

School Can't Australia

Themes from researching Parent Perspectives

A collaboration between



This qualitative study gathered families' accounts of the challenges they face, focusing on their perspectives and lived experiences, to identify effective and ineffective practices in supporting school attendance. The findings reveal unmet needs and highlight what families believe helps improve attendance.

Participants

The study participants included parents/carers from around Australia (excluding the ACT, NT, and Tasmania) who had children who have experienced or are experiencing School Can't.

The students ranged in age from 5 to 17. The interviewees comprised 50% of primary school children (37.5% in Grade 5/6 and 12.5% in Kindergarten to Grade 4) and 50% of high school children (18.75% in Grade 7/8, 18.75% in Grade 9/10, and 12.5% in Grade 11/12). Of these students, 56.25% were enrolled in government schools, 6.25% in Catholic schools and 37.5% in independent schools.

A pre-qualifying questionnaire ensured a balanced participant group, identified through volunteer requests on the School Can't Australia Parent/Carer Peer Support Group Facebook. As agreed by the School Can't admin team and board, selected families represented diverse geographical locations, ages, and circumstances.

Each of the families selected received an email with a choice of interview dates and times. Once agreed upon, participants received a zoom invitation with the researchers' contact details. All the participants were 18 years or older. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality of the participants was preserved. A total of 21 participants made a time to be interviewed; however, 23.8% were no-shows, resulting in a final sample of 16 completed interviews.

Data Collection Methods

The primary method of data collection included parent/carer interviews conducted over the teleconferencing platform Zoom over a two-week period in October 2024.

Interviews

An open-ended, semistructured interview guide was used and prepared in a way that ensured the same basic lines of inquiry were pursued by each parent/carer interviewed. The average interview lasted 43 minutes.

Interview Questions

In line with the narrative storytelling approach, the interview questions arose organically through discussions with participants. Please tell us your School Can't story/background
What have you found works when dealing with schools?
What have you found does not work?

Transcripts from Interviews

Interviews were recorded in Zoom and then transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis Methods

Identification of significant statements
Identify categories of statements common to all participants
Identification of themes
Organise categories of significant statements by themes

Peer Debriefing

A peer review was conducted between researchers to identify key statements and themes following each interview. Discussions regarding the congruency of emerging finding, as well as tentative interpretations, followed this process. In the process of debriefing, the meanings were explored, and the basis of interpretations was clarified. Discussions with peers helped to clarify key ideas about practices families find effective or ineffective, which have been used by schools to support School Can't students.



1. The Onset of School Can't

Families find that school can't can emerge from a combination of stressors that occur within the school environment, such as experiences with overwhelm, struggles with change, and negative experiences. It often begins as a response to unaddressed challenges, such as learning difficulties or overwhelming changes. Early signs may be subtle, but without proper intervention, they can escalate into a more persistent school can't state. These are common triggers that lead to the development of school can't.

In many cases, school can't students are neurodivergent and/or experience anxiety in response to these stressors. Consequently, they can find the school environment very difficult to manage. Incidents and experiences can escalate to feeling unsafe, which exacerbates their difficulties in attending school.

Sub Themes

Overwhelm and Stressors as Triggers

For many school can't students, external stressors in the school environment are a primary trigger for their school can't which is associated with anxiety and trauma for the school can't student. These stressors can be related to academic pressures, social interactions, or sensory overload and may contribute to overwhelming feelings that make attending school unbearable.

When the stress response is activated, many students can experience a flight/flight or freeze response which can make it hard to leave home.

Difficulty with Transitions and Change

Changes, whether small daily transitions or larger shifts (such as moving to a new school year or classroom), can be challenging for many school can't students. When changes and transitions aren't managed properly, they may contribute to anxiety and flight responses, associated with school can't.

When students perceive changes as sudden and unexpected, they may feel unsupported and anticipate being misunderstood, responses that are often accompanied by freezing or withdrawal.

Negative School Experiences and Trauma

Negative experiences, such as bullying, misunderstandings, or being harshly disciplined for distress or regulatory behaviours and may contribute to feelings of shame and fear. Being belittled or disciplined for behaviours that are natural to them can be confusing. Sometimes they are made to feel "naughty" or "bad" or different.

Over time, these experiences may contribute to the development of school can't.

1. Understanding the Onset of School Can't

Supporting verbatim

Overwhelm and Stressors as Triggers

"It started with her feeling anxious about certain subjects, especially maths. She'd come home crying, saying she felt stupid. Eventually, the anxiety spread to the point where she couldn't face going to school at all. Every day was a battle."

