

# *Understanding School Refusal*

# Be You In Focus webinar handout

## This resource contains:

- A quick summary of key concepts.
- Links to resources.
- Attendee Questions and Answer panel responses.
- In Practice reflective questions.

## Quick summary of key concepts and messages

- School refusal is a complex issue which does not have one single cause, and the reason for school refusal can be different for each student who experiences it.
- See school refusal as a behaviour that serves a purpose for the young person – it's important to try to understand the function of the behaviour to help find solutions.
- It can be frustrating for adults to understand the reasons for school refusal. However, try and remain calm and non-judgmental and seek guidance and assistance from internal and external resources as necessary.
- "respectfully curious" - this is an important way to approaching this topic with children or young people. Seek to understand their perspective and what is going on for them.
- It's important for educators to understand their role and to have realistic expectations for their students. Even the best plans to support a successful return to school won't have the desired outcomes.

## Links to resources:

Please find below a selection of resources either shared during the webinar or used in preparation for the webinar.

### Be You Resources

- Professional Learning: Be You Early Support (Notice, Inquire, Provide modules): <https://beyou.edu.au/learn/early-support>
- Be You Mentally Health Continuum and BETLS\* tool: <https://beyou.edu.au/resources/mental-health-continuum>

\*BETLS is an acronym for behaviour, emotions, thoughts, learning and social relationships.

## Factsheets:

- Be You [School Refusal](#)
- Be You [Separation Anxiety](#)
- Be You [Promoting School Attendance](#)
- Be You [Communication Skills for Educators](#)
- Be You [Before Recommending Additional Support](#)
- Be You [Recommending Additional Support](#)
- Be You [Helpseeking for Children and Young People in Schools](#)
- Be You [Transition from Primary to Secondary School](#)
- Be You [Transitions in Learning Communities](#)
- Be You [Supporting Young People Experiencing Anxiety](#)

## Other References:

- headspace Understanding school refusal resource  
[h Understanding school refusal \(headspace.org.au\)](https://www.headspace.org.au/understanding-school-refusal)
- Beyond Blue healthy families website  
<https://healthyfamilies.beyondblue.org.au/>
- Reachout: How to help a teen who doesn't want to go to school factsheet  
<https://parents.au.reachout.com/common-concerns/everyday-issues/things-to-try-school-and-education/how-to-help-a-teen-who-doesnt-want-to-go-to-school>
- Raising Children Network: school refusal in children and teens  
<https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/school-learning/school-refusal/school-refusal>
- Children of Parents with a Mental Health Illness website  
<https://www.copmi.net.au/>
- Kids Help line  
<https://kidshelpline.com.au/>

## Attendee questions and panel answer responses

### What's the difference between school refusal, absenteeism and truancy?

These issues can be all difficult to manage. The panel was very clear in acknowledging that it is not easy to manage school refusal and requires energy and patience from educators. It can also be difficult to accept that even when you have developed a solid plan to return to school, sometimes it may not play out the way you expect or want it to go.

It's useful to define the different forms of absences as they can often be used interchangeably but have different functions behind them.

Absenteeism is any form of absence from school or class, usually with the knowledge of the parents/carers. This may include when parents/carers decide to take the student on a holiday outside of Term holidays.

Truancy refers to concealed absences by the child or young person, without parent/carer knowledge. Truancy is usually not anxiety-based and usually involves the child or young person in engaging in alternate activities or behaviours, such as seeing friends, or spending time in the shopping centre. It's important to follow up with the student and parents/carers when truancy occurs, as this can become an appealing alternative to schooling for a young person and can impact the learning and sense of connection to school and peers.

School refusal refers to when a child or young person refuses to attend school and/or problems remaining in class for an entire day and is anxiety-based (for example separation, generalised or social anxiety driven). It can present as extended absences from school, periodic absences from school, missed classes or chronic tardiness with the child or young person experiencing intense dread (or anxiety) about school that precipitates pleas for future non-attendance. Parents/carers are aware of school refusal absences and no attempt by the child is made to conceal these absences.

All absences need to be followed up according to your internal school procedure. It's important to include both the student and their parent/carer in a conversation about the reasons for absences, and to plan for how the student will return to school.

