refuse to move
- beg or plead not to go
- complain of aches, pains and illness before school, which generally get better if you let your child stay at home
- show high levels of anxiety
- have trouble sleeping
- threaten to hurt themselves.

Causes of school refusal

There's rarely a single cause of school refusal. It might be linked to anxiety or worries about leaving home, a phobia (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/health-daily-care/school-age-mental-health-concerns/phobias-panic-attacks-pts>), learning difficulties, social problems at school, or depression.

School refusal **might start gradually or happen suddenly**. It can happen at the same time as or after:

- stressful events at home or school or with peers
- family and peer conflict
- starting or changing schools
- moving home
- bullying (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/school-learning/bullying/bullying-signs>) or teasing
- problems with a teacher
- poor school results.

By not going to school, a child might be able to:

- avoid scary things – for example, tests, certain teachers, the canteen and so on
- get out of social situations with peers or teachers
- keep an eye on what's happening at home – for example, if a family member or pet is ill.

Understanding your child's school refusal

The first step to working on your child's school refusal is trying to **understand the issue from your child's point of view**. This means you can go to the school with useful information.

Identifying why your child is having trouble going to school

- Talk with your child about school (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/school-learning/school-homework-tips/talking-about-school>), and why they don't want to go. Try to find out whether your child is having problems with peers or teachers, or whether they're trying to avoid something. For example, 'If you could change one thing about school, what would it be?'
- If your child finds it hard to talk about the problem, ask your child to rate each part of the school day – for example, the bus ride, classroom, specialist classes, teacher, peers, recess and lunch breaks. Younger children might find it easier to tell you how they feel by pointing to symbols like sad faces or smiley faces.
- Think about whether there's anything happening at home that's making it hard for your child to leave and go to school. For example, have you had a death in the family or recently moved house? Is your child worried about someone at home, or is your dog unwell?

Finding solutions to school refusal

- Help your child to problem solve (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens/behaviour/encouraging-good-behaviour/problem-solving-steps>) any obstacles about leaving home or going to school. Clearly define the issue, then brainstorm possible solutions. Choose the option that has the best possible outcome.
- Tell your child that you're going to work together with their school to help them go to school.
- Talk with your child about seeing a counsellor or psychologist if they feel they can't manage their worries or fears about school.



It's important for your child to go to school while they're getting help with the issue that has caused the school refusal. When your child goes to school, it builds their confidence and resilience. It keeps your child connected with learning, and it's important for social development. It's often easier for children to return to school if they haven't been away from school for too long.

Working with schools on school refusal

The best way to get your child back to school is by working as a team with your child's school. It's a good idea to start by talking with your child's classroom teacher, home-room teacher or year coordinator.

Here are some things you could cover:

- Explain what's going on for your child and why your child is refusing to go to school – for example, bullying, learning difficulties, mental health problems and so on.
- If your child is experiencing bullying, talk about how this is affecting your child. You could ask the school about their strategies to manage and prevent bullying.
- Ask whether other support staff, like the student welfare coordinator, school psychologist or counsellor, can help your child. Ask whether you can have regular updates on your child's progress and support needs.
- If your child has a learning difficulty that makes it hard for your child to enjoy learning, ask what support the school can offer.
- If your child needs ongoing support to stay engaged in school, ask the school about forming an attendance student support group. This group can work with you to find the best ways to support your child's attendance.
- Talk with the school about a gradual start back at school for your child. For example, your child might be able to start with a shorter school day or with their favourite subjects, and build up from there.



Children have the right to learn and develop in safe and healthy school environments. If school refusal is related to school-age bullying (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/school-learning/bullying/school-bullying-helping>), or teenage bullying (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens/behaviour/bullying/teen-bullying>), it's always best to work with the school on the problem.

Working on school refusal at home: practical strategies

Here are some practical things you can do at home to encourage your child to go to school.

When you're talking to your child

- Show your child that you understand. For example, you could say, 'I can see you're worried about going to school. I know it's hard, but it's good for you to go. Your teacher and I will help you'.
- Use clear, calm statements that let your child know you expect them to go to school. Say 'when' rather than 'if'. For example, you can say, 'When you're at school tomorrow ...' instead of 'If you make it to school tomorrow ...'.
- Show that you believe your child can go to school by saying positive and encouraging things. For example, 'You're showing how brave you are by going to school'. This will build your child's self-confidence.
- Use direct statements that don't give your child the chance to say 'No!' For example, 'It's time to get out of bed' or 'Jo, please get up and into the shower'.

When you're at home with your child

- Stay calm. If your child sees that you're worried, stressed or frustrated, it can make your child's anxiety worse.
- Plan for a calm start to the day by having morning and evening routines. For example, get uniforms, lunches and school bags ready the night before, get your child to have a shower or bath in the evening, and get your child to bed at a regular time.
- Make your home 'boring' during school hours so that you don't accidentally reward your child for not going to school. This means little or no TV or video games and so on. You could think about not letting your child use their phone during school hours.
- Get your child to do work provided by the school while at home. This will help to make sure your child doesn't fall behind with class work.
- Provide consequences that reduce the amount of attention your child gets for not going to school – for example, an early bedtime or limited time with you at night.

Getting to school

- Get someone else to drop your child at school, if you can. Children often cope better with separation at home rather than at the school gate.

- Praise and reward (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/connecting-communicating/connecting/praise>) your child for going to school. For example, if your child goes regularly, they could earn bonus technology time, a special outing with a parent to their favourite park, or their favourite meal for dinner.



Your child needs your love and support to get back to school. So focus on any efforts your child makes to go back, be patient with your child's progress, and try to keep any frustration to yourself. This will help your child build the confidence they need to get back to school regularly.

Getting professional help for school refusal

Families can get professional help to learn about managing school refusal and to sort out the problems behind it.

If your child is saying they feel sick, make an appointment with your GP (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/general-practitioner>) to check it out.

If there are no physical reasons for your child feeling sick, your GP might refer you to a paediatrician (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/paediatrician>), psychiatrist (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/psychiatrist>) or psychologist (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/psychologist>).

A psychiatrist or psychologist will usually do an assessment to see whether the school refusal is linked to issues like anxiety or depression. Therapies and supports for school refusal will probably work better if your child is also getting help for anxiety or depression.

It's a good idea to ask your child's health professional about any strategies you can use at home to support your child's return to school.



Your GP will probably talk with you about a mental health treatment plan for your child. If you have a plan, you can get Medicare rebates for up to 20 sessions with a mental health professional. You can also get Medicare rebates for visits to a paediatrician.

Looking after yourself

School refusal can be hard to handle, and it can be very worrying. [Looking after yourself \(https://raisingchildren.net.au/grown-ups/looking-after-yourself/parenting/looking-after-yourself\)](https://raisingchildren.net.au/grown-ups/looking-after-yourself/parenting/looking-after-yourself) with healthy food, regular exercise and enough rest is good for your health and wellbeing. And when you're healthy and well, you'll be better able to support your child to go to school.

Getting support from a trusted friend or a mental health professional can often be a big help too.

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