"My son began avoiding school after a particularly bad experience with a teacher who didn't understand his sensory issues. He was terrified of being in that environment, and over time, his anxiety just grew to cover the whole idea of school."

"The anxiety was subtle at first. He'd make excuses to stay home, saying he didn't feel well. But it escalated when he started having panic attacks in the morning before school. That's when I realised it was more than just a phase."

Difficulty with Transitions and Change

"He was fine in primary school, but moving to high school was a huge shock. The different classes, teachers, and new faces—he couldn't handle it, and he just started refusing to go altogether. It felt like overnight, everything changed."

"Any change to the routine would send her into a meltdown. When they changed her classroom, she couldn't cope. She felt like everything was different and that she didn't belong there anymore. That's when she started refusing to go."

"Even something as simple as a new seating arrangement could throw him off. He'd get so upset that he couldn't concentrate, and eventually, he just refused to go because he didn't want to deal with those unexpected changes."

Negative School Experiences and Trauma

"She was constantly getting into trouble for not sitting still, but no one understood that it wasn't something she could control. After being sent to detention multiple times, she started faking being sick to avoid going."

"He had a terrible experience with bullying that the school didn't really address. They told him to ignore it, but it kept happening. Eventually, he just refused to go back because he felt like no one was on his side."

"The way they handled his outbursts was so harsh. Instead of trying to understand why he was acting out, they'd punish him, and he'd come home crying. He was scared of getting in trouble, so he just started avoiding school altogether."



2. Feeling safe

School can't students often have a very strong need to feel secure and understood in their school environment. When they don't feel safe - emotionally, psychologically or physically - this may contribute to distress and a sense of isolation.

Families have reported that their student's self-esteem can be impacted by feeling singled out or when they feel unprotected in the school environment. When schools create a supportive and inclusive atmosphere that acknowledges and addresses these needs it can support the student's feelings of safety.

Sub Themes

Psychological and Emotional Safety

Families noted that students often look for ways to escape overwhelming situations, displaying "flight or fight" responses. Many school can't students become very stressed by the school environment and therefore need support to regulate their nervous systems when situations escalate.

Stress responses can be associated with behaviours that are misinterpreted and punished as they can be construed as defiance or angry outbursts when they actually indicate a need for understanding and support.

Belonging and Self-Perception

Many school can't students feel "broken" or lose their sense of belonging, most often when they're not understood or accommodated. Even small changes can be too complex for them to manage on their own, this is often associated with chronic stress which may worsen due to delays in diagnosis.

Without a sense of belonging, they can feel misunderstood and disconnected, leading to heightened anxiety which should be addressed by helping the student to feel safe, rather than exposing them to further stress.

Protection from Bullying and Exclusion

Many school can't students have been targets for bullying because they were different. Parents talked about school policies that were extremely effective against racist or misogynistic behaviours, but less effective in preventing bullying of students considered 'different,' which is frequently linked with heightened anxiety.

Ensuring every student's safety means protecting them from being singled out and creating an environment where diversity is respected.

2. Feeling safe

Supporting verbatim

Psychological and Emotional Safety

"Some days he wouldn't go. He would just freeze, and there was no way of getting him into the classroom. It wasn't just refusal; it was like his whole body shut down. We'd see this switch flip, and he'd become so overwhelmed by the thought of facing the school environment. It was more than anxiety; it was a complete shutdown of his nervous system."

"The psychologist told us to make home boring, but he would just escalate when we pushed him to go to school, so we couldn't follow that advice. It felt like we were stuck. If we tried to encourage him to go, his stress levels would go through the roof, and it would end up making things worse. He needed to feel safe, not pushed."

"There were days when my child would just freeze at the thought of going to school, often escalating into panic attacks. It wasn't just avoidance; it was pure distress that she couldn't express. She would just sit in the car, shaking, and refuse to move. I knew then that forcing her wasn't the solution."

Belonging and Self-Perception

"When he stopped wearing the school uniform, it was his way of saying he didn't belong. He would tell me, 'What's the point? I'm not part of this.' It wasn't about rebellion; it was about feeling disconnected and misunderstood. For him, the uniform symbolised a place where he didn't feel safe."

"Even small changes, like a new teacher or a different classroom layout, would completely throw her off. She'd feel so anxious and out of place that she couldn't focus on anything else. And because she didn't understand why she felt that way, she started believing there was something wrong with her."

"Chronic stress built up because of the lack of understanding at school. They thought she was just being difficult, but it was clear she was struggling to cope. The delays in getting her diagnosed meant she kept thinking she was just 'bad' at things, which really hurt her self-esteem."

