

# Getting to school and staying at school

## INFORMATION FOR PARENTS AND CARERS

This handout has been created to share information and some strategies that you can use in assisting your child or adolescent who is refusing to attend school. School refusal is a complex issue, and many parents aren't sure what to do and it can become a source of enormous stress for the whole family. Talking with your child's teacher is the best place to start, so that you can work together on understanding the issues involved and coming up with a plan for getting your child back to school as soon as possible. If you are feeling uncertain and overwhelmed by the challenges, it could be beneficial for you to seek some support for yourself. You might find it helpful to also seek support through your family doctor, the school counsellor at your child's school, family friend, community based support worker, a religious or spiritual leader.

### What is school refusal?

Many children and adolescents will express reluctance to go to school at some point. However, there are a number of children and adolescents who find going to school so difficult that they refuse to go. The term 'school refusal' is often used when the poor attendance is related to some anxiety or worry that the child or adolescent has about going to school. Parents or carers are usually aware that their child is not going, and have been making efforts to alleviate the anxiety and to encourage the young person to attend school (Kearney & Albano, 2004). The student's themselves are often upset about what they are missing. This is different from truancy, which is a term more often used for students who generally hide their absences from their parents or carers, may be involved in antisocial activities, and are less likely to show emotional distress about attending or missing school (Wimmer, 2004).

School refusal can occur at all ages but has been found to occur more frequently during major changes in children's lives such as beginning kindergarten or the transition from primary to high school. Children and adolescents who are having problems with attending school may show more signs of school refusal following holidays, school camps, sports days and weekends, but in general could refuse to go to school any day of the week. There is no single cause for school refusal, and reasons will differ from child to child. Some children and adolescents are more sensitive and particularly vulnerable to emotional distress. School refusal can also be a sign of a developing mental health problem, such as anxiety or depression.

School issues such as bullying, academic difficulties, a change in schools, or problems with teachers and peers

are common reasons that may contribute to school refusal. Other triggers for school refusal might be related to events at home. Examples of potentially stressful events that have been associated with school refusal include moving house, the death of a loved one, undertaking caring roles for unwell family members, parental separation, and exposure to family violence (Wimmer, 2004).

### What are the signs of school refusal?

If your child has missed school 2-3 times over a two-week period, especially if related to some of the behaviours described below, your child may be developing a pattern of school refusal:

- Tearfulness before school or repeated pleas to stay at home resulting in frequent lateness or absences
- Tantrums, clinginess, dawdling or running away before school or during drop off
- 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 periods spent in sick bay or in principal's office.

### What are the consequences of school refusal?

School refusal is a serious issue and needs to be managed early, as long absences mean that children miss out on important parts of the curriculum. Children and adolescents who school refuse can very quickly become entrenched in a long-term pattern of school refusal, which can have major long-term impacts for them and their family. Missing one day of school each week



adds up to 2 months' worth of learning missed over a year, and it has been shown that every day absent in high school has an impact on numeracy skills (Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2013).

Missing out on education is detrimental to lifelong learning and development in many ways. A week is 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 routines, and might even affect income as parents or carers forgo work to stay home with the child. Some research has shown that school refusal has been associated with a higher chance of having problems later in life with mental health and social relationships, in addition to affecting the ability to get employment (Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2013; Silove et al., 2002; Flakierska-Praquin et al., 1997).

## How can you help at home?

As challenging as the situation may be, it is important to try and remain calm and not make too big a deal of the school refusal as this could inadvertently prolong the school refusal behaviour. Keep up with extra-curricular and family activities to support resilience and give your child the experience of enjoyment and success. Some of the following tips may be useful (Bernstein, 2014):

