

# School refusal

Children and young people are sometimes reluctant to attend school and can become significantly worried or upset to the point of refusing to do so.

## What is school refusal?

*There is currently no agreed definition of school refusal. Different terms are also used like school avoidance, school phobia, school can't or attendance anxiety. In this Fact Sheet, we'll use 'school refusal'.*

School refusal is not the same as 'wagging' or truancy – it occurs when non-attendance is linked to worry, anxiety, or emotional distress about going to school.

Unlike truancy, the absence isn't usually hidden from family. In fact, families may have attempted many strategies to reduce the child or young person's anxiety or other challenges affecting their school attendance. The behaviour is considered an emotional response.

## What are the signs?

It's not unusual for students to sometimes be nervous or worried about going to school. However, for some students, this worry and anxiety can be excessive and can lead to them having trouble going to school or leaving home. So they might not attend school at all.

Signs of school refusal can vary significantly among children and young people depending on factors like their individual circumstances, family and community context, and school environment.

As an educator, you might notice some of the following signs of school refusal, including:

- attachment issues, dawdling or running away on arrival (in primary school-aged children)
- expressed reluctance to attend school

- frequent complaints of illness (such as stomach aches, headaches, dizziness or fatigue)
- absence or lateness to school after weekends, holidays, school camps or sports days
- long, unexplained absences from school
- periodic absences or missed classes, with no explanation given
- frequent requests to go home or call a family member
- absences on specific days (such as sports day or days with tests)
- frequent lateness to school
- long periods spent in the sick bay or the school office.

However, these signs can also be the result of other health conditions. It's important to work with the child or young person's family, and liaise with your wellbeing team, to help understand the underlying cause of these signs.

Families may indicate their child or young person is experiencing issues at home, such as morning tearfulness prior to school, difficulty falling asleep the night before or protesting going to school the next day. They may also report behaviour of concern from a child or young person intent on avoiding school. It's important to share information with families as soon as possible and seek their perspective on these issues.

Learn more about how you can [promote school attendance](#).

## Be You Professional Learning

Check out tips for creating and maintaining strong relationships with families in the [Family Partnerships](#) domain.

## What contributes to school refusal?

There are many reasons why a student might refuse school.

*Some research suggests a significant number of students experiencing school refusal are neurodivergent. For these students the typical school environment can contribute to sensory overload and anxiety.*

The reasons for school refusal will be different for each child or young person. School refusal can happen at any age but is more likely to occur during times of [transition](#) (for example, starting primary or secondary school) or major family events (such as separation or family bereavement). Usually, there's no single event or reason, but rather various factors that contribute to a child or young person's non-attendance.

### Contributing factors might include:

- anxiety about social situations
- anxiety around activities that involve performance or evaluation (such as sports days, tests or speaking in front of the class)
- peer issues, such as social isolation, bullying or conflict with friends
- difficulty or conflict with educators
- academic challenges or learning difficulties
- anxiety around being separated from significant family members
- traumatic events, such as family illness, grief or parental separation/divorce, exposure to family violence
- difficulties with transition, such as moving to a new school
- mental health issues.

School refusal or reluctance to attend are symptoms of an underlying challenge. It's important to identify, understand and address these deeper causes when supporting a child or

young person to return to school or attend consistently.

Getting help from support services within the school or [local community](#) can be a good first step, as early detection and intervention is essential. The longer the issue persists, the more difficult it can be to re-engage the child or young person with their learning.

## What are the consequences?

School refusal is a serious issue that's best managed early. Long absences can mean children and young people miss out on large parts of the curriculum. School refusal can also create conflict and strained relationships within families through disruptions to their routines. It might even affect income if family members forgo work to stay home with the child or young person.

Children and young people who miss school might also face long-term challenges. Research shows school refusal can contribute to mental health issues, emotional and social issues, exiting school early and employment challenges in later life.

Understanding the signs and underlying causes of school refusal, working collaboratively with families, and intervening early are key to supporting [students re-engagement with school](#). Inclusive and flexible learning environments also help encourage regular school attendance.

## Be You Resources

Learn more about [Promoting school attendance](#).

## Be You Professional Learning

Learn more about how to recognise behaviours that may indicate early signs of mental health challenges in the [Early Support](#) module.

External Links - Raising Children Network – [School refusal](#).

## Bibliography

Visit [School refusal](#) for a list of references for this Fact Sheet.

