

Pre-Teen School Refusal



What is school refusal?

School refusal is about an overwhelming anxiety that is so terrifying and disabling that your child cannot go to school regardless of the consequences to themselves and the effects on your family. Truancy is different, as this is when a young person feels they have something better to do.

How does school refusal start?

The most common age of onset of school refusal is 10 to 13 years, affecting both boys and girls equally. This can be a time when the parents' influence can be less than that of their children's friends. Maintaining or increasing the level of engagement with the child against this movement away from you will involve considerable effort as your child may resist. Other influences that increase the risk of school refusal are a fear of failure, bullying or interruptions to regular school attendance.

Signs leading up to and including school refusal

What may start as occasional school avoidance can snowball and develop into school refusal.

Some of the signs you may recognise are:

- Complaining about attending school.
- Difficulty in getting out of bed and dawdling in preparing to go to school.
- Increased reluctance to attend after school breaks or days when your child feels open to criticism e.g., assessments, reading aloud or sports etc.
- Complaints of nausea, stomach aches, diarrhoea, headaches, sleep and appetite disturbances (a medical opinion should be sought to rule out a medical condition).
- Difficulty with school-work and decreased participation in class.
- Anxiety/shyness, depression, social isolation or withdrawal, threats of self-harm (a medical opinion should be sought).
- Behaviours such as: verbal and physical aggression, clinginess, seeking reassurance, noncompliance, and running away from school or home.
- Experiencing bullying at school.
- Perceives an excessive workload, subject stressors, suffers from perfectionism, poor sense of academic competence, learning challenges, feels disconnected.

How to prevent the development of school refusal

Your relationship with your child

At the age of 8 or 9 years, your child will have started to reduce their engagement with you and look to their friends for support and approval. However, your child still needs your involvement in their life, though they may claim otherwise. Your continued involvement is crucial in helping your child navigate through their school life. Mind you, there will be times when this will not be easy. You may well need buckets of patience and skills in encouraging your child to share some time with you.

Ways of connecting with your child

Make sure that it's fun for you both and does not become a chore.

Some ways of doing it are:

- Encourage your child to join in activities that you may be already doing such as walking the dog, cooking meals, and joining in gardening or helping in the backyard.
- Join in activities your child already does such as active computer games that involve movement and exercise, and sedentary computer games, as well as playing ball games, hide and seek, make believe etc.
- Both of you join in new activities such as family games night (your child's friends could also be invited).

(Refer to 4families leaflet 'Playful Parents')

Other ways of connecting with your child and helping them cope with schoolwork are:

- Chatting about what is going on in school in casual conversations. Not interrogating!
- When your child first gets home talk about non-school topics for a while unless your child raises the topic. Wait until your child is more settled.
- Rather than asking a general question about school like, 'how was school?', more specific questions might be:
 - What did you do at lunchtime today?
 - Who did you hang out with today?
 - What's school like this term compared with last term?
 - What subjects did you do today?
 - What was the best thing at school today?

Taking an active interest in their homework by:

- Helping your child to keep the homework diary up to date.
- Talking about homework in a positive way and praising all attempts and efforts.
- Encouraging even the smallest step made, not just major successes.

Helping with establishing and maintaining good study practice by:

- Helping your child to establish a routine to do homework at the same time each day.
- Using the same place for homework and study that has few or no distractions.

Your relationship with the school

Rather than waiting for major issues to arise that may lead to school refusal, raising queries or issues with your child's teachers about such things as homework, your child's reluctance to go to school or your child's progress is important. Talk informally with teachers at school drop-off and pick-up times or by email or phone if this is more appropriate for you and the teacher.

Some practical steps could be to ask the school to:

- Share lesson plans with you and your child.
- Excuse your child from activities that make them anxious e.g. reading aloud.
- If your child has a counsellor they may assist by writing a letter of recommendation to the school.

Helping your child to get back to school when they have stopped attending

Speak with your child

When children are at home they may settle into a routine of sleeping late and hanging out with friends and surfing the internet late into the night. Doing so is understandable in the absence of a structured daily routine. Unfortunately, this stress-free environment is likely to continue to reduce your child's motivation to attend school.

You may find it easier for your child to reconnect with and attend school by setting up a structured daily routine, for example:

- Getting up and dressed by school time each morning.
- No access to TV and the internet during school hours.
- Arranging for the teacher to give schoolwork to your child to be completed at home.
- No activities out of the home, such as shopping during school hours.

DO's

- **Do use negotiation and not confrontation.**
- **Do talk to your child about the option of speaking to a school counsellor or alternative counsellor for support.**

DONT's

- **Do not physically force, coerce or emotionally blackmail your child to go to school**
- **Do not make your child promise to go to school. At the time they may feel that they can keep their promise but they may become so overwhelmed with anxiety when it is time to go to school that they are unable to keep their promise. This could cause them to feel bad about themselves in letting you down.**
- **Do not remove their devices. Playing computer games may reduce their level of anxiety. Instead, restricting their use to outside school time is an acceptable option.**

Speaking with the school

You can build a parent-school relationship in several ways:

- Go to parent-teacher interviews and parent meetings.
- Check the school website, noticeboard, and emails regularly.
- Attend any parent seminars on topics such as bullying and mental health, or social events such as barbecues, sports and music events and school fairs.
- Find out about the school's attendance policies and procedures. This will help you to avoid any legal or financial penalties while you try to address the problem.
- Ask the school to work with you and your child to formulate a return to school plan which may involve transitioning to shorter school days or fewer subjects. This will involve the school engagement officer.

Speaking with your GP or child mental health services

If there are no medical reasons for your child's school refusal, the GP may refer your child to a mental health professional such as a counsellor, psychologist or psychiatrist who can help your child to learn skills to deal with their anxiety and other issues about going to school.

Alternative schooling options

Look into alternative schooling options. These options are different for each state and territory but may involve homeschooling or distance education. Check out your state or territory's Education Department website <http://det.wa.edu.au/homeeducation/detcms/portal/> for details. However, depending on circumstances, withdrawing your child from their current school and enrolling them at a different one may help. Other options are:

- Home tutoring.
- Online learning in a 'virtual classroom'.
- Home schooling.
- Distance education.

At this point, the Department of Education School Engagement Officer will work with you to come up with a re-engagement plan that is achievable.

This tip sheet provides general information and is not intended to be a substitute for professional support. Please reach out for support if you are worried about you or your child.

Useful Link

<https://www.education.gov.au/parent-engagement-children-s-learning>