

Responding to school reluctance or refusal: Strategies for parents



**Parenting
Strategies**



MONASH
University



Table of contents

Who are these guidelines for?	1
What do we mean by school reluctance and school refusal?	1
What increases children’s risk of developing school reluctance or refusal?	1
What are the potential consequences of school reluctance or refusal?	1
Warning signs of school reluctance or refusal	2
If your child shows signs of school reluctance or refusal	3
Talk with your child about what is causing their school reluctance or refusal.....	3
Address the underlying causes of your child’s school reluctance or refusal.....	3
Work with your child’s school.....	4
If you need more support from the school.....	4
Work together with your child.....	4
Praise and reward your child’s efforts.....	5
Help them to balance school and other activities.....	5
Be involved and support increasing independence.....	5
Seek professional support early	5
Box 1: What types of professionals might be needed?	6
What type of treatments are available?.....	6
Box 2: If you are worried about your child’s safety	6
Managing anxiety about school	6
Physical symptoms of anxiety.....	7
Supporting your child on school mornings	7
Managing expectations about schoolwork and achievement	8
If your child is not attending school	8
Establishing a plan to return to school	9
Decide which day your child will return to school	9
Putting the plan into action.....	10
Review the plan as needed.....	10
When your child is back at school	10
Managing setbacks	10
Responding to specific causes of school reluctance or refusal	11
If your child is struggling academically	11
Help boost their confidence.....	11
Supporting your child to complete homework.....	11
If your child is experiencing difficulties with peers or bullying.....	12
Bullying	12
Box 3: If you are considering changing schools or alternative schooling options	12
If your child is starting at a new school or school year	12
If your child is reluctant or refusing to go to school after an absence due to illness.....	13
Box 4: If your child has a learning difficulty	13
Box 5: If you are experiencing financial difficulties	13
Box 6: Risk and protective factors for developing school reluctance or refusal	14
Child-related risk factors	14
Family-related risk factors.....	14
Protective factors	14
Look after yourself	15
Box 7: Self-care activities	15
How these guidelines were developed	16
Please cite these guidelines as follows.....	16
Where to find information about parenting and child mental health.....	16

Who are these guidelines for?

These guidelines are a general set of recommendations on how you (as a **parent or caregiver**) can reduce your child's risk of school refusal and support their mental health and school engagement if they are having problems with school attendance. The strategies included in these guidelines are intended to apply to parents of both **primary and secondary school-aged** children.

The guidelines may be useful for parents who are worried about their child's engagement with school and those whose child is already experiencing school reluctance or refusal. Each family is unique, so you may need to adapt these strategies to your specific situation.

The guidelines are **not** intended for parents whose child is experiencing truancy (i.e., 'wagging' or skipping school) or those who are unable to attend school due to other circumstances that prevent them from attending (e.g., medical illness).

What do we mean by school reluctance and school refusal?

A child is experiencing **school reluctance** if they are unwilling to attend school, but they are still attending school.¹

A child is experiencing **school refusal** if they have difficulties attending and/or remaining at school during the day due to emotional distress about attending school.²

It is important to note that school refusal is not a diagnosable mental health condition; however, it may be a consequence of mental health issues (e.g., anxiety, depression).

Although widely used, we acknowledge that the term 'school refusal' is not universally accepted as the best term to describe the behaviour. We acknowledge that there are numerous and interacting child, family, school, community and other circumstances that contribute to a child's attendance at school.



What increases children's risk of developing school reluctance or refusal?

Some children are at higher risk of school reluctance or refusal than others (see *Box 6: Risk and protective factors for developing school reluctance or refusal, page 14*). You might find it helpful to consider which risk factors apply to your child and whether these can be changed to reduce their risk. Even if any of the risk factors that apply to your child are difficult to change, you as a parent can still support your child to reduce the effect of these factors on your child.

What are the potential consequences of school reluctance or refusal?

There are both short- and long-term consequences a child may experience if school refusal is ongoing. These consequences include:

- missing out on learning/education^{3,4}
- exiting school early⁵
- difficulties with friendships/peer relationships^{3,4}
- later problems with working life (e.g., unemployment)^{3,4,5,6}
- mental health problems^{3,5,7}
- conflict and strained relationships within the family^{3,4,5}
- decreased income in the family (e.g., if family members stay home from work to care for the child).⁵

It is important to help your child to engage with school to minimise the potential consequences of not attending school.