### **What are the early signs of school refusal?**

Some early signs of school refusal could be complaining of stomach aches or headaches, visible clinginess and difficulty with parental separation (particularly with primary aged students), frequent lateness, frequent requests to go to sick bay or contact caregivers and absenteeism on specific days of importance, such as sports days, or when a certain class is timetabled.

While some of these behaviours are very usual for students entering a new environment (new starters or starting a new school/year level) and will improve as the new routine is established; for some students these may be signs of a deeper underlining cause. 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. Discussing your concerns with the parents/carers is important, as they may be able to provide important context, such as any worries or fears that their child may have raised at home, or previous instances of school refusal in earlier schooling.

During the webinar, the hosts talked about the [Be You BETLS Tool](#), which is a fantastic way to capture your observations and provide you with data about whether the student is experiencing school refusal.

### **What are some practical strategies to get students back to school, and in managing school refusal?**

Before you can establish that the student is refusing to attend school, try and have a curious stance in engaging both the student and their caregiver. By using supportive and open-ended questions, you can invite the student to talk about why it is difficult for them to attend school and encourage the parent or caregiver to give an insight into what might be happening – for example family difficulties or breakdown, caring responsibilities. Try to actively listen to the student's perspective without needing to have answers or solutions. It's important that you are

clear with the student and their parent/carer about your goal to get them back to school, but also let them know that you are wanting to work towards this outcome and understand that an immediate full-time return to class may not be realistic.

If the student is not feeling able to come into school to have discussions about their school refusal, you may consider speaking via Zoom or in a phone call. As you continue to speak to the student and their parent/carer about setting goals and planning for a return to school, you may find it useful to give the student the option to speak initially with the camera off on Zoom, and ease into speaking to you with the camera on, for short periods of time.

When you are speaking to the student about their reasons for school refusal, it's important to remember that school refusal is primarily an issue about anxiety. The young person may not be able to fully explain the reasons for their anxiety or may describe thoughts or feelings which you may think are manageable. It's crucial that you remember that these anxieties are very real for the student. Managing a return to school is a team effort with the student, their parent/carer and any additional mental health supports through the school or externally.

Once you begin to understand the student's reasons for not attending school, it's a great idea to think about who else you might need to get involved within your school, in supporting the student's return to school. Is it your role to develop a return to school plan or do you need to collaborate with your principal or wellbeing leader? Do you have a policy or procedure that you need to follow? With these considerations in mind, develop a return-to-school plan in collaboration with the student and parent/carers.

Depending on the student's individual needs, this might include gradual re-entry, a flexible learning program or timetable, or special arrangements for recess. The panel talked about the "Just Right" strategy when developing the plan. It is likely going to be a slow return and it's important to try and be as flexible as you can and that everyone has a clear understanding of what the expectations of the plan involve. There may be setbacks along the way, and it's understandable that these can be frustrating. However, don't forget to provide recognition and positive feedback for any efforts towards school attendance!

Here are some other possible strategies:

- Support families to implement a morning routine that sets the expectation of school attendance. This may be a staged approach – the student may plan to wear their school uniform in the morning at home, and then over time, wear their uniform and drive to the school without going in. This could then move to getting to school and going to the office, and then staying for a short time in an area that feels safe. By setting small, gradual goals in consultation with the student and their parent/carer, it means that the student isn't expected to simply come back to school for a full day, which may feel impossible for the student. It's important to have realistic expectations and to be prepared for setbacks.
- 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.
- Clear signposting about what to expect, both in their return to the school grounds, and once they're in the classroom, support the student to have some control over their experience, and can do lots to alleviate anxiety. This might include having a small written

“timetable” of what will happen that day. For example, “meet friends in quiet room near office for 20 minutes. Go for a walk past lockers once classes have begun” and then gradually adding activities with the student and their parent/carer’s input.

- Respond to any school-based needs, such as academic support, or support with social relationships. This might include modification of work or smaller, manageable chunks. If the student has been school refusing for some time, they may have missed content, so discussing with the classroom teacher/s and the student about goals for work completion can help the student to experience a sense of control over their learning and experience some small wins in getting work completed.
- Link families with appropriate support services for assistance with family-based issues which might be impacting on the child or young person’s attendance. It’s important that this is done in conjunction with the Wellbeing staff at the school, and that families are supported by qualified mental health practitioners. There are many parent support resources and networks that can provide advice for parents/carers who have a child experiencing school refusal. We have included some of these links in the list of resources.
- Regularly review the plan for return to school with the student and parent/carer. Is it meeting their needs currently, are there any barriers or new considerations? Reflect and report back on what has been working and be curious about the student and caregivers experience.