Protection from Bullying and Exclusion

"He used to come home and tell me about the names they would call him because he was different. It broke my heart because he tried so hard to fit in, but the other kids wouldn't let him. No matter how much the school said they were anti-bullying, he was still targeted every day, and no one seemed to know how to address it."

"The inclusion policies sound great on paper, but in reality, they're just putting all the kids together without the proper support. My child was bullied because she was 'weird,' and instead of helping her, they just told her to 'ignore it.' How is that making her feel safe?"

"There's a misconception that if you're neurodivergent, you're automatically going to be the target of bullying. But what they don't understand is that it's not the differences that cause bullying; it's the lack of education around those differences. Schools need to foster an environment where diversity is seen as a strength, not a weakness."



3. They Do What They Can Do

School can't students are often responding to school-related challenges and stressors with an involuntary freeze response, despite often having a strong desire to attend school.

Often, their attempts to cope are misunderstood, and they may internalise their stress, a pattern associated with distress.

Sub Themes

Responses to Overwhelm and Trauma

Families noted that their school can't students frequently experience overwhelm and school based trauma. This may develop in the context of learning difficulties, discipline for their behaviour or unsupported transitions, which can affect a child's self-esteem. When school can't students are made to feel "naughty" or "bad," they may withdraw to seek safety.

Families found that an approach grounded in compassion, kindness and understanding, combined with efforts to reduce school-based challenges, may better support students than disciplinary measures or singling them out and may reduce the likelihood of escalation, overwhelm and trauma.

Mitigating Stress Load and Agency

School can't students may at times feel embarrassed when expected to act differently from their peers, and this is often associated with feelings of overwhelm. While they seek a sense of control over their lives, intense stress may be expressed through fight, flight, or freeze responses, which are sometimes misinterpreted as defiance.

When accommodations and supports are provided to aid regulation, it is important that their use is normalised so that students do not feel embarrassed to use them.

Masking Behaviours

Some students "mask their struggles at school, which may contribute to schools underestimating or questioning parents' reports of difficulties at home, including serious concerns such as self-harm or suicidal ideation. Families are often told, "they seem fine at school," while observing their child experiencing significant distress at home.

Families want to feel believed and to help schools understand the whole picture of what is occurring with their school can't student. Without proper information-sharing, teachers may miss vital cues to provide support.

3. They Do What They Can Do

Supporting verbatim Responses to Overwhelm and Trauma

"My daughter had severe anxiety, and every little change at school would set her off. She felt so overwhelmed by it all, especially when she had a hard time keeping up with reading. It was like she was being punished for something she couldn't control. She would shut down, refuse to go, and they'd just think she was being stubborn, but it was trauma. The whole experience of trying to learn, failing, and then being misunderstood by her teachers just reinforced her fears."

"There were so many days when my son was just unable to even get out of bed because the thought of going to school was too much. It started with a reading difficulty, and it felt like the school did nothing to help. They would label him as lazy, but he wasn't. He just couldn't cope, and every time he felt like he was failing, it was like another piece of him broke. That's when the anxiety attacks started."

"My child used to love going to school until she started struggling with some subjects. The teachers didn't really notice at first, and by the time they did, she had developed this severe anxiety. We tried to explain that it wasn't about not wanting to go, but about being scared of failing and being judged. It was heartbreaking to see how she would freeze, and the teachers just thought she was misbehaving."

Mitigating Stress Load and Agency

"The school didn't understand how much my son needed things to be predictable. He hated having to do things differently from the other kids, but that's what he needed. When they changed his routine or forced him to do things in a way that didn't suit him, he'd feel embarrassed and out of control. He'd either lash out or completely shut down. They saw it as defiance, but he just wanted to have a say in how he managed his day."

"My son would often come home and just fall apart. He would hold it together all day, masking his anxiety, and then he'd just collapse from the stress. It was his way of coping, but the school didn't see that. To them, he was fine because he wasn't acting out. But at home, we'd see the real effects — the crying, the frustration, the self-doubt. He was trying so hard to do things his way, but it was never enough."

"There was this one time when my daughter's teacher tried to make her join a group activity she wasn't comfortable with. She panicked and ran out of the room. It wasn't about not wanting to join in, it was because she didn't have the control she needed to feel safe. But instead of understanding that, they just saw it as her being difficult."

Masking Behaviours

"We fought so hard to get the school to recognise that our son was struggling, but they kept telling us there was no problem because he was doing okay academically. What they didn't see was the effort it took for him to hold it together all day. He'd come home exhausted, depressed, and even self-harming because he was trying so hard to hide how much he was struggling."