1 Jones, A. M., & Suveg, C. (2015). *Flying under the radar: School reluctance in anxious youth*. *School Mental Health: A Multidisciplinary Research and Practice Journal*, 7(3), 212–223.

2 Berg, I. (2002). School avoidance, school phobia, and truancy. In M. Lewis (Ed.), *Child and adolescent psychiatry: A comprehensive textbook* (pp. 1260–1266). Lippincott Williams & Wilkins

3 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.

4 Sewell, J. (2008). *School refusal*. *Australian Family Physician*, 37(4), 406–408.

5 Kearney, C. A., & Bensaheb, A. (2006). *School absenteeism and school refusal behavior: A review and suggestions for school-based health professionals*. *Journal of School Health*, 76(1), 3–7.

6 Mcshane G., Walter G., Rey J.M. (2004). *Functional outcome of adolescents with 'school refusal'*. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 9(1), 53–60.

7 Fremont, W. P. (2003). *School refusal in children and adolescents*. *American Family Physician*, 68(8), 1555–1560.

Warning signs of school reluctance or refusal

It is important for parents to know the warning signs for school reluctance and refusal. Responding early to these warning signs may prevent school reluctance or refusal from happening or becoming an ongoing problem.

Below is a list of warning signs that children may show. Children who develop problems with school reluctance or refusal will often show several, but not all, of these warning signs.



Feelings about school

- Negative feelings about school (e.g., anxiety, embarrassment, fear, irritability, loneliness, sadness, shame)
- Negative thoughts and feelings about school that affect other parts of their life (e.g., interfere with social activities or family life)
- Feeling under pressure (e.g., to perform academically or when with other students).



Behaviours

- Protesting about going to school
- Tantrums or outbursts of anger, especially on school mornings
- Inability or reluctance to wake up and get ready for school on time
- Other behaviours that show reluctance to go to school (e.g., slow to get out of bed or get ready for school, locking themselves in the bathroom)
- Oppositional, aggressive or other challenging behaviour with the intent to avoid school
- Skipping class or school repeatedly
- Not attending school on significant days (e.g., days on which tests or specific classes are scheduled)
- Threatening to harm themselves if made to go to school
- Behavioural or emotional problems that are present on school days but subside on weekends or holidays.



Physical

- Frequent physical complaints, which may be unexplained (e.g., nausea, stomach aches, headaches, dizziness, fatigue) and subside when the child is allowed to stay home from school.



Behaviours when at school

- Falling behind with schoolwork
- Challenging behaviour on arrival at school (e.g., tantrums, clinginess, running away)
- Frequent requests or begging (e.g., phone calls or texts to parents) to leave school early during the school day
- Running away from or hiding at school (e.g., in the bathroom/toilet)
- Leaving school before the school day ends
- Long or regular visits to the health centre, sick bay, school nurse or school office
- Persistent distress (e.g., crying) during class.



Emotional, psychological and social changes

- Difficulties falling asleep the night before school
- Morning tearfulness prior to school
- Withdrawal from others
- Wanting to stay home when invited to school-related events or events with school peers (e.g., birthday parties).



If your child shows signs of school reluctance or refusal

If your child is showing signs of school reluctance or refusal, it is important to make time to support them early. Early intervention is associated with better outcomes.

The following sections cover actions that you can take to respond to your child's difficulties with school attendance.

Talk with your child about what is causing their school reluctance or refusal

As soon as you notice warning signs, try to talk with your child to understand the reasons for their behaviour and why they are reluctant or refusing to go to school. This will help you to understand what type of support may be needed. Try to chat with your child at an appropriate time and place, for example, when there is plenty of time, privacy and no distractions. Also, have these discussions when everyone is calm. Try to use open questions (i.e., questions where the answer is not a simple 'yes' or 'no') where possible.

Practice using *active listening*—listen with your full attention, observe your child's non-verbal communication (e.g., their body language, facial expressions) and show that you are listening by confirming your understanding with your child (i.e., repeat back to them, in your own words, what you have understood). When your child opens up to you, acknowledge and express empathy for their feelings and opinions about school, even if you disagree with them. Don't dismiss or minimise their feelings. Throughout conversations with your child, assure them that you will work together with them to overcome what is concerning them about school.

Keep in mind that there may be multiple reasons for your child's school reluctance or refusal. Also, your child may not know the reasons or may not be willing to talk about them. If your child struggles to talk about the reasons for their difficulties, you can try asking them to express their concerns in another way, like drawing or writing.