### **How do we manage when the family isn’t supportive of getting the student to return to school or are enabling the behaviour?**

This can be a difficult part of school refusal to manage, as educators may feel that they are working hard to get the student to feel safe to return to school but feel that parents/carers aren’t being equally supportive.

One of our panellists from the webinar, Glenn, mentioned that it’s important to consider that the parents/carers may themselves be experiencing mental health concerns, or may themselves have had negative experiences of schooling. They may struggle to engage with the school, or to be able to provide a level of support for their child to return to school. The parent/carer may feel that they need the student to stay at home to support them.

In these instances, it is crucial that educators remember the boundaries of their role, and to be realistic and gentle with themselves about what can realistically be achieved. By being clear and accessible to parents/carers within school hours and assuring them of your intent to work to support the student to feel safe and supported is important.

The parent/carer may appear to not be supportive of getting their child back to school, but it may be a case of not knowing where to start, or it is feeling impossible. Take time to speak to the parent/carer and get a sense of what they are experiencing when it’s school time can help to give context to the actions or inactions of the parent/carer. You may like to provide some suggestions for where the parent/carer can get more information, including letting them know that a GP can be a good place to start the conversation. Providing examples of some simple strategies for parents/carers may assist them to begin to support the school, if they aren’t sure where to start. These could include:

- Making time at home boring, so staying home isn't seen as a reward. This could include limiting time watching TV or being on the computer or phones
- Getting their child to complete work provided by the school, during school hours
- Using clear, calm language to set expectations about attending school. This could sound like "when you are at school tomorrow", rather than "if you make it to school tomorrow"
- Using positive language and acknowledge efforts the child is taking, such as "I'm really proud of how brave you were in going to school yesterday, even when it felt hard"

If you are concerned that the parent/carer is making no effort to get their child to school, over a period of time, or if you are not getting any response from parent/carers when you contact them, it is important to discuss your concerns with your school's leadership. You may find it useful to keep a note of the times and methods you used to connect with the parent/carer (email, text, phone call) and any responses you have received. In discussion with your school's leadership, it is important to discuss if there are any legislative requirements that the school needs to follow, in terms of attendance documentation. If you need to report any protective concerns or follow any mandatory reporting requirements, it is vital that these are actioned.

### **How do I manage with multiple students' school refusing?**

It's important that there is a collaborative approach in your school, and that one person is not trying to manage the issues of school refusing for multiple students. It's important to connect to the school's leadership staff and wellbeing staff. If you are the wellbeing leader and are the person who usually supports students who are school refusing, then when there are multiple students to support, it is advisable to speak to your school's leadership about what other supports may be available, or who else can assist you. Remember that your wellbeing is vitally important and that it is reasonable to speak about how you are coping with your workload. Be You has a number of resources to support [Educator Wellbeing](#), including the Educator Wellbeing Plan.

If there are multiple students who are school refusing, it's still important that we assist and work with each student individually, with their parents/carers. The reasons for school refusal will be individual to each young person, and the approach to support them will require their own re-entry supports and planning. It's also important to remember confidentiality applies to each of these students, even if you feel that they have similar concerns.

### **How do you support a student when they seem to be up all-night gaming or not sleeping?**

We had many questions during the In Focus about this topic, so let's acknowledge that this is a widespread issue that many educators are facing, and not just with students who are school refusing. It is also a tricky issue for educators to manage when it's happening outside of school hours.

Ideally, you would follow the principles mentioned in the earlier answers. Gently explore with the student what might be keeping them up at night and arrange to meet with the parent/carer to discuss your concerns. Using that same "Just Right" strategy, don't suggest the student completely stop gaming but try and establish what might be a reasonable time amount. It's also important to note that if a student is going to bed at 4am, it will be extremely difficult for them

to suddenly start going to bed at 10pm. Use the gradual approach in your planning. If you agree on a time frame for gaming (say 5pm-10pm), brainstorm some ideas about how the student and parent/carer may be able to reinforce this decision eg; turning off the wi-fi or disconnecting the controller. Support the parent/carer by reinforcing the reasons why it is important for their young person to be getting enough sleep and that it is a crucial ingredient in school attendance and ultimately academic engagement. Encourage the parent/carer to access their own supports, or explore parenting resources and forums, such as the ones we've included in the list of resources. This [resource from Kids Helpline Parents on online gaming](#) may be a good resource to share with parents/carers.