"My daughter would mask her anxiety so well that the school didn't believe us when we said she was having panic attacks. They only saw a quiet, polite child who didn't cause trouble. But they weren't there when she was crying at home, begging not to go back. It took years before anyone took us seriously, and by then, the damage was done."

"The school kept saying that everything seemed fine because she wasn't acting out, but that was only because she was so good at pretending. She'd come home and have complete meltdowns, and it took forever for us to even get them to acknowledge there might be an issue. They just didn't see how much energy she was putting into hiding her struggles, and it was exhausting for her."



4. The School Approach

Schools often struggle to identify the early signs of school can't behaviour and inconsistent or inadequate support may compound students' distress. At times, gaps in teacher training or resources limit educators' ability to recognise signs of stress and respond effectively to neurodivergent students.

Although supports and accommodations are sometimes agreed upon with families, these may be implemented inconsistently or ineffectively. In some cases, students and parents are asked to participate in face-to-face meetings with panels of educators and school representatives, which can feel intimidating and place pressure on families to accept plans that may be impractical for the student or, in some instances, compound a school can't student's trauma

Sub Themes

Inconsistent and Poorly Executed Support

In some cases, schools agree to support plans, interventions and additional assistance, but these may not always be implemented consistently. Factors such as teacher absences or part-time availability of support staff can make communication across the school uneven, which in turn creates gaps in the continuity of support. For students, this inconsistency may contribute to confusion and heightened stress.

Families are looking for proactive support to help their child return to school rather than unpredictable circumstances that compound the students' anxiety.

Gaps in Training and Understanding

Teachers and support staff can lack training in how to support neurodivergent behaviours. At times, stress responses are misunderstood as behavioural issues, rather than being recognised as indicators of a need for trauma-informed approaches.

Without appropriate responses, students' distress may intensify, and for some, this can contribute to an eventual inability to attend school.

Systemic Barriers and Power Imbalance

Parents may experience a power imbalance in their interactions with schools, at times feeling dismissed or undermined when advocating for their child. Formal school panel meetings, particularly when attended without adequate support, can feel intimidating and place pressure on families to agree to plans they perceive as not in their child's best interests.

Access to supports may also be delayed when schools require a formal diagnosis, which can contribute to escalating challenges. Parents have reported that greater emphasis is placed on attendance than on the student's wellbeing.

4. The School Approach

Supporting verbatim

Inconsistent and Poorly Executed Support

"When his key support staff was absent, nobody knew what to do. There was no backup plan, and it left him clinging to me, unable to attend school. The inconsistency is exhausting because just one absence can derail an entire week."

"There was this idea that once something was working, we could just take the support away, like everything was fixed. But as soon as they did, my son regressed. The lack of consistent support just sends us back to square one."

"The whole system is reactive. They only act when something goes wrong. We needed consistent, ongoing support, but they only paid attention when a crisis hit."

"We had an Individual Education Plan (IEP) set up, and everything seemed fine on paper. But in reality, there was no follow-through. Each new teacher would act like it was the first time they were hearing about my child's needs, and we'd have to start the process all over again. It was exhausting, and it meant my daughter kept falling through the cracks."

"Consistency was a big issue. One teacher would be supportive, and then the next would completely ignore the accommodations that were supposed to be in place. My son never knew what to expect, which just added to his anxiety. It felt like we were constantly having to remind them of what they had agreed to do."

"There was no accountability. They'd say they'd follow the support plan, but when it came down to it, they wouldn't implement it."

Gaps in Training and Understanding

"The teachers don't get it. They see him struggling but don't understand why. They have no training on how to support neurodivergent kids, so they just treat it like bad behaviour. It's frustrating."

"They don't know what school refusal even means. I had to explain it to them, and they just looked at me like I was making it up. Without proper training, they can't possibly support these kids."

"The lack of understanding around mental health is glaring. If it was a physical issue, they'd be all over it. But because it's anxiety, they just ignore it, thinking it will go away."

"I don't think teachers are given the right tools or training to understand neurodivergent behaviours. They'd see my child getting anxious and label it as 'acting out.' But it wasn't bad behaviour; it was a cry for help. They just didn't know how to handle it, and that lack of understanding made everything worse."

"I had to explain to the school what sensory processing issues are and why certain environments could trigger meltdowns for my child. I mean, shouldn't they already know this? It's frustrating when you have to educate the educators, especially when your kid is suffering in the meantime."

"There was one incident where a teacher told my daughter to 'just calm down' during a panic attack, as if she could control it. That's when I knew there was a serious lack of training. They didn't understand what anxiety looks like or how to support her through it. It was heartbreaking to see."

Systemic Barriers and Power Imbalance

"We were told over and over that nothing could be done without a formal diagnosis, but getting one is a long, costly process. It feels like an excuse to avoid doing anything."