Here are some other things you can do to help identify the cause of your child's school reluctance or refusal:

- Speak to school staff (e.g., teachers, school wellbeing staff) as soon as possible. They may have some ideas about why your child is struggling. Contacting the school early will also reduce the chances of the problem becoming more severe.
- Keep a record of the days your child doesn't attend school and what they're concerned about, to help you explain the situation to school staff or other professionals.
- Work with school staff to look for patterns in your child's absences from school (e.g., certain days of the week or after lunch).

If you are unable to identify the reasons for your child's school reluctance or refusal, seek professional help (see section *Seek professional support early*, [page 5](#)).



Address the underlying causes of your child's school reluctance or refusal

Once you have identified why your child is reluctant or refusing to attend school, you will need to work collaboratively with your child, the school and any other professionals involved to create a plan to manage your child's difficulties. The plan needs to be individually tailored to your child, based on the reasons for their difficulties. The plan should involve you, any other parent(s) supporting your child, teachers and other professionals involved.



Assure your child that you will work together with them to overcome what is concerning them about school.

Work with your child's school

The school should be the first point of contact if your child is refusing to go to school. It is essential to work together with your child's school to support your child and improve their school attendance. Try to be your child's advocate with the school.

Seek support from the school to help create a coordinated return-to-school plan (see also *Establishing a plan to return to school*, [page 9](#)). Ask your child to identify any school staff they would feel safe to involve in supporting them and try to involve these people.

Keep in regular contact with your child's teacher, or the main contact person at the school, about how your child is doing at school. Try to maintain a positive relationship with key school staff. Acknowledge the things the school is doing to help your child, as this may help you to receive more support from the school.

When communicating with the school, try to:

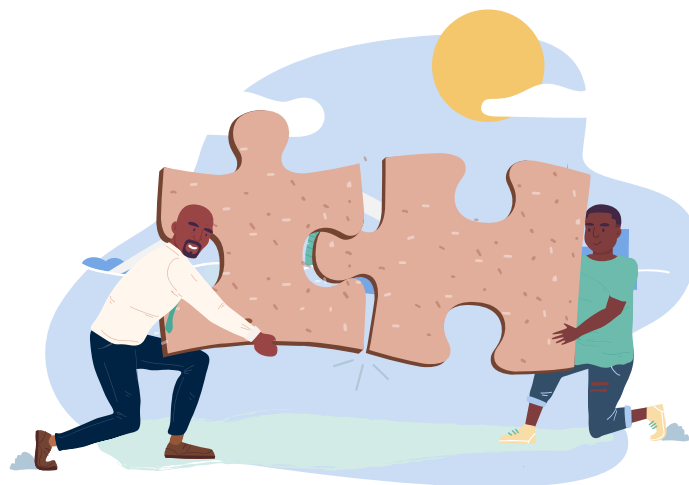
- Directly seek information about what is happening at school instead of only hearing information from your child.
- Let the school know when your child is absent and the real reason for this (e.g., sickness, refusal to go to school).
- Share with the school any information about the reasons for your child's school reluctance or refusal.

Ask the school about:

- The resources they can provide for school attendance and mental health issues.
- School-based mental health resources to support students with emotional and disruptive behaviour problems.

If you need more support from the school

If you aren't satisfied with the way a staff member is responding to your concerns, ask for assistance from another staff member, or escalate to a more senior staff member. If you are still not receiving sufficient support from the school, consider seeking extra support from an independent professional (e.g., psychologist) who can help advocate on your behalf.



Work together with your child

Try to involve your child as much as possible in the decisions and planning about their return to school. Let your child know that attending school regularly is expected of them and is important for their mental health and wellbeing. If needed, support your child to strengthen their relationships with friends and teachers at school.



It is essential to work together with your child's school to support your child and improve their school attendance.

Praise and reward your child's efforts

Keep in mind that going to school is distressing for your child, so it is important to acknowledge their efforts and any positive steps they take towards attendance.

Be careful not to make your child feel guilty for not attending school, as this can worsen anxiety or depression. When your child does attend school, praise them for this and encourage their efforts. Praise and reward your child when they make progress towards attending school. Focus on praising or rewarding your child's behaviours and actions (e.g., attending school) rather than the outcome (e.g., performing well at school). When praising or rewarding your child, try to use incentives that you think your child will respond best to and that are appropriate for their age (e.g., encouraging words, small gifts, quality time with you, physical affection).



