



School refusal

Children and young people are sometimes reluctant to attend school and can become significantly worried or upset to the point of refusing to do so.

What is school refusal?

School refusal is not 'wagging' or truancy – it's where non-attendance is related to worry or anxiety about going to school.

Students who refuse to go to school don't typically engage in the antisocial behaviours usually linked with truancy (such as lying, stealing or destruction of property). Unlike truancy, the absence isn't usually hidden from family. In fact, families may have attempted many strategies to reduce the child or young person's [anxiety](#) to help them attend school. Refusal can be considered as an emotional problem rather than misbehaviour.

What are the signs?

It's not unusual for students to sometimes be nervous or worried about going to school.

But for some students, this worry and anxiety can be excessive and can lead to school refusal. As an educator, you might notice some of the following signs of school refusal, including:

- tantrums, clinginess, dawdling or running away on arrival (in primary school-aged children)

- frequent complaints of illness (such as stomach aches, headaches, dizziness or fatigue)
- frequent requests to go home or call a family member
- absence or lateness to school after weekends, holidays, school camps or sports days
- long, unexplained absences from school
- periodic absences or missed classes, with no explanation given
- absences on specific days (such as sports day or days with tests)
- frequent lateness to school
- long periods spent in the sick bay or the school office.

These symptoms can also be the result of other chronic health conditions. It's important to work with the child or young person's family, and liaise with other professionals who might be involved, to understand the underlying cause of these signs.

Families may indicate their child or young person is experiencing issues at home, such as morning tearfulness prior to school, difficulty falling asleep the night before or protesting going to school the next day. They may also report oppositional or

challenging behaviour from a child or young person intent on avoiding school. It's important to share information with families as soon as possible and seek their perspective on these issues.

Read about how you can [promote school attendance](#).

Be You Professional Learning

Check out tips for creating and maintaining strong relationships with families in the [Family Partnerships](#) domain.

What causes school refusal?

There are lots of reasons why a student might refuse school.

The reasons will be different for each child or young person. School refusal can happen at any age but is more likely to occur during times of [transition](#) (for example, starting primary or secondary school) or major family events (such as separation or family bereavement). Usually, there's no single event or reason, but rather various factors that contribute to a child or young person's non-attendance.

Contributing factors might include:

- anxiety about social situations
- anxiety around activities that involve performance or evaluation (such as sports days, tests or speaking in front of the class)
- peer issues, such as social isolation, bullying or conflict with friends
- difficulty or conflict with educators
- academic problems or learning difficulties
- anxiety around being separated from significant family members
- traumatic events, such as family illness, grief or parental separation/divorce, exposure to family violence
- difficulties with transition, such as moving to a new school
- mental health issues.

School refusal, non-attendance or reluctance to attend are symptoms of an underlying problem.

It's important to identify, understand and address these deeper causes when supporting a child or

young person to return to school or attend consistently. Getting help from support services within the school or local community can be a good first step, as early detection and intervention is essential. The longer the issue persists, the more difficult it can be to re-engage the child or young person with their learning.

What are the consequences?

School refusal is a serious issue that's best managed early.

Long absences mean children and young people miss out on large chunks of the curriculum. School refusal can also create conflict and strained relationships within families through disruptions to their routines. It might even affect income when family members forgo work to stay home with the child or young person.

Children and young people who miss school by refusing to attend might also face long-term problems. Research shows school refusal can contribute to mental health issues, emotional and social issues, exiting school early and employment challenges in later life.

References

- 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.
- Inglés, C. J., González-Maciá, C., García-Fernández, J. M., Vicent, M., & Martínez-Monteaudo, M. C. (2015). Current status of research on school refusal. *European Journal of Education and Psychology*, 8(1), 37-52.
- Kearney, C. A. (2008). School absenteeism and school refusal behavior in youth: A contemporary review. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 28(3), 451–471.
- McKay-Brown, L. (2016). Getting school refusers back to class. Melbourne: University of Melbourne Graduate School of Education. Retrieved from <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/getting-school-refusers-back-to-class>.
- NSW Government Ministry of Health. (2014). School Refusal – every school day counts. Sydney: NSW Health. Retrieved from

<http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/kidsfamilies/youth/Documents/forum-speaker-presentations/2017/webster-greenberg-sr-booklet.pdf>.

Raising Children Network. School refusal: 5-8 years. Retrieved from <https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/school-learning/school-refusal/school-refusal>

Raising Children Network. Truancy and school refusal: 9-15 years. Retrieved from

<https://raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/school-education/truancy-other-school-problems/truancy-9-15-years>

Wimmer, M. (2008). Why kids refuse to go to school and what schools can do about it. *Education Digest*, 74(3) 32-37.