"They used funding as a shield. Every time we asked for more support, they'd say there was no money. But these are kids' lives we're talking about. You can't put a price on that."

"As a parent, you're made to feel powerless. They're the professionals, so when they dismiss your concerns, it's like your voice doesn't matter. It's a constant battle."

"Every time we asked for more support, we were met with excuses about budgets and policies. It felt like they were hiding behind red tape so they wouldn't have to do anything. As a parent, it makes you feel powerless. We shouldn't have to fight this hard just to get basic accommodations."

"The system is set up to favour the school's perspective. They have all the authority, and parents are left with no choice but to accept what they're given. It's a power dynamic that's completely out of balance. When I tried to push back, they made it clear that they were in control, not us."

"They refused to act on our concerns without a formal diagnosis, but getting that diagnosis took months. In the meantime, my child was suffering every day. It felt like they were using bureaucracy as an excuse not to provide support, and it was devastating to see how much my child struggled because of it."



5. Support Through Escalation

When schools do not provide consistent support for school can't students, trust between families and schools is undermined, and challenges may intensify. Breakdowns in communication can contribute to inconsistencies in how students are supported, leaving both students and families less confident in the care being provided.

When students perceive the school environment as untrustworthy, their sense of safety is diminished, and this is often associated with heightened distress about attending school.

Sub Themes

Inadequate Support Associated with Escalation

When support plans are not implemented consistently, or when accommodations are lacking and responses risk shaming the student, stress levels for school can't students may intensify. Attendance plans that do not take the student's needs into account can also contribute to further distress or trauma.

When such practices increase stress and reduce students' sense of safety, they may feel further alienated from school, which is associated with worsening school can't rather than facilitating attendance.

Communication Breakdowns

In situations of managing school can't, families want effective support which requires consistent communication and collaboration between schools and care providers. However, information is often siloed, whether between health professionals, across different departments within the school, or in the relationship between families and schools. Such fragmentation may create gaps in understanding and care.

Consistency of support, together with attention to "felt safety," is important in reducing stress responses for school can't students. When support is inconsistent, students' anxiety may intensify.

Broken Trust

Maintaining trust with a school can't student is essential to supporting them with their school attendance. If the student feels that they cannot trust their family or the school to "have their back", their difficulties with school attendance may intensify.

Inconsistent or unreliable support can also reduce students' and families' sense of safety and being heard. Such experiences are often associated with attendance difficulties and may contribute to the persistence of school can't.

5. Support Through Escalation

Supporting verbatim

Inadequate Support Associated with Escalation

"Our son's school insisted on sticking to a strict attendance policy, even though he was clearly struggling. They pressured us, making him show up, but it just pushed him further away. We ended up switching schools, but it was a continuous cycle of stress and refusal."

"I knew my child needed specific accommodations, and we had plans in place, but they just weren't implemented. Instead, he was treated as if he was the problem. This only escalated his anxiety, and he started having panic attacks at the thought of going back."

"The school's response was to make a plan without consulting us, which failed almost immediately. When we pointed this out, they accused us of not following through, even though their plan just added to my son's stress. It was like they were setting him up to fail."

Communication Breakdowns

"The lack of communication between the different staff members was shocking. No one seemed to have a clear idea of what was going on, and it felt like we were constantly left in the dark. We had to chase for updates, and even then, it was hit or miss."

"There was a complete breakdown in communication between his teachers, the learning support, and even us as parents. We were told different things by different people, and no one seemed to take responsibility. It made it impossible for us to know how to support our son."

"Sometimes, they didn't even pass on crucial information, like when my son started self-harming. The school was aware but didn't inform other staff members who were also responsible for his care. It's alarming to think about how many gaps there are in their system."

Broken Trust

"The trust between my child and the school was completely shattered. They promised accommodations, but when things got tough, they didn't follow through. My son felt betrayed and started refusing to go altogether. Once that trust was broken, there was no going back."

"We worked hard with the school to get him to attend even a few days, but every time they said one thing and did another, it pushed him further away. He told me he felt like no one really cared about him there, and I could see why."

"The moment my son had an outburst, they treated him as a threat rather than understanding what triggered it. They called me to pick him up, and after that, he didn't want to step foot inside the school again. The way they handled it broke any trust he had left."



6. The advocacy and emotional load carried by parents

Parents and families carry a significant burden in advocating for their school can't children, often without the necessary support. Signs of distress associated with school can't are often missed, as families may not initially recognise what is occurring. On reflection, many families report regretting how they initially responded before understanding the full extent of their child's difficulties.