Help them to balance school and other activities

Your child may feel overwhelmed from struggling to balance school and other extracurricular activities. If this is the case, discuss your child's activities with them and ensure they are not overscheduled. Reduce the number of activities your child is doing while still balancing their life with sufficient non-school related experiences. However, encourage your child to see through any commitments they have made, wherever possible.

Be involved and support increasing independence

Show an interest in your child's school life to show that you value school. Know what is going on for your child at school on a week-to-week basis, such as: what they are looking forward to, what they are worried about, their hopes, concerns and struggles (e.g., homework, friendships).

It is important to allow your child to talk about school in their own time. Try to talk about school with your child when you are both engaged in everyday (but non-distracting) activities, like when you are washing the dishes or going for a walk or drive, so that your child feels comfortable and the conversation is more natural.

Seek professional support early

If your child is unwilling or unable to return to school, you should seek professional advice on how to respond. This could be from a family doctor, paediatrician, psychologist, social worker or other mental health professional. Seek professional help early, within weeks of your child refusing to attend school. The more severe a child's school refusal becomes, the more resources, time, monitoring and professional help will be needed.

Although for many young people, school refusal problems develop gradually, some children will suddenly develop severe school refusal, which will require immediate and intense intervention.

If you are not sure how to seek professional help, speak to the school's wellbeing staff about options. They may be able to help you to find appropriate professional support. Look into the range of services available in your local area.

When you do seek professional help, if you aren't happy with the support received from the first professional you see, don't give up—seek other sources of professional help.



Box 1: What types of professionals might be needed?

- **Medical professionals.** A medical doctor may be needed to identify the cause of any physical symptoms your child has (e.g., stomach aches, headaches). They can also refer you to other specialists.
 - **Family doctor (GP).** Your GP is the best first point of contact. You do not need a referral to see a GP.
 - **Paediatrician.** Your GP may suggest involving a paediatrician (a doctor who specialises in children and teenagers), depending on your child's symptoms. For Medicare funding in Australia, you need a referral from a GP to see a paediatrician.
- **Mental health professionals.** Different types of mental health professionals may work with young people with school attendance difficulties. Most commonly, this would be a **psychologist**; however, **social workers, occupational therapists** and **counsellors** may also be appropriate. You can see most mental health professionals with or without a referral. However, to be eligible for Medicare funding, you will need a referral from a doctor.

Ideally, seek a mental health professional with experience in treating young people with school refusal problems. You can ask the wellbeing staff at your child's school for suggestions.

What type of treatments are available?

Although more research is needed, the following treatments currently have the best evidence for supporting children experiencing school refusal and their families:

- cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) for school refusal^{1,2}
- exposure therapy.^{1,2}

There is currently no evidence that supports the use of medication specifically for the treatment of school refusal.³

Box 2: If you are worried about your child's safety

Some young people with school reluctance or refusal may engage in dangerous behaviours, including running away, self-harm or suicide attempts.

Running away:

- If your child is at risk of running away from school, ensure that the school will contact you immediately.
- If your child does run away from school, speak with school staff about why they ran away before returning your child to school.

Self-harm or suicide:

- If you are worried that your child may harm themselves or is at risk of suicide, you should seek professional support and discuss this with school staff.

Managing anxiety about school

School reluctance or refusal problems are usually driven by a child's attempt to cope with overwhelming difficulties rather than disobedience or defiance. If your child is reluctant or refusing to go to school, remember that they are probably feeling very anxious or distressed about school.

When people feel anxious, they tend to avoid situations that make them feel more anxious (in this case, school). However, we know that avoidance actually makes anxiety worse in the long term. So, allowing a child to avoid school is likely to make their anxiety about school worse.

Instead, the best approach to anxiety is to gradually face our fears with appropriate support, even though this is daunting. It is important to let your child know that *you* are confident in their ability to face their fears.

Let your child know that some anxiety or difficulties at school are normal and to be expected. Keep in mind that even when school attendance improves, your child's anxiety may persist for some time because they are confronting their fears.



School reluctance or refusal problems are usually driven by a child's attempt to cope with overwhelming difficulties rather than disobedience or defiance.

1 Elliott, J. & Place, M. (2019). [Practitioner Review: School refusal: developments in conceptualisation and treatment since 2000](#). *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 60(1), 4–15.

2 Maynard et al. (2015). [Treatment for school refusal among children and adolescents: A systematic review and meta-analysis](#). *Research on Social Work Practice*, 28(1), 56–67.

