

Step 1: Get yourself in the right headspace.

You'll need to remember to not get "tripped-up" by your child's anxiousness to return to school. It's so easy for parents and carers to feel that they might be being "too tough" by insisting that their child goes to school. Parents and carers can too easily feel they are being mean. It's not unusual for them to feel like they should give in to their child's protests.

Certainly, ask your child a few questions about why they don't want to go to school and let the school know about your child's concerns if the school needs to take some action. There may well be a reason your child is a bit anxious about returning to school; and it's worth understanding how you can ask the school for its support. In general, you should perceive 'going to school' as a normal life challenge – even for children who have special needs. Going to school, with all of its ups and downs, is a normal life challenge and the vast majority of teachers are there to support your child.

So, in step one, remind yourself that you are following this return to school action plan, because it is important for your child to have an education and to develop their friendship skills. You will need to counter your own feelings of being a 'mean' parent by changing YOUR self-talk. It might sound strange, I know, but your 'chatter' to yourself is important. Here are some things you can say to yourself:

"I know it is in her best interests to go to school: there are social benefits and also it's important that she not fall behind in her learning."

"He needs to go to school to stay connected to his friends and to learn how to get along with people outside the family."

"I am not being mean by helping him to face a normal life challenge, even if it is uncomfortable. In fact, by giving in to his or her resistance. I am implying that going to school is beyond his ability."

There's no getting around this, getting your child back into the habit of going to school will be hard so make sure you have the mental bandwidth in your own life to do it. Don't choose a period of time when you, yourself, have "a lot going on".

Step 2. From the get-go, state what your expectations are.

Let your children know that it's your expectation that attending school for 90% of the time is 'normal.' They should attend school every day unless they're really sick. So, you might start by explaining this to your child:



“It’s our job to go to our workplaces; it’s your job to go to school, unless you’re really sick - in which case - we can work out what to do, then. Having an education is important and the government expects all parents to send their children to school.”

Step 3: Leave your own emotions at the door.

Even though you may be tempted to, try not to get into arguments with them or nag them about going to school. If they're nervous or anxious about going to school, your frustration with them may backfire. Unfortunately, it's far too easy for children to 'feed' off your distress which, funnily enough, can have the strange effect of them wanting to stay home to look after you!

You'll want to make your 'return-to-school' project as calm and non-emotional as possible. Maybe you can remind them once every few days that going to school is important - but that's it. The bottom line is: no nagging.



Step 4: Stage their return to school and reward each step in the right direction.

With your co-parent, work out how “far away” your child is from routinely going back to school. If your child is sleeping-in till late morning, because they have grown used to not getting ready for school, you need to start waking your child at the time they would ordinarily need to be getting up for school. Make sure they have a bedtime routine and are getting enough sleep. Once you have established the bedtime and early-rising routine, think of what needs to happen next. The ultimate goal is to get your child to school and for them to stay the full day. The place you will need to start their return to school pathway should be the next meaningful next step towards that goal.

Because every school refusal situation is different, your child will need you to work out the steps on their own ‘return to school’ ladder. Have a look at the following ‘staged plan’ for getting your child on their pathway to returning to school.

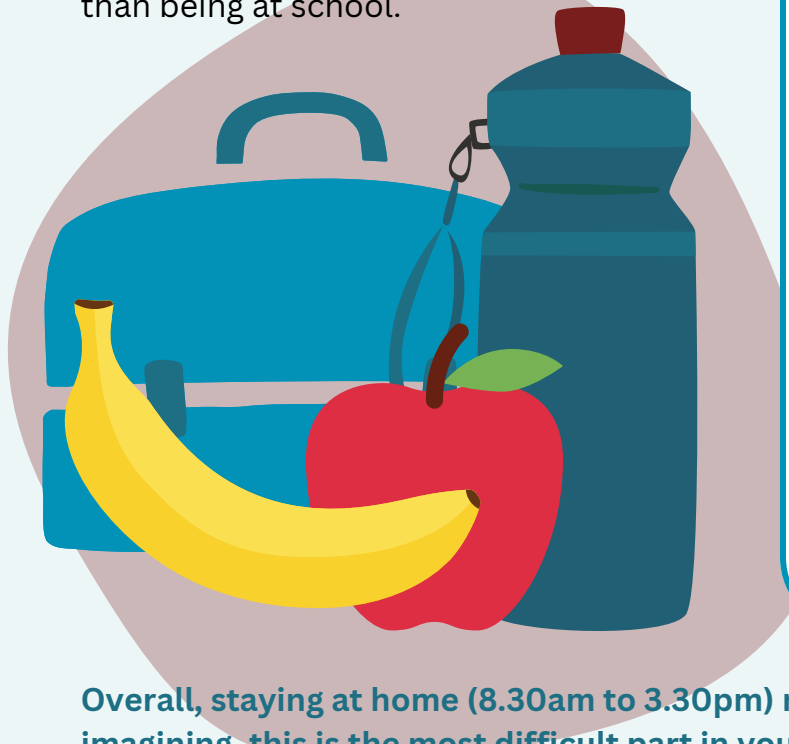
10	Routinely and going to school for full days.
9	Goes to school for the morning.
8	Will go with their friend to one classroom door, then go home.
7	Friend comes by and buddies with them to accompany them to the school gate.
6	Teach them one ‘body-calming’ technique to use when their feeling upset.
5	Teacher reaches out to your child (via your phone) each day to confirm how important it is they come to school.
4	Will get dressed into uniform in the morning and do a drive by of school.
3	Gives over their phone to you for the day when they are at home.
2	Get’s up to have a shower in the morning but doesn’t go to school.
1	Won’t get up in time and won’t get ready/ is absolutely refusing to go to school and your family is fighting.

