

Promoting school attendance

Schools that actively encourage mental health and wellbeing for children and young people can help to reduce school refusal.

What can schools do?

It's not unusual for students to sometimes be nervous or worried about going to school. But for some students, this worry can be excessive and can lead to school refusal. Different terms are also used to describe this behaviour such as school avoidance, school phobia, school can't or attendance anxiety.

The following approaches can help learning communities foster positive mental health and wellbeing among children and young people, which can help alleviate their distress around school attendance.

Building a mentally healthy community

A positive school culture helps children and young people feel safe and secure. It promotes a sense of belonging and encourages positive relationships to thrive. Students are more likely to attend school regularly when they feel supported and valued as an important part of the learning community.

Promoting a sense of belonging and connection, can help create culturally safe environments that respect and value students' diverse backgrounds. Creating inclusive and welcoming learning environments help support all students to thrive.

Creating family partnerships

Partnerships with families helps ensure attendance problems are detected early and a consistent approach is used to support the child or young person. Regular communication between schools and families during periods of non-attendance helps everyone work together to support the child or young person to return to school.

Developing resilience

Embedding teaching of social and emotional learning skills into the curriculum, with opportunities to practise these skills across a range of contexts, helps give children and young people tools for managing uncomfortable emotions. Having these real-life skills makes school refusal less likely.

Providing early support

Recognising the signs that a child or young person might be experiencing social or emotional difficulties helps educators take appropriate action. School refusal can be a flag for anxiety or other mental health issues. Recognising and responding to school refusal early means that educators might pick up on issues that would otherwise be missed. The child or young person and their family can also be referred to other services or professionals who can support them.

Students with disability and/or developmental delay

Some students might require additional support, such as children or young people with a disability or additional learning needs. Reasonable adjustments may be required to enable their attendance and participation.

Be You Professional Learning

Learn more about providing early support for children, young people and their families in the Early Support domain.

Learn more about creating and maintaining strong partnerships with families in the Family Partnerships domain.

Practical strategies

Early recognition of attendance and school refusal issues is essential.

Strategies can be put in place to support the student before the behaviour becomes entrenched.

At the whole-school level

- Create a positive school climate where everyone feels supported by their peers and educators, and has a sense of connectedness to the learning community.
- Establish peer support or mentoring programs to increase a sense of belonging among students.
- Closely monitor student attendance to enable early detection of attendance problems and follow up with the student and their family.
- Communicate the importance of consistent attendance to the school community.
- Develop a school policy specifically on school refusal with defined processes for when and how to respond.
- Embed trauma-informed approaches for students across the school community. While especially important for students affected by adverse experiences (recognising the impact of trauma and colonisation), these approaches benefit all students by creating safe, predictable environments and fostering supporting relationships.
- Build partnerships with local communities including First Nations communities, to support students' cultural identity and sense of belonging. Engaging community leaders and organisations can strengthen support networks for students and families.
- Ensure students know where they can go and who they can talk to if they're feeling worried or overwhelmed.
- Develop effective programs to support students and their families during the transition to school and between schools.
- Ensure all school staff are aware of the factors that contribute to school refusal and

receive support when working with students displaying persistent school refusal.

- Promote inclusive practices that support all students, including those that are neurodivergent who may be at higher risk of school refusal. This includes providing staff training and making reasonable adjustments to help reduce any barriers to participation.
- Offer alternate education settings or programs that incorporate cultural learning, land-based education or community led initiatives.
- Provide professional development for staff on understanding school refusal, mental health literacy, and effective classroom strategies for supporting students.

At the individual level

- Work closely with the family and child/young person to understand the underlying reasons behind the school refusal and problem-solve together.
- Work with the school's wellbeing team or learning support team (depending on resources available at your school) and get advice on support the student might need.
- Consider seeking information about professionals within the broader community who may be able to provide support - (i.e., youth workers, cultural leaders, health services).
- Recognise that students may experience multiple overlapping challenges that can influence school attendance, requiring tailored and flexible support.
- Strengthen collaboration with health professionals, community organisations, and mental health services to provide integrated support for students with persistent school refusal.
- Provide integrated support for students experiencing school refusal, including access to any school-based mental health professionals.
- Maintain close contact with the family, even during extended periods of non-attendance.

This helps support consistent strategies at home and school.

- Acknowledge the challenges faced by families of children and young people who refuse school.
- Develop a [return-to-school plan](#) in collaboration with the family and student. This might include gradual re-entry, a flexible learning program or timetable, or special arrangements for recess. The aim of the plan should include the expectation of gradual full attendance.
- Ensure the student's voice is heard, respecting their insights into what support will help them feel safe and engaged at school.
- Support families to implement a morning routine that sets the expectation of school attendance.
- Consider the support the child or young person might need upon arrival at school. This might include meeting with a friend at a specific place and time, using a quiet space to settle before school starts, engaging in an activity or responsibility, or meeting with a key staff member.
- Provide recognition and positive feedback for any efforts towards school attendance.
- Respond to any school-based needs, such as academic support, dealing with bullying or support with social relationships.
- Link families with appropriate support services for assistance with family-based issues which might be impacting on the child or young person's attendance.

Be You Resources

Learn more about creating [welcoming, culturally responsive learning environments](#).

Be You Professional Learning

Learn more about observing children and young people's behavioural and mood changes in the [Notice](#) module.

Learn more about creating welcoming learning environments in the [Include](#) module.

External Links

Creative Spirits – [How to improve Aboriginal literacy & school attendance](#).

Orygen Youth Mental Health – [Information for schools. A guide for supporting school attendance](#).

Bibliography

Visit [Promoting school attendance](#) for a list of references for this Fact Sheet.