It is important to explore the reasons and motivations behind why a student might be gaming or are they simply struggling to sleep? Significant sleep issues may require external support and intervention. If a student is using gaming for social interaction, is there a way you can support and promote social connection at school? Understanding what motivates a student, can be a helpful way to offer solutions and to try to find a solution that still meets the needs of the student. This is particularly important when you might not be able to have active engagement with the parents- especially with older students. Do you know what they are interested in, eg: computer programming or developing video content? This could be a way to motivate a young person to see the benefits in coming to school by talking about the pathways that school or other education pathways can provide them to pursue their passions. Are there opportunities within the school timetable to engage in some of their interests? It's also a great opportunity to explore the positive ways we can support mental health and wellbeing by having a discussion with the whole class about possible strategies that others use or different ways we navigate challenges.

As mentioned in the earlier answers, remember to remain within your role and try to accept that you might not be able to encourage a young person to return to school. It's ok to look after yourself by enforcing healthy boundaries.

### How do we contact our Be You Consultant?


If you are a participating Be You school or service and you would like to get in contact with your Be You Consultant, visit [beyou.edu.au](http://beyou.edu.au). Log in to your account, then click on 'My Learning Community'. Click on 'Supports' and you will find your Be You Consultant listed there if you are an Action Team leader. If you are not a participating school, then please complete [this web form](#) and we will get back to you. The following subject line should be selected: Find out more about Be You for Schools.

## Reflective questions to utilise in Action Team meetings and/or other relevant school meetings:

- What is your current school policy regarding students presenting with school refusal?
- How does this align with your Education Department/Governing body/Professional association's policies in relation to managing school refusal?
- How does this complement your existing policies regarding generalised mental health concerns and risk management policies?





- What is your schools internal process for referral to student services/wellbeing team, if an educator is concerned about a student school refusing?
- Who can staff go to within the school if they have questions or wish to access further support?
- Who do families go to within the school if they have concerns about their young person and/or wish to discuss their young person's school refusal?
- What preventative approaches currently exist in your school regarding mental health? How does our school currently promote help seeking for mental health challenges from a whole school approach? This could include help seeking messages for students, educators, families?
- How does your school currently approach improving the mental health literacy of students?
- What external mental health agencies does your school have relationships with? What are the referral processes for these agencies? Are families aware of local mental health service providers?





## Mental Health Services and Support

<p><b>Beyond Blue</b></p> <p>24/7 mental health support service</p> <p><b>1300 22 4636</b> beyondblue.org.au</p>	<p><b>headspace</b></p> <p>Online support and counselling to young people aged 12 to 25</p> <p><b>1800 650 890</b> (9am-1am daily) For webchat, visit: <a href="http://headspace.org.au/ehespace">headspace.org.au/ehespace</a></p>	<p><b>Kids Helpline</b></p> <p>24/7 crisis support and suicide prevention services for children and young people aged 5 to 25</p> <p><b>1800 55 1800</b> kidshelpline.com.au</p>	<p><b>1800RESPECT</b></p> <p>24/7 support for people impacted by sexual assault, domestic violence and abuse</p> <p><b>1800 737 732</b> 1800respect.org.au</p>
<p><b>Lifeline</b></p> <p>24/7 crisis support and suicide prevention services</p> <p><b>13 11 14</b> lifeline.org.au</p>	<p><b>Suicide Call Back</b></p> <p>24/7 crisis support and counselling service for people affected by suicide</p> <p><b>1300 659 467</b> suicidecallbackservice.org.au</p>	<p><b>Mensline</b></p> <p>24/7 counselling service for men</p> <p><b>1300 78 99 78</b> mensline.org.au</p>	<p><b>QLife</b></p> <p>LGBTI peer support and referral</p> <p><b>1800 184 527</b> (6pm-10pm daily) qlife.org.au (online chat 3pm-12am daily)</p>

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