Parents educate themselves across a number of different and complex systems to determine what is best for the child. Then it is on their shoulders to advocate tirelessly on their behalf. This lack of guidance, coupled with significant investments of time and emotional labour, can take an enormous toll on families.

Sub Themes

Navigating Complex Systems

Families can find themselves on a very intense journey of needing to educate themselves across various systems, policies and legislation as they become responsible for navigating education, healthcare, and advocacy.

Without a clear "playbook," they're left to figure things out on their own, which can be overwhelming. Many interviewees had spent hours and hours researching to understand the systems they were navigating to ensure that they could give their school can't child the best chance possible.

Guilt and Self-Blame

Many parents struggle with guilt, feeling they should have recognised the signs earlier. They're burdened by the responsibility of managing their child's needs and often blame themselves when things go wrong.

Parents often feel guilt for the self assessed missteps they make throughout their school can't child's journey which they feel may have worsened the situation. As external parties judge them, they often become their own harshest critic.

Time and Emotional Investment

Parents can find that the advocacy required to support their school can't child is exhausting. Parents invest significant time learning and engaging with complex systems, all while managing the ongoing emotional toll of their child's trauma.

The toll on relationships within families can be forced to breaking point with many parents having to reduce or leave employment to support their school can't child which places further strain on resources.

6. The advocacy and emotional load carried by parents

Supporting verbatim

Navigating Complex Systems

"You've got to be a researcher. You have to understand the education system, the disability system, and the NDIS, which is like an incredibly complex maze. There's no manual, so parents are left to figure it out on their own. It's like having to do a second job, and it's exhausting."

"I've spent countless hours learning about how to navigate these systems because no one else is going to do it for me. I've had to know exactly what to ask for and how to get it, otherwise, nothing happens. It's like being a full-time advocate."

"Navigating the education system, the NDIS, and various health services feels like being thrown into the deep end with no instructions. I've had to teach myself how to deal with everything—how to advocate, what to ask for, who to talk to—because there's no real support or guidance. It's a massive learning curve, and it's draining to do this on top of everything else."

"I think one of the hardest parts is just trying to connect all the dots. The school has one plan, the therapist has another, and the NDIS has its own language altogether. I'm left trying to translate and make sure everything aligns, and that's a full-time job in itself. Without someone helping to bridge those gaps, it's overwhelming."

Guilt and Self-Blame

"There's so much guilt because you think, 'If only I had known sooner, maybe things would be different.' You blame yourself for not catching the signs early enough or not doing enough. It's an awful weight to carry."

"I constantly feel like I'm failing my child, even though I'm doing everything I can. It's like, no matter how much I learn or how hard I try, there's always this voice telling me I'm not doing enough."

"You can't help but second-guess every decision. I've spent so many nights wondering if I did the right thing, or if I should have done more. That guilt just eats away at you."

"I constantly replay moments in my head, thinking, 'What if I had noticed this earlier?' or 'What if I had pushed harder for that diagnosis sooner?' It's exhausting to live with that kind of guilt, even though deep down I know I did my best. But when things aren't going well, it's hard not to feel like it's all my fault."

"I think the hardest part is that you're always questioning yourself. Every time the school calls with a problem, it feels like they're confirming that I've failed somehow. It's like they don't see how hard I'm trying; they just see what's wrong, and I end up blaming myself for it."

Time and Emotional Investment

"My entire day revolves around managing my child's care. From early morning calls to the school, to mid-day appointments with therapists, and late-night planning to make sure everything is set for the next day. It's relentless, and the emotional toll is just as heavy as the time commitment. You're always 'on,' and there's no room to breathe."

"I've given up my career because my child needs me to be there, and that's a choice I made, but it doesn't make it easier. The system makes everything so hard, and it takes everything I have just to make sure he's okay."

"I was constantly running from appointment to appointment, trying to balance everything and keep up with work. Eventually, I had to stop working because it was just too much. You're stretched so thin, you just have nothing left to give."

"Every single day is a balancing act, and there's no safety net. If I'm not the one advocating, if I'm not the one organising and coordinating everything, it just doesn't get done. But it's not sustainable. I'm exhausted, emotionally and physically, and I worry about how long I can keep doing this."



7. Families are often experiencing trauma too

Families, particularly parents, of school can't students often bear the brunt of the challenges their children face, dealing with judgement, lack of support, and feelings of guilt. The emotional and financial load on families can result in social isolation for the whole family, not just the school can't student.

Many families report feeling blamed for contributing to or enabling their child's school can't, which is often associated with feelings of shame, guilt, and isolation. Supporting a child through school can't can also be deeply distressing for families. When opportunities to seek support are limited, families report that their experience of trauma is compounded.