3 Tobon, A., Reed, M., Taylor, J. & Bloch, M. (2018). [A systematic review of pharmacologic treatments for school refusal behavior](#). *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychopharmacology*, 28(6), 368–378.

It is also important to support your child to learn helpful coping strategies to manage their anxiety. If you're not sure what will help your child, seek advice from the school or a mental health professional. You can also:

- Use evidence-based self-help resources, such as websites or books about managing anxiety. [Head to Health](#) is an Australian Government website to help you find trusted mental health information, online programs and digital resources.
 - One evidence-based Australian program that may be useful for children with anxiety is [the BRAVE program](#). This is an online program for young people (ages 3 to 17) and their parents for the prevention and treatment of anxiety (not specifically related to school).
- Talk with your child about changes that could be made at school, home and/or in their daily routine to help them feel less anxious.
- Inform school staff of your child's anxiety about school, as it may be hard for staff to recognise this.
- Identify any triggers for your child's anxiety by asking their teachers if there are particular times that they find more challenging (e.g., during lesson changeovers, break times, particular subjects, the journey to school or throughout the day).
- Work with the school to minimise potential stressful events (e.g., unexpected tests, reading aloud in front of the class).
- Encourage your child to learn relaxation strategies (e.g., deep breathing, guided imagery and mindfulness) that they can use to manage their anxiety. For more information about teaching your child relaxation strategies, check out these links:
 - breathing exercises: <https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/activity-guides/wellbeing/breathing-exercises-relaxation-activity>
 - muscle relaxation: <https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/activity-guides/wellbeing/muscle-relaxation-activity-children-parents>
 - mindfulness: <https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/activity-guides/wellbeing/mindfulness-activity-children-parents>

Physical symptoms of anxiety

If your child is reluctant or refuses to go to school because they are experiencing physical symptoms, seek help from a medical practitioner and have a basic physical examination to find out if the symptoms have a physical cause. It is possible that your child's symptoms are related to anxiety. For example, symptoms of anxiety can include stomach aches, headaches, fatigue and dizziness. If your medical practitioner cannot find any physical reasons for your child's symptoms, they may refer your child to a mental health professional.

Talk with your child about any physical symptoms of anxiety they are experiencing. Let them know that although these symptoms are unpleasant, they are not dangerous.

Supporting your child on school mornings

School mornings can be a time of high distress for children with school reluctance or refusal problems. Talk with your child about how you can best support them on school mornings. Here are some strategies you can try:

- Give your child a wake-up phone call on school mornings.
- Help your child to develop a school morning schedule. Include key times when they need to have things done, especially if they tend to become distracted or lose track of time.
- Encourage your child to keep their morning routine simple on school days. Save non-essential activities and distractions for afternoons and weekends.
- Include things that your child finds calming (e.g., taking a shower, drawing, walking to school, meeting their friends at the gate).
- Help your child to develop a night-time routine to help them get a good sleep, in preparation for school the next day.



Managing expectations about schoolwork and achievement

Some young people may experience school reluctance or refusal because of high expectations about achievement. These expectations could be from themselves, their parents or family members, or the school. If you think this is contributing to your child's school reluctance or refusal, try to:

- Shift conversations with your child about school away from their grades or achievement.
- Focus on the effort your child is putting into their schoolwork rather than their grades or achievement.
- Avoid nagging, criticising, blaming, reprimanding or lecturing your child about their academic achievement.

If your child has *low* motivation to achieve or is struggling to motivate themselves, try to:

- Help your child identify their strengths and abilities.
- Encourage your child's achievements and support them with enthusiasm and optimism.
- Avoid accusing your child of being lazy.

Praise your child for their efforts in their schoolwork and for even the slightest improvement in achievement. Try to reward your child for their behaviour and actions (such as completing homework tasks) rather than the outcome (such as receiving a good grade).



Try to reward your child for their behaviour and actions (such as completing homework tasks) rather than the outcome (such as receiving a good grade).

If your child is not attending school

If your child is not attending school, you can help them progress towards returning to school by:

- Maintaining a consistent routine at home that resembles a regular school week.
- Asking the school for a small amount of schoolwork for your child to complete at home during school hours.
- Having someone available to support your child in completing their schoolwork at home during school hours.
- Giving your child home-based learning tasks and appropriate household chores to complete during school hours.

