

THE SCHOOL PSYCH.



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Infosheets

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School Refusal

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School refusal is primarily an anxiety-based difficulty that is not the same as 'wagging' or truancy. Young people suffering from school refusal difficulties find they 'can't' attend rather than 'won't' attend school. It occurs for a variety of reasons, and each young person has their own story. The most important place to start is simply by listening, rather than judging or pushing. Putting the complex puzzle together is essential to moving forward.

Technical bits...

School refusal is not a clinical diagnosis, and does not come under a single category in the DSM-5. School refusal is a set of symptoms that are often caused by other underlying difficulties and conditions, such as anxiety, depression, phobias, ADHD, ASD and Learning Disorders. Tailored assessment of individual strengths and weaknesses is essential to determine any underlying and contributing conditions.

Most young people want to go to school. Sometimes they feel like they can't. They're anxious and overwhelmed. They're conflicted because they want to hang out with their friends, but sometimes there are things going on that they just can't face.

Anecdotal Evidence:

I have had the privilege of working with a lot of families and young people who are in the grips of school refusal. Contrary to popular judgement, these kids want to go to school. They want friends, they want to participate.



Through some thorough assessment and a non-judgmental ear, I often notice the following: the young person experiences such a deep sense of shame that they struggle to communicate what is happening and instead shut down. Once we break down the shame, we often find learning difficulties, attention problems, social challenges, lack of support at school, harsh punishments, stressed parents and low self-esteem.

WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?



Kearney (2018) suggests that many young people refuse school for one or more of the following reasons: (1) to avoid school-related situations that cause substantial distress, (2) to escape painful social and/or evaluative school-related situations, (3) to pursue attention from significant others, and (4) to pursue tangible rewards outside of school.

In other words:

1. **School is stressful**- this could be related to academic expectations, the school environment etc. There may be underlying conditions making this difficult for them.
2. **They fear judgement** - from their peers, teachers, parents related to school/performance/social situations.
3. **They receive attention through not attending** (do not use this idea to blame the child, all humans seek attention some way or another). This is a communication of their distress.
4. **When they stay home, they get something out of it.** They might get to stay home with mum, play video games, hang out with grandparents etc.

HOW CAN SCHOOLS HELP?



Schools sometimes feel a bit lost with school refusal, because it is happening 'outside the school gate', but there is plenty that schools can do to assist:

- **Promote open communication with the family.** Monitor and enquire about absences. Make sure the child and family feel valued by noticing absence.
- **Observe and gather data about academic and social difficulties.** Provide intervention where possible, or advise of external assistance. Parents don't know what you see if you don't communicate with them and provide clear evidence.
- **School refusal needs an individual re-engagement and learning plan.** A gradual return is recommended. Staged, with clear expectations and supports. Difficulties must be identified in the plan and steps clearly outlined to support the young person in managing them. See the CPS model in references.
- **Make sure the young person feels connected to school and their return matters.** They need to feel valued and listened to, not shamed and punished.
- **