Sub Themes

Emotional and Financial Strain

The constant need for families to advocate for their children takes a toll on families. Managing their child's school can't journey can be financially draining, socially isolating and emotionally exhausting.

Families described themselves as being burnt out as they attempted to navigate a system that has not met their child's needs.

The impact on the mental health of the whole family, not just the student, can be considerable and is often associated with strained relationships as families seek to agree on the best steps forward for their child.

Feeling Judged and Blamed

Parents often feel blamed for their child's challenges. Even when they're doing everything they can, they face judgement from school staff, which contributes to feelings of guilt and frustration.

Parents are sometimes shamed for their child's behaviour and presented with suggestions such as "make home boring" or that they are being manipulated by their child. This leaves parents feeling unheard as they try to explain that their child genuinely freezes in fear at the prospect of attending school. The isolation and loneliness parents feel when they are misunderstood compounds the difficulties families experience.

Lack of Support and Transparency

Families often feel unsupported as they try to find effective ways to help their school can't student. While they want to encourage attendance, many are uncertain about the best approaches. They are required to make numerous decisions and often lack the guidance needed to do so.

Navigating systems such as the NDIS, state education policies and school placement options can be overwhelming in the absence of clear direction. When dealing with schools, parents also report a lack of transparency in how issues are addressed, making it difficult to know what actions are being taken within the school environment.

7. Families are often experiencing trauma too

Supporting verbatim

Emotional and Financial Strain

"I had to quit my job because I needed to be available at any moment to pick up my son. It's been years of this, and financially, we're drained. We've spent so much on therapies and support that we're just trying to keep our heads above water."

"The constant pressure of advocating for my child while managing work and other responsibilities has taken a toll on my mental health. There's no space for my own needs because every resource, every bit of energy, goes into supporting my child."

"We have spent thousands on private assessments and therapies, only to have the school dismiss their recommendations. It's a financial strain that most families can't handle, but we keep going because what choice do we have?"

"It's like I'm always 'on.' There's no time off because every moment is spent thinking about what my child needs next, or how to get it. It takes all your time, your energy, your mental bandwidth."

Feeling Judged and Blamed

"I always felt like they were blaming me for my child's struggles. They would hint that maybe it was something I was doing at home, rather than acknowledging that he needed different support at school. It was incredibly isolating."

"It's hard to describe how it feels when a teacher subtly suggests you're not doing enough. Every meeting felt like I was on trial, trying to prove I was a good parent, despite their lack of support."

"They tried to make it seem like it was my fault that my son wasn't attending regularly. It felt like they were more interested in protecting their reputation than actually helping us, which made me question everything I was doing."

"I still feel responsible, like if I had been more on top of things, maybe it wouldn't have gotten this bad. Every time something goes wrong, I ask myself, 'What didn't I do?' or 'What could I have done better?' It's a constant weight, and it never really goes away."

Lack of Support and Transparency

"Dealing with the NDIS is a nightmare. There's no guide on how to navigate it, and no one is there to support you through the process. We're just left to figure it out on our own, even when our child is struggling."

"I kept asking the school how they were implementing the support plan, but I rarely got clear answers. It was always vague, and I felt like they were hiding something. Without transparency, how can we trust that our kids are getting the support they need?"

"After every assessment, there were promises of better support, but nothing ever changed. It's like the school was just trying to pacify us without making any real effort to follow through. We felt completely unsupported."

"The school didn't even know what to do half the time. It felt like they were learning on the job, and I was the one guiding them. I had to do all the research and bring solutions to the table."



8. Effective Support and Positive Outcomes

A range of effective strategies and positive experiences have helped school can't students to thrive. When schools adopt flexible, empathetic, and well-implemented support systems, they can foster positive outcomes for students. Success stories highlight the importance of collaboration, appropriate training, and consistent engagement.

Respectful conversations between families and schools that avoid blame, shame and guilt, while recognising the needs of all involved, create the foundation for effective planning. Families feel that these plans help school can't students feel safe and better regulate their nervous system at school. With adaptation, open communication, and strong relationships, schools can support school can't students to achieve genuine progress and improved wellbeing.

Sub Themes

Collaborative and Flexible Approaches

Success is often achieved when schools work closely with parents and students, engaging in open communication to adapt support strategies as needed.

With effective communication, timely intervention, and collaboration between families, schools, and health providers, escalation can often be prevented and students can receive the support they need. Respectful conversations and co-developed, achievable plans help school can't students feel supported and contribute to more positive outcomes.