When establishing a school-like routine at home, make it clear to your child that these changes are intended to lead up to them returning to school.



Establishing a plan to return to school

When creating a plan for your child to return to school (after a period of refusal), involve your child, the school and a mental health professional if one is involved. Together, develop a clear plan to gradually reintegrate your child to school. Try to figure out where past efforts have broken down (e.g., getting out of bed, getting dressed, getting into or out of the car, getting into the classroom). Develop specific plans for dealing with refusal at these stages.

It is important that both you and your child have a clear understanding of the details of the return-to-school plan. You may need to remind your child about what has been agreed on in the plan.

Aim for the plan to start with a small goal and gradually build up. Here are some tips to consider when developing the return-to-school plan:

- Consider a range of options for how to return to school (e.g., starting the school day after lunchtime, only attending favourite classes, only attending non-classroom areas).
- Arrange for your child's arrival at school to be a low-profile event to minimise embarrassment and anxiety.
- Ask the school to establish a safe place for your child, where they can go to settle themselves if needed (e.g., a school counsellor's office).
- Include calming activities (e.g., deep breathing, muscle relaxation or mindfulness exercises) in the plan to reduce your child's anxiety during the school day. For more information, see the links in the section *Managing anxiety about school* (page 6), or seek advice from a mental health professional.
- Help your child to stay in regular contact with their teachers and peers, as this may help with their return to school.
- Try to minimise any incentives for your child to stay home from school (e.g., access to computer/video games, social media and the internet).
- Work with the school staff to make sure your child feels welcomed.
- Work with the school to find ways to support your child in easing into class or the assembly area when they arrive at school.
- Try to support other goals your child may have (not related to school) to help build their sense of achievement.

Decide which day your child will return to school

As part of the return-to-school plan, you'll need to choose a day for your child's return. When deciding on a day, consider:

- your child's school timetable, including preferred subjects and teachers
- whether there is someone available to accompany your child to school.



Aim for the plan to start with a small goal and gradually build up

Putting the plan into action

When putting the return-to-school plan into action, be consistent in applying the strategies you use to support your child back to school. Give clear, simple and consistent instructions to your child in the morning before school. If your child resists your efforts, try to respond in a calm and controlled manner. It will help if you plan what you will do if your child refuses to comply with your instructions.

Be empathic but firm that your child must attend school. Even when you feel frustrated, try not to show your frustration or disappointment to your child if they don't achieve a step in their return-to-school plan. Remember, change may take time and consistency, and setbacks are to be expected.

If there is more than one parent/carer in the household who is supporting your child's return to school, try to present a united front and share the responsibility when giving instructions.

Avoid:

- Using negative strategies (e.g., shouting, physical force, emotional blackmail), as these may increase your child's anxiety and make the problem worse.
- Forcing your child to make promises about going to school. This could make your child feel guilty if they fail, which can make them feel worse.

Review the plan as needed

If the return-to-school plan is not working, work with your child, the school and any professionals involved to review and change the plan as needed. Try not to be disheartened—it may take several attempts to find the strategies that work for your child.



When your child is back at school

Getting your child back to school after a period of school refusal is a great achievement—remember to recognise and praise your child (and yourself!) for getting to this point.

Once your child has started attending school again, they will likely need ongoing support to maintain their attendance and address the underlying causes of their initial school refusal. Remember that because your child is facing their fears by attending school, their anxiety is likely to persist or even increase as they transition back to school.

To support your child during their return to school, you can:

- Ensure that your child arrives at school on time each day unless they are too unwell to attend.
- Work with school staff to maintain your child's attendance, prevent relapse back to non-attendance and respond quickly to signs of relapse (see *Managing setbacks* below).
- Consider seeking extra academic, social and psychological support for your child to help them maintain their attendance.



Managing setbacks

Young people sometimes experience a relapse (i.e., refuse to attend school again after a successful return to school). Relapse is most likely to occur following school holidays, long weekends, or multiple absences due to illness.

If your child experiences a relapse, try to remain calm and hopeful, and avoid thinking the worst. You should not view this as a failure on your part, or of the school or your child. When talking to your child about their relapse, refer to it as a 'setback' or 'hiccup'—this may help them to understand that what they're going through is temporary.



Acknowledge your child's struggle to maintain their school attendance, express empathy, and provide unconditional love and support. Have an open and honest chat with your child about what is happening for them.

