



## School refusal, anxiety and attendance: Information for parents

### WHAT IS IT?

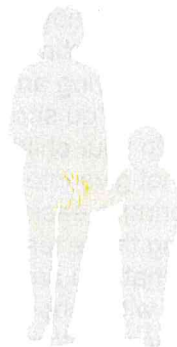
#### Anxiety

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. They may complain of a headache, sore stomach, nausea or tiredness. Behavioural symptoms may include tantrums, crying, avoidance or defiance.

It is important to understand the concerns your child may have about school 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 secondary school)
- Separation anxiety - where 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
- Academic pressure or problems
- Not getting along with teachers
- Fear of not having friends
- Bullying
- Moving house
- A change in a parent's job or 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.

#### 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.

### Form a partnership with school

It is important to have a good working relationship with the school. Talk with your child's teacher or principal.

Notify the school and let them know that you are having difficulty getting your child to school. Don't call in sick if your child is refusing to go to school. It's important that the school knows when things are difficult and when your child is really sick to be able to provide you with the best help.

Encourage your child to communicate with school staff about things they are finding difficult. If your child is able to do this, you can inform staff yourself.

### 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.

### It is better to arrive late, than not at all

If it has not been possible to get your child to school on time, keep trying to get them there even if they are going to be late. Notify the school of this.

### Give clear and firm messages about school

It is vital that you are clear with your child that they must go to school. Avoid vague messages.

For ideas, see the *School refusal, anxiety and attendance: Clear messages for parents* resource.

### Minimise 'benefits' to staying at home

- Ban or limit access to computer games, TV, mobile and the internet for the time your child is at home.
- Keep visitors to a minimum and don't make the day about your child.
- Have clear expectations about completing homework and home duties.

### Set up a reward plan

Develop a reward plan for preparation and attendance at school; for example, time on the computer/ internet or a nice afternoon tea treat, if they attend their first day/s back. A shopping trip with parent/family, or inviting a friend over on the weekend, may be good rewards if they attend for the whole week.



### Talk and listen

Talk to your child about school being an important place to meet friends, stay in touch with what other students are doing, and develop work and life skills.

Encourage your child to use words like 'worried' or 'anxious' instead of sick. It is supportive to convey empathy for how they are feeling without allowing them to stay at home.

### Ignore crying and tantrums

Having already established that health factors are not affecting your child, complaints of illness, crying and tantrums should be ignored. 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.

If your child refuses to get out of the car, inform the school and ask for assistance.



### Avoid a battle or negotiation

Offer strong and consistent messages without aggression. If your child is refusing to go to school, try and remain as calm as possible.

Speak firmly without raising your voice. Students are less likely to go to school after major conflict with their parent or parents.

Your child may try to get you to agree that they can go to school the next day instead. It is important you stick by your expectation for them to go school every day, including 'today'.

### Lead by example

Children learn a great deal by watching others. If your child sees you becoming constantly anxious and angry when faced with difficult situations, they too may learn to respond in this way. When you or other members of your family are calm and in control, your child will have examples which will help them overcome their difficulties in a calm way.

### 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, favourite 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 his/her anxiety.

Praise or 'talk up' all efforts that help them return to school or cope with anxiety provoking situations (eg. staying at school until recess, walking through the school corridors on their own etc.).

### 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 making a 'dry run' to school the day before. This may help 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.

Don't allow your child to sleep in or stay in bed for extended periods. Encourage them to get up and get dressed in their school uniform every school day.

If they refuse to get out of bed, you may need to turn on lights, open curtains and remove blankets. These actions show that you expect they will be attending school.

### Be ready yourself

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

### School drop-off

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. Be reliable and on time.

### 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.

## COMMON MISTAKES

It is also helpful to know what actions you should avoid when your child is refusing to go to school.

### **Don't show you are worried**

If you express your worries to your child, you may inadvertently reinforce their idea that there is something to worry about.

### **Don't be late at the end of day**

Your child may fear that you have forgotten them if you are late to collect them at the end of the day. Have a backup plan for the days you may run late to pick them up.

### **Don't allow extra days off after genuine sickness**

Return your child back to school as soon as they are well after genuine illness. Don't allow extra days off.

### **Don't take your child home from school if they're not genuinely sick**

Taking your child home when they are not genuinely sick can unintentionally support an avoidance strategy that creates more anxiety and avoidance in the future.

## Further assistance

Sometimes, all of these things do not work and you may need assistance from a mental health professional. Discuss your concerns with the school for further assistance.

If your child requires additional support the school may be able to assist through a referral to a service such as the school psychologist.

## References

- Monash University, Centre for Developmental Psychiatry and Psychology, *School Refusal Program*, viewed 17 November 2016, <<http://www.med.monash.edu.au/scs/psychiatry/developmental/clinical-research/school-refusal-program>>
- Anxiety House, *School Refusal*, viewed 17 November 2016, <<http://www.anxietyhouse.com.au/anxiety/school-refusal>>