

Getting to school and staying at school

INFORMATION FOR PARENTS AND CARERS

This handout has been created to share information and some strategies that you can use in assisting your child or adolescent who is refusing to attend school. School refusal is a complex issue, and many parents aren't sure what to do and it can become a source of enormous stress for the whole family. Talking with your child's teacher is the best place to start, so that you can work together on understanding the issues involved and coming up with a plan for getting your child back to school as soon as possible. If you are feeling uncertain and overwhelmed by the challenges, it could be beneficial for you to seek some support for yourself. You might find it helpful to also seek support through your family doctor, the school counsellor at your child's school, family friend, community based support worker, a religious or spiritual leader.

What is school refusal?

Many children and adolescents will express reluctance to go to school at some point. However, there are a number of children and adolescents who find going to school so difficult that they refuse to go. The term 'school refusal' is often used when the poor attendance is related to some anxiety or worry that the child or adolescent has about going to school. Parents or carers are usually aware that their child is not going, and have been making efforts to alleviate the anxiety and to encourage the young person to attend school (Kearney & Albano, 2004). The student's themselves are often upset about what they are missing. This is different from truancy, which is a term more often used for students who generally hide their absences from their parents or carers, may be involved in antisocial activities, and are less likely to show emotional distress about attending or missing school (Wimmer, 2004).

School refusal can occur at all ages but has been found to occur more frequently during major changes in children's lives such as beginning kindergarten or the transition from primary to high school. Children and adolescents who are having problems with attending school may show more signs of school refusal following holidays, school camps, sports days and weekends, but in general could refuse to go to school any day of the week. There is no single cause for school refusal, and reasons will differ from child to child. Some children and adolescents are more sensitive and particularly vulnerable to emotional distress. School refusal can also be a sign of a developing mental health problem, such as anxiety or depression.

School issues such as bullying, academic difficulties, a change in schools, or problems with teachers and peers

are common reasons that may contribute to school refusal. Other triggers for school refusal might be related to events at home. Examples of potentially stressful events that have been associated with school refusal include moving house, the death of a loved one, undertaking caring roles for unwell family members, parental separation, and exposure to family violence (Wimmer, 2004).

What are the signs of school refusal?

If your child has missed school 2-3 times over a two-week period, especially if related to some of the behaviours described below, your child may be developing a pattern of school refusal:

- Tearfulness before school or repeated pleas to stay at home resulting in frequent lateness or absences
- Tantrums, clinginess, dawdling or running away before school or during drop off
- Frequent complaints of illness before or during school such as stomach aches, headaches, dizziness or fatigue
- Difficulty attending school after weekends, holidays, school camps or sports days
- Long periods spent in sick bay or in principal's office.

What are the consequences of school refusal?

School refusal is a serious issue and needs to be managed early, as long absences mean that children miss out on important parts of the curriculum. Children and adolescents who school refuse can very quickly become entrenched in a long-term pattern of school refusal, which can have major long-term impacts for them and their family. Missing one day of school each week

adds up to 2 months' worth of learning missed over a year, and it has been shown that every day absent in high school has an impact on numeracy skills (Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2013).

Missing out on education is detrimental to lifelong learning and development in many ways. A week is a long time in the playground, so frequent absences might jeopardise children's social relationships. School refusal can also create conflict and strained relationships within families as a result of disruptions to routines, and might even affect income as parents or carers forgo work to stay home with the child. Some research has shown that school refusal has been associated with a higher chance of having problems later in life with mental health and social relationships, in addition to affecting the ability to get employment (Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2013; Silove et al., 2002; Flakierska-Praquin et al., 1997).

How can you help at home?

As challenging as the situation may be, it is important to try and remain calm and not make too big a deal of the school refusal as this could inadvertently prolong the school refusal behaviour. Keep up with extra-curricular and family activities to support resilience and give your child the experience of enjoyment and success. Some of the following tips may be useful (Bernstein, 2014):

- It is important to listen to your child's concerns and fears of going to school. Some of the reasons for refusing to attend school may include a peer who is bullying them, problems on the bus or carpool ride to school, or fears of inability to keep up with the other

students in the classroom. These issues can be addressed if they are known.

- If your child is complaining of illness, it is recommended that you visit your family doctor to have this checked out.
- School refusal can be a sign of developing mental health problems like anxiety and depression. If your child or adolescent tells you they are having problems like this, or if you have noticed they have had other changes in mood or behaviour, it would be good to discuss these with the school counsellor or your child's family doctor. They can help advise whether these kinds of problems could be playing a role and, if so, what to do next.
- Being firm and kind in getting your child to school regularly and on time will help, including not prolonging the goodbyes.
- Reassure your child that you will be at home upon their return from school. Keep your message consistent.
- Let your child know that you will be doing "boring stuff" at home during the school day, or going to work, so they don't think they are missing out on something.
- If your child simply refuses to go to school, some parents have found that decreasing the reward for staying home helps e.g. if they stay at home, do not allow video games, television, toys, snacking, parental attention.
- Find out what subjects/work is being done at school and provide similar education at home, when possible. This is especially relevant if your child's reported "sickness" seems to disappear once they are allowed to stay at home.
- Praise your child's positive behaviours while ignoring the negative behaviour.
- Seek professional help for yourself and your child.

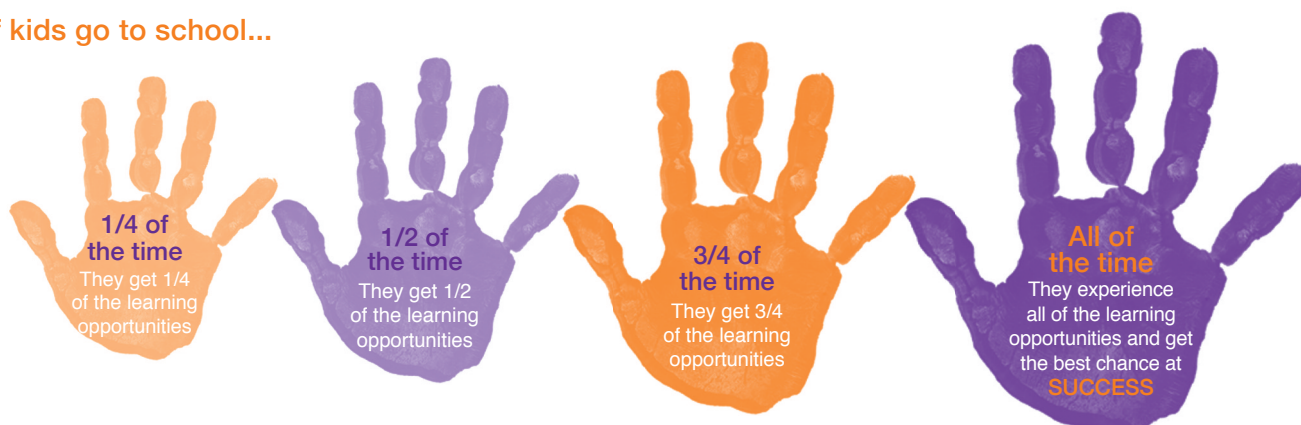
Everybody has a responsibility to help children

Families, carers, the student, the school and the community

School refusal could be thought of as a symptom, like when a child develops a fever. Investigating to find out the cause early on and then taking appropriate steps is the best way to keep the situation from developing into something more serious.

Missing school matters and every day counts

If kids go to school...



Consent to reprint image given by Council of Catholic School Parents, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Parent Committee 2014.