As soon as you notice your child displaying any warning signs of school refusal (see section *Warning signs of school reluctance or refusal*, [page 2](#)), return to the strategies used in your child's return-to-school plan. Use this plan to get your child back to school as quickly as possible.

Responding to specific causes of school reluctance or refusal

If your child is struggling academically

If your child is struggling academically, ask their teacher(s) for ideas on how to foster your child's interests and strengths at school and to support them in areas they are struggling with. Encourage your child to ask their teacher(s) for help with their schoolwork when they need it. If your child is finding it difficult to complete their schoolwork or homework, talk to school staff about providing your child with additional support to ensure they have understood their tasks. Encourage your child to set achievable goals and break down large tasks into smaller chunks.

Help boost their confidence

Encourage your child to do something they excel in to help boost their confidence to try school challenges. You can also find out what motivates your child to do things they enjoy (e.g., doing things with friends) and try to help your child apply these motivational factors to their schoolwork.

For teenagers, talk with them about finding someone who can help them, such as:

- a homework club
- meeting individually with a teacher
- assistance from another student
- tutoring.

It is important to show your child acceptance and affection if they are struggling academically. Make sure they know they are loved regardless of their academic achievement.

Supporting your child to complete homework

If your child is struggling with homework, ask them if they would like your help (but avoid doing their homework for them!). Find out whether your child's school has any resources to help your child with homework and develop organisational skills.

If your child is struggling to *begin* their homework, ask how they are feeling about getting their homework done and try to identify what might be stopping them. Work with your child to remove barriers to completing homework, such as:

- creating a distraction-free environment
- setting appropriate limits on social media and gaming
- having a set time period for homework.





If your child is experiencing difficulties with peers or bullying

Difficulties with peers and/or friends at school can contribute to school reluctance or refusal. It is important to support your child to set and work towards realistic social goals, such as joining a club at school or making a new friend in their class. If your child struggles with making friends or developing social relationships, seek support from school staff or a professional (e.g., a psychologist) to help them with this.

Bullying

Bullying refers to the repeated and deliberate use of words or actions against someone or a group of people to cause distress and risk to their wellbeing. It can be verbal, physical, social or psychological, and can happen in person or online (i.e., cyberbullying).

If your child is the victim of bullying, don't minimise the situation—take it seriously. Never blame the victim for being bullied.

If your child is being bullied, it is important to inform staff at your child's school about it. Let your child know that you will be informing their school and try to get your child's agreement. Ask your child's school about how they will manage the bullying behaviour and what resources they have to support your child.

You can also help your child find a mentor who can support them, such as a teacher or other adult.

Box 3: If you are considering changing schools or alternative schooling options

It is important to have a good understanding of the underlying causes of your child's school refusal before considering whether changing schools is likely to address the problem. Consider the advantages and disadvantages of your child's current class or school placement so that you can make an informed decision about the best option for your child.

If you are considering alternative schooling options, discuss these options with your child, staff at their school, and any other professionals that may be involved.

For teenagers, remember to take their future job and career interests into account when considering alternatives to their current schooling arrangements. Try to help your teen make a decision that will keep options open in the future.

If your child is starting at a new school or school year

Starting at a new school or a new year or grade level at school may contribute to your child's school reluctance or refusal. It is important to listen to your child's concerns or fears about their new school without judgement. Validate and empathise with your child's feelings about leaving their old school.

It is also helpful for you to be positive about the move to a new school. One way to do this is to point out opportunities for new activities and making new friends. You can also help your child make a plan for settling into their new school, for example, how they might meet new people and extracurricular activities they can join.

Support your child to find out as much as possible about the new school before they start. Prior to the transition between schools, or school levels, talk with the school's wellbeing staff about any reluctance that your child has about attending school. Try arranging a tour of your child's new school with your child. However, when planning tours and orientation programs at the new school, be careful not to overwhelm your child.

If your child is reluctant or refusing to go to school after an absence due to illness

An extended absence from school due to illness can increase a young person's risk of school reluctance or refusal.

If your child has been absent due to illness, check in with them and try to work out how they feel about returning to school and what may help to minimise their anxiety.

Work together with staff at your child's school to identify your child's earliest possible return date. Let the school know about your child's medical condition and work with the staff to figure out the best way they can respond to minor physical complaints or symptoms your child may have. This may help to prevent having your child sent home unnecessarily for physical complaints. It will also help you and your child feel more confident about them returning to school.

