Parent Factsheet: What to do when your child suddenly wants to avoid a certain person, place or activity

Immediate Action

Respect your child’s choice to avoid this activity for a time until you know more about their reasons and delicately monitor your child’s behaviour. If you notice they become anxious, sad or withdrawn, or there are changes in their behaviours or attitudes, tell your child they are safe and a trusted adult can always help. Ask them if they would like to share why they want to avoid something or someone. Reassure them that you will listen carefully and believe their story.

Description

The reasons why a child may suddenly want to avoid a person, place or activity can be so varied that you will need to do some detective work to find out why.

It may be as simple as a child changing their mind about an activity, getting bored of a game or app or feeling stressed about assignments at school. It can also be reasons as confronting as abuse, bullying or trauma. The only way you will know why your child wants to avoid this person, place or activity is to talk to them about it.

To open a safe and friendly dialogue, create a container for the conversation, picking a safe and private time and place. Perhaps try raising the topic on a walk or during some quiet time at home when no-one else is around. Ask open questions and listen without judgement.

Key Terms

**Social anxiety** - Persistent fear of being watched and judged by others. This fear can affect work, school and other daily activities.

**Sexual abuse** - Using power over a child or adolescent to involve them in sexual activity.

**Trauma** - A psychological response to an event that the person finds highly stressful. Events may include but are not limited to: abuse, witnessing assault, war, prolonged isolation, robbery or kidnapping. Symptoms may include but are not limited to: headaches, digestive symptoms, fatigue, racing heart, sweating, feeling jumpy, withdrawal, changes in appetite, loss of confidence, anger, fear, sadness, shame, anxiety, irritability, difficulty concentrating.

**Open questions** - Questions that allow people to speak freely and do not require a limited response. For example, ‘How did you find this?’, ‘What interests you about this?’.

Why does this happen?

Here are some possible reasons why a child may suddenly want to avoid a person, place or activity, but there will be many others that may be much more straightforward to deal with:

**Bullying**  
When a child feels threatened, outcast or bullied, they may avoid their usual activities or people they mix with. Bullying behaviours can include physical abuse, verbal taunting, exclusion, humiliation or threats.

**Anxiety, fear or embarrassment**  
When a child or young person wants to avoid something, it may be because something has gone wrong, and they do not want it to happen again. Maybe it was a conversation that didn’t go well, or they are embarrassed about something they have done. They might be anxious about being in trouble or be afraid of something happening again. Social anxiety can be common for children on the autism spectrum.

**Asserting freewill**  
When a child reaches a certain age or level of confidence, they may feel more ready to refuse to be in situations they have never really enjoyed. This may be a healthy expression of personal boundaries and identity as they grow up, but in some situations, it may cause challenges for families, such as if they no longer want to attend religious ceremonies or school.

**Abuse or assault**  
If a child had been abused or assaulted, they may wish to avoid being in the same situation again. If you notice your child behaving quite differently from normal, do not automatically assume the reason is abuse or assault, but gently invite your child to share their feelings or worries with you and reassure them that you will believe what they tell you. It is common for perpetrators to use tactics to discourage disclosure or teach victims to fear the consequences of disclosure. This is why some children remain silent about the abuse for years and continue to stay in an abusive environment. They may also be reluctant to speak about their experiences of abuse or assault if they feel they will not be listened to or believed.

How to respond to your child

**Tip 1**  
Calmly and openly ask your child about the person, place or activity they want to avoid. Listen without judgement and continue to monitor your child’s wellbeing. Share that you have noticed some changes in their behaviour and you are checking in because you care for them.

**Tip 2**  
Explain that if someone or something is making them feel scared or uncomfortable a trusted adult can always help. Ask if they would like to share anything with you that may have happened online or in person and help them come up with some strategies to deal with the situation. Keep in mind that if they have a story to share about an adult you care about, they may find it difficult to speak to you about it. Reassure them that no matter what they have to say, you will be there for them and believe them.

**Tip 3**  
Continue to check in with your child about their feelings towards the situation. You might like to revisit any family rules or boundaries for in-person and online contact with others and ensure your child has a plan for if something goes wrong.

**Tip 4**  
If you believe your child is showing signs of trauma and this issue is impacting their everyday life, they will require professional mental health support. You will need to help them access it and encourage them to continue. A starting point could be to contact Kids Helpline (1800 55 1800) or [eHeadspace](https://headspace.org.au/eheadspace).

How to communicate with relevant adults

**Tip 1**  
You may consider checking in with your child’s teachers, coaches or leaders in various activities. Keep it casual and just ask how your child is going. This will give you an indication of where your child feels most comfortable and whether or not the behaviours you are noticing are present in these environments also. Remember to respect your child’s privacy and don’t share anything you don’t need to.

**Tip 2**  
You may feel worried and concerned about your child’s mental health and it may be impacting your own wellbeing. Reach out for support if you need to by contacting a fellow trusted adult or mental health professional. If sexual abuse or assault is involved, you may like to contact a hotline such as 1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732).

**Tip 3**  
If you discover your child is avoiding an adult due to sexual abuse, do not attempt to contact this adult, for everyone’s safety. Limit all contact with this individual and collect as much factual evidence as you can to support your child’s story. Contact your local police station and report the incident as soon as possible.

Key References

* <https://raisingchildren.net.au/toddlers/health-daily-care/mental-health/social-anxiety>
* <https://au.reachout.com/articles/sexual-assault>
* <https://schoolavoidance.org/school-avoidance-facts/>
* <https://kidshelpline.com.au/parents/issues/understanding-child-sexual-abuse>
* <https://www.deseret.com/2014/1/25/20533627/when-bullies-strike-in-pe-kids-avoid-physical-activities-byu-led-study-says>