Individualised Learning and Support

Interventions that accommodate the unique needs of each student, including special arrangements and modified expectations, often support positive outcomes. Examples include adjusting workload, modifying test conditions, providing quiet spaces, or offering pass cards to leave class when stress levels rise, all of which can help students to stay at school longer.

Engagement improves when discussions are welcoming, collaborative, and respectful of the needs of both parents and students.

Building Trust and Positive Relationships

Positive relationships with teachers and support staff can foster a sense of safety and trust, which is essential for the success of school can't students.

For these students, having their feelings validated and believed, rather than shamed for their behaviour or accused of being "dramatic" or "manipulative," is key to building this trust. Strong leadership within schools that supports and encourages teachers and staff to support the student will ensure a consistent, compassionate and comforting approach is offered across their daily experiences.

8. Effective Support and Positive Outcomes

Supporting verbatim Collaborative and Flexible Approaches

"It was really a back-and-forth process. We'd sit down and understand what was going on from my daughter's perspective. If something wasn't working, we'd come up with another approach, and they'd keep trying until it clicked. The teachers saw us as partners, and that's why it worked."

"My daughter's school created a tailored learning plan that actually included input from her, so she felt heard. She has a small peer group and a few teachers who really 'get' her, which makes all the difference."

"When my son was struggling, the school didn't just stick to a rigid plan. They adjusted it regularly and even checked in with me to make sure it was still effective. It's that flexibility that's been key."

Individualised Learning and Support

"They school set up a Victorian Pathways Certificate for my daughter, allowing her to study just a few subjects she was passionate about, with lots of teacher support. It became less about forcing her to fit in, and more about letting her learn in a way that suited her."

"They arranged for a learning support officer to help my son navigate mainstream classes, but they also adjusted things when it wasn't working. That flexibility meant he didn't feel like he was constantly failing."

"They gave my daughter a safe space to take breaks when things got overwhelming, and she knew she could rely on it. That simple accommodation made her feel understood and reduced her anxiety."

Building Trust and Positive Relationships

"The biggest difference has been having teachers who are genuinely invested. When they say, 'We've got your back,' they mean it, and my daughter can tell. It makes her feel safe enough to take small steps forward."

"It wasn't just about the accommodations, but the people. My son's teacher took time to understand his interests and strengths, and that's what helped him feel more confident. He knew someone at school actually cared."

"The school found a way to connect her therapy sessions with her classes, so it wasn't just 'therapy' - it was part of her day. This integration showed her that the school was invested in making her feel comfortable and supported."

What works well and not well

What works well



- ✓ Validating the students' feelings rather than dismissing or punishing
- ✓ Showing curiosity about what is impacting the student rather than displaying judgement
- ✓ Identifying how to address stress and foster a feeling of safety
- ✓ Understanding the nature of problems and stressors from the student's perspective
- ✓ Developing relationships with individual teachers within the school (Does not necessarily have to be the Wellbeing teacher)
- ✓ Developing ways to identify early signs of distress
- ✓ Support in maintaining trust between parent and child
- ✓ Having a shared understanding about nervous system regulation
- ✓ Some level of autonomy in choice of activities
- ✓ Accommodations such as attending school without submitting work

What does not work well



- ✗ Treating stress behaviour as misbehaviour
- ✗ Intimidating meetings with teacher panels
- ✗ Punishments such as detentions
- ✗ Shaming the student or parents
- ✗ Not believing the families ("she's fine at school")
- ✗ Failing to recognise masking behaviours
- ✗ Failing to provide adjustments to workload or change test conditions
- ✗ Attendance plans and attendance targets
- ✗ Not recognising a "freeze" response to stress
- ✗ Labelling this as "lazy", "slow", "avoidant"
- ✗ Requiring formal diagnosis prior to action
- ✗ Lack of consistency in support between different staff at the school

What works well and not well

What works well



- ✓ Use of supports such as pass cards students can show to leave the classroom when needed
- ✓ A joint approach with health providers
- ✓ Transparency and open conversations with families
- ✓ Student access to quiet spaces
- ✓ A well planned approach faithfully executed
- ✓ Interventions that address key stressors such as very noisy environments, overload and overwhelm
- ✓ Executive function supports/breaking down tasks to support gaps in education
- ✓ Leadership within the school that backs the supportive approach
- ✓ A rest from the stressors
- ✓ Redefining what success looks like
- ✓ Support and acceptance
- ✓ Advocacy and guidance to support families navigate the various systems eg: NESA (or equivalent)

What does not work well



- ✗ Lack of leadership within the school about how things should be handled
- ✗ The "make home boring" approach
- ✗ Accusing parents that they are being "manipulated"

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