- It is important to listen to your child's concerns and fears of going to school. Some of the reasons for refusing to attend school may include a peer who is bullying them, problems on the bus or carpool ride to school, or fears of inability to keep up with the other
- students in the classroom. These issues can be addressed if they are known.
- If your child is complaining of illness, it is recommended that you visit your family doctor to have this checked out.
- School refusal can be a sign of developing mental health problems like anxiety and depression. If your child or adolescent tells you they are having problems like this, or if you have noticed they have had other changes in mood or behaviour, it would be good to discuss these with the school counsellor or your child's family doctor. They can help advise whether these kinds of problems could be playing a role and, if so, what to do next.
- Being firm and kind in getting your child to school regularly and on time will help, including not prolonging the goodbyes.
- Reassure your child that you will be at home upon their return from school. Keep your message consistent.
- Let your child know that you will be doing "boring stuff" at home during the school day, or going to work, so they don't think they are missing out on something.
- If your child simply refuses to go to school, some parents have found that decreasing the reward for staying home helps e.g. if they stay at home, do not allow video games, television, toys, snacking, parental attention.
- Find out what subjects/work is being done at school and provide similar education at home, when possible. This is especially relevant if your child's reported "sickness" seems to disappear once they are allowed to stay at home.
- Praise your child's positive behaviours while ignoring the negative behaviour.
- Seek professional help for yourself and your child.

## Everybody has a responsibility to help children

Families, carers, the student, the school and the community

School refusal could be thought of as a symptom, like when a child develops a fever. Investigating to find out the cause early on and then taking appropriate steps is the best way to keep the situation from developing into something more serious.

### Missing school matters and every day counts

#### If kids go to school...



Consent to reprint image given by Council of Catholic School Parents, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Parent Committee 2014.



## What to do at school?

- Talk to your child's class teacher or year advisor as soon as practical. It is important that parents and school staff share an understanding of the issue and are in agreement with how to develop strategies to address the school refusal behaviour. Don't be afraid to work with the school staff on this issue, as they will also be eager to work with you to help get your child back to class.
- Prolonged goodbyes in the playground may become difficult, so plan an exit strategy with the school staff, and stick to it, despite the upset that might ensue.
- Be on time to pick up your child from school if you provide transportation.

Despite the difficulties that school refusal brings to your family, it is important to have confidence that these behaviours can be resolved with appropriate support and time. This will help model to your child that they too can have confidence they will overcome this difficulty (Flakierska-Praquin et al., 1997).

Parents and carers can find it difficult to respond to their child's school refusal. You might find yourself becoming impatient and frustrated. It is also common that, when faced with parenting challenges, parents/carers find themselves disagreeing about how best to respond to their child's behaviour. Remember it will take patience and time, be open to getting support, and know that occasionally you might have to change your approach to find what will work for your child or adolescent.

## Who can you approach for help?

### At school

Seeking support from the staff at your child's school can be helpful as there are ways that they can help you turn this behaviour around. Schools and parents can work collaboratively to help the students to develop better coping skills, relax, and improve social skills. School personnel that can assist you include the class teacher, year advisor, welfare staff, home school liaison officers, Principal, Assistant Principal and the school counsellor. If you feel that you have not succeeded in getting the support you require, don't give up. Try approaching someone else at the school.

### In the community

There are a variety of resources available in the community. Some of these may be able to help with different aspects of what might be contributing to your child's difficulty attending school, or with more general stresses on the family. A few are listed below, and many more can be found on the websites listed under "Useful links and resources".

If you, your child's school counsellor, or their family doctor thinks your child or adolescent may benefit from specialist community mental health services, you can find out more information about the mental health services in your local area by calling the NSW Mental Health Line: 1800 011 511.

Information specific to **Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander services** can be found by visiting the following [www.cesphn.org.au/programs/aboriginal-health](http://www.cesphn.org.au/programs/aboriginal-health)

If you are new to Australia and would like some additional support around family life in a new country, you may wish to contact the organisations listed below. They will also have access to interpreter services and translated materials.

