

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 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, so 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 hard to get them to go.

School refusal is **not a formal psychiatric diagnosis**. It's a name for an emotional 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.



School refusal can be an issue for children in both primary and secondary school, but it's more common in children aged 5-6 years and 10-11 years.

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/toddlers/health-daily-care/mental-health/phobias-panic-attacks-pts>), learning difficulties (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/school-education/learning-difficulties/learning-disabilities-signs-and-support>), 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/pre-teens/behaviour/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 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/pre-teens/school-education/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 use a problem-solving approach (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/behaviour/encouraging-good-behaviour/problem-solving-steps>) to the things that make it hard for them to leave home or go to school.
- 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 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 can help your child. These staff might include the student welfare coordinator, school psychologist or counsellor. 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 them 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/pre-teens/school-education/bullying-school/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 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.
- Praise (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/behaviour/encouraging-good-behaviour/praise>) your child when they show brave behaviour, like getting ready for school. For example, you could say, 'I know this is hard for you, but I think it's great that you're giving it a go. Well done'.

- 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.

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 your child when they actually go to school. You could also consider rewarding them. 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 (https://raisingchildren.net.au/_media/external-links/h/healthdirect-mental-health-care-plan) for your child. If you have a plan, you can get Medicare rebates for up to 10 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>) 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.

Acknowledgements

Our content is regularly reviewed for quality and currency. The last review of this article was by Dr Jo Winther, clinical psychologist, The Royal Children's Hospital Mental Health Service, Melbourne. Scientific Advisory Board (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/about-us/our-experts-partners/scientific-advisory-board>) review was provided by Clinical Professor David Bennett.

References

Fremont, W.P. (2003). School refusal in children and adolescents. *American Family Physician*, 68(8), 1555-1561. Retrieved 18 November 2022 from <https://www.aafp.org/afp/2003/1015/p1555.html>.

Heyne, D., Gren-Landell, M., Melvin, G., & Gentle-Genitty, C. (2019). Differentiation between school attendance problems: Why and how? *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*, 26(1), 8-34. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cbpra.2018.03.006>.

Heyne, D., King, N.J., Tonge, B.J., & Cooper, H. (2001). School refusal: Epidemiology and management. *Paediatric Drugs*, 3(10), 719-732. <https://doi.org/10.2165/00128072-200103100-00002>.

Heyne, D., King, N.J., Tonge, B.J., Rollings, S., Young, D., Pritchard, M., & Ollendick, T.H. (2002). Evaluation of child therapy and caregiver training in the treatment of school refusal. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 41(6), 687-695. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00004583-200206000-00008>.

Kawsar, S., Yilanli, M., & Marwaha, R. (2022). *School refusal*. National Library of Medicine. Retrieved 18 November 2022 from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK534195/>.

Kearney, C.A. (2008). School absenteeism and school refusal behavior in youth: A contemporary review. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 28(3), 451-471. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2007.07.012>.

King, N.J., & Bernstein, G.A. (2001). School refusal in children and adolescents: A review of the past 10 years. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 40(2), 197-205. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00004583-200102000-00014>.

Magne Ingul, J., Havik, T., & Heyne, D. (2019). Emerging school refusal: A school-based framework for identifying early signs and risk factors. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*, 26(1), 46-62. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cbpra.2018.03.005>.

Maynard, B.R., Brendel, K.E., Bulanda, J.J., Heyne, D., Thompson, A.M., & Pigott, T.D. (2015). Psychosocial interventions for school refusal with primary and secondary school students: A systematic review. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 11(1), 1-76. <https://doi.org/10.4073/csr.2015.12>.

Maynard, B.R., Heyne, D., Eposito Brendel, K., Bulanda, J.J., Thompson, A.M., & Pigott, T.D. (2018). Treatment for school refusal among children and adolescents: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 28(1), 56-67. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731515598619>.

McShane, G., Walter, G., & Rey, J.M. (2001). Characteristics of adolescents with school refusal. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 35(6), 822-826. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1440-1614.2001.00955.x>.

Preece, D., & Howley, M. (2018). An approach to supporting young people with autism spectrum disorder and high anxiety to re-engage with formal education - the impact on young people and their families. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 23(4), 468-481. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2018.1433695>.

Reissner, V., Jost, D., Krahn, U., Knollmann, M., Weschenfelder, A-K., Neumann, A., Wasem, J., & Hebebrand, J. (2015). The treatment of school avoidance in children and adolescents with psychiatric illness. *Deutsches Ärzteblatt International*, 112(39), 655-662. <https://doi.org/10.3238%2Farztebl.2015.0655>.

Last updated or reviewed

31-12-2022

SUPPORTED BY



Australian Government
Department of Social Services

Raising Children Network is supported by the Australian Government. Member organisations are the Parenting Research Centre and the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute with The Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health.

At raisingchildren.net.au we acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we live, gather and work. We recognise their continuing connection to land, water and community. We pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

[Privacy statement](#) | [Terms of use](#)

© 2006-2023 Raising Children Network (Australia) Limited. All rights reserved.

Warning: This website and the information it contains is not intended as a substitute for professional consultation with a qualified practitioner.