Box 4: If your child has a learning difficulty

If your child is reluctant or refusing to go to school because they are experiencing learning difficulties, consider:

- Seeking assessment and intervention for your child's learning difficulties. Reach out to your child's school and/or community agencies in your area for this support. You can ask school staff about educational resources they have to support students with learning disorders.
- Collaborating with staff from your child's school to create an individualised education plan that accommodates your child's needs.

Box 5: If you are experiencing financial difficulties

If family financial difficulties (e.g., not having money for food, transportation, school books/iPad or uniform) are contributing to your child's school reluctance or refusal, approach the school to find out if there are financial supports available. If you feel uncomfortable approaching your child's school about this, or the school does not have any support available, consider approaching other agencies or professionals that might be able to help you to get financial support (such as a social worker or social service agency).

Box 6: Risk and protective factors for developing school reluctance or refusal

There are both child-related and family-related factors that can increase a child's risk of developing school reluctance or school refusal. Changing or reducing these risk factors may prevent school reluctance or refusal from developing or persisting.



Child-related risk factors

- Mental health problems (such as depression and anxiety disorders)
- Low self-esteem
- Problems with peers (e.g., difficulty forming and maintaining friendships, peer pressure or conflict with peers)
- Experiencing bullying (including verbal, physical and cyberbullying)
- Traumatic experiences at school, home or elsewhere
- Negative school experiences (e.g., problems with a teacher)
- Experiences of discrimination at school
- Not enough sleep
- Starting at a new school or level at school
- Developmental disorders (e.g., autism spectrum disorder or an intellectual disability)
- Learning problems (e.g., dyslexia)
- Attention problems
- High achievement expectations from self, parents or school
- Struggling academically
- Exam stress
- Physical illness
- Periods of school absence (e.g., due to illness or holidays)



Family-related risk factors

- Parent mental health problems
- Parental history of school refusal
- Poor relationship between family and school
- Differing parental responses to the child's school reluctance or school refusal
- Family problems (e.g., conflict, parental separation or death in the family)
- Low parental involvement and low supervision of their child
- Past or current trauma affecting child, parents or both
- Violence in the family



Protective factors

There are also family-related factors that can **reduce the risk** of a child developing school reluctance or refusal. These include:

- parents having a positive attitude towards education
- parents communicating clear expectations about school attendance to their child.

Look after yourself

Parenting is tough at the best of times. It is normal to feel frustrated, worried, confused, angry or disappointed about your child's school reluctance or refusal. It is important to look after yourself and not be too hard on yourself.

If you feel like you are struggling to cope, you can consider:

- asking for help and accepting care from others. Reach out to people you already know whom you can rely on for assistance (e.g., family or friends), or find new supports (e.g., peer support, online support groups or health professionals)
- engaging in self-care activities (see *Box 7: Self-care activities* below).



Box 7: Self-care activities

Consider trying some of these activities for your own self-care:

- Engage in exercise or physical activity (e.g., sport, walking or gardening).
- Do something enjoyable.
- Practise good sleep hygiene.
- Try to keep involved in activities that give you a sense of purpose or achievement, at least for a small part of every day.
- Eat a nutritious, balanced diet.
- Talk over problems or feelings with someone who is supportive and caring.
- Reward yourself for reaching small goals.
- Let family and friends know how you are feeling, so people close to you know what you are going through.
- Engage in activities that give you a feeling of achievement.
- Ask a trusted friend or relative to help you get out and about or do activities.
- Make sure you get out of the house and are active for at least a short time each day.
- Make a list of strategies that have worked in the past for depression and keep using them.
- Learn relaxation methods (e.g., progressive muscle relaxation training).

How these guidelines were developed

These guidelines are based on a 2021 study of international expert consensus on parenting to support children experiencing school reluctance or school refusal. Experts who contributed had professional experience as a parent advocate or at least five years' experience in either clinical treatment or research involving **parenting and school refusal**. Details of the methodology are available upon request—please contact us via the details listed at parentingstrategies.net.

The guidelines were produced by researchers from Monash University, The University of Melbourne and Deakin University, with funding from the National Health and Medical Research Council, Australia. Although these guidelines are copyrighted, they can be freely reproduced for non-profit purposes if the source is acknowledged.

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Where to find information about parenting and child mental health

For information about how you can support your child's mental health, including a list of extra resources, please see the 'Useful Links' page on our website: parentingstrategies.net

parentingstrategies.net

For any enquiries, please use
the Contact Us form at
parentingstrategies.net/contact-us



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