- **Ethnic Communities' Council of NSW**  
[www.eccnsw.org.au/Home.aspx](http://www.eccnsw.org.au/Home.aspx)  
Phone (02) 9319 0288
- **Transcultural Mental Health Centre NSW**  
[www.dhi.health.nsw.gov.au/tmhc/](http://www.dhi.health.nsw.gov.au/tmhc/)  
Phone 1800 648 911 (free call) or (02) 9912 3851
- **Asylum Seekers Centre**  
[www.asylumseekerscentre.org.au](http://www.asylumseekerscentre.org.au)  
Phone (02) 9078 1900

## Useful links and resources

- **beyondblue**  
[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

The organisation provides a website with a large number of resources and links for answering questions and finding treatments for people with depression, anxiety disorders and related mental disorders. The website includes pages of content for parents/carers and for young people.

- **Black Dog Institute**  
[www.blackdoginstitute.org.au](http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au)

The Black Dog Institute website has information on diagnosis, treatments and prevention of mood disorders such as depression and bipolar disorder.

- **Children of Parents with Mental Illness (COPMI)**  
[www.copmi.net.au](http://www.copmi.net.au)

This national initiative promotes better outcomes for children and families where a parent experiences mental illness, by providing information and support to children and young people who have parents with mental illness, and their families and friends. The website has information on what to do when irregular school attendance is related to the child or young person's caring role for a parent or family member with a mental illness.



● **Family Referral Service**  
[www.familyreferralservice.com.au](http://www.familyreferralservice.com.au)

The Family Referral Service (FRS) brings together families, support services and community resources to support families. Referrals can be made by young people, parents, or extended family members and helps with appropriate referral to a variety of public and private services dealing with a broad variety of issues, including family violence, housing, financial assistance, counselling and mediation, parenting, mental health, and finding culturally appropriate support.

● **headspace**  
[www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)

headspace is the National Youth Mental Health Foundation for young people aged 12-25 years. The foundation hosts an online support website: [ehespace.org.au](http://ehespace.org.au) and have over 70 headspace centres around Australia. headspace provides support in four main areas: physical health, mental health, education, employment and other services and alcohol and other drug services.

● **Kids Help Line**  
[www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au) | 1800 55 1800

Kids Helpline is a free, 24 hour, private, confidential, telephone and online counselling service specifically for young people aged between 5-25 years.

● **Mental Health Line** | 1800 011 511

The Mental Health Line is a 24-hour telephone service operating seven days a week across NSW. The Mental Health Line is the centralised referral to NSW Health public mental health services.

● **Parent Line NSW**  
[www.parentline.org.au](http://www.parentline.org.au) | 1300 1300 52

Parent Line is a telephone counselling, information and referral service for parents of children aged 0-18 years who live in New South Wales. The service includes the Early Childhood Intervention Information Line, which provides information for parents who are concerned about their child's development, or who have a child who has been diagnosed with a disability. The aim of Parent Line is to nurture and support positive, caring relationships between parents, children, teenagers and significant other people who are important to the well-being of families.

● **Raising Children Network**  
[raisingchildren.net.au](http://raisingchildren.net.au)

A website formed through a partnership with the Australian Government and a network of leading early childhood agencies to provide parents with reliable

information and resources to support them in the day-to-day work of raising children and looking after their own needs. The website is growing all the time and covers a range of parenting topics.

● **Reach Out!**  
[reachout.com](http://reachout.com)

ReachOut.com is a large, nationwide online youth mental health service. It is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, to provide practical information, tools and support to young people from everyday troubles to really tough times.

● **The Brave Program**  
[braveonline.psy.uq.edu.au](http://braveonline.psy.uq.edu.au)

The BRAVE Program is an interactive, online intervention for the prevention and treatment of childhood and adolescent anxiety. The programs are free, and provide ways for children and teenagers to better cope with their worries. There are separate programs for children, teens, and parents.

● **Young Carers NSW**  
[www.youngcarersnsw.org.au](http://www.youngcarersnsw.org.au) | 1800 242 636

The Carers NSW Young Carer Program was developed to make a positive difference to the lives of young carers and their families. Young carers are children and young people, 25 years or under, who help to support a family member or friend who has a disability, mental illness, drug or alcohol dependency, chronic condition, terminal illness or who is frail. This is a free service that can support any young carer.

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