For example, after you establish them getting up at the appropriate time, each day you might practice getting your child dressed fed and ready to leave - but they don't actually go to school. Then, you might add, getting in the car and driving to the school but not getting out. At the same time, you might be helping your child learn a few body-and-mind calming techniques. Then, you might get your child's class teacher to make contact with your child to express their excitement about your child's return to school. Next, you might organise a buddy for your child to meet up with on the way to school. Finally, you might take your child to school and with a buddy, walk-in and go straight to a pre-arranged activity. Have a plan in place at school in case your child struggles to stay in class all day. The important thing is for your child to stay at school for consecutive full days, even if they are not engaged in learning all day.



Step 5: Make clear and definite changes at home.

Now that your steps for a returning-to-school plan have been set up in your own mind, you will need to think about steps you can make at home. In the early part of your 'return to school' plan, make your child's days at home like their days at school. In short, don't make being at home more rewarding than being at school.



- A) Remove their access to devices, iPhones and TVs for the days they're at home. Make them inaccessible.
- B) Prepare them a packed lunch, snacks and drinks.
- C) If you're working from home don't have conversations with them. Nothing they would not have if they were at school. Don't take them on outings to the shops.
- D) Get them up from bed at a normal time they would get up for school. Make sure that they go to bed at the time they would go to bed on a normal school night and don't let them take their phone to bed.
- E) The only exception for device use is to do their schoolwork, which should be monitored.

Overall, staying at home (8.30am to 3.30pm) needs to be boring in contrast with going to school. As you're probably imagining, this is the most difficult part in your return to school project. Plan how you are going to reduce or remove their access to entertainment such as Netflix, computer games, and social media when they choose to stay home – anything they wouldn't have if they were at school.

Step 6: Invite supportive others in your family to help.

“Emily, I know you haven’t been going to school lately (fact). That must be tough (acknowledge). You’re going to face lots of challenges in life – including going to school (fact). I think you can find your way back to school. You’ve got this (belief).”

To succeed in helping your child back to school, involve family allies to encourage their return.

Recruit grandparents, aunts/uncles, schoolteachers, a school friend and even your close adult friends. Ask them to call your child on your phone - or theirs. Here is what they can say:



Step 7: Maintain their participation in your 'return to school' plan. Reward progress.

You can provide encouragement such as:

"I know you are strong enough to deal with this"

"You've got this"

"I'm really proud of the effort you're making"

Even when they get back to a normal routine, talk with your child each day by asking open-ended questions. For example, "Tell me about something that happened at school today?" Try to listen but don't feel you have to over empathise with their complaints about school. Avoid downward-spiralling discussions. Just listen for a few minutes, don't necessarily try to solve their issue - and then express your confidence in their ability to face the normal challenges of going to school.



In an overall sense, it's important to have a plan which both parents can agree about. At the end of the day, your "return to school" plan needs to be achievable - and followable. As your child's parents, what you both will get from implementing this seven point plan is a real sense of doing what's in your child's best interests.

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Headspace

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Emotions

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Support

Involve supportive others to help your family.

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Maintain

Maintain their participation in your “return to school” plan by expressing your belief that you can do this - and by rewarding her as she makes progress towards returning to school.

Back to school Flow Chart

Print this out to track your success.

To sum up, supporting your child to go back to school can be one of the hardest problems any parent will face. This is mainly because school refusal can develop into such an entrenched family pattern that it can be very hard to undo. It's a tough ask for many families - not just yours.

If you have tried these steps for one month and they are still not going to school, you may need to seek professional help. You might wish to take this plan with you, to show the health professional and see if it needs tweaking.

In taking on this return to school plan your love and care for your child is very apparent and, as parents, what we often do to show we love our children sometimes involves discomfort. Think about taking your babies for vaccinations or stopping your child eating too many chips. They won't like it. Your decision on their behalf won't be liked by them but you also know it's in their best interests!

If you're concerned about your child's level of anxiety, you might consider reading my new book *The Anxiety Coach* or doing my 4-hour online child anxiety course – available at www.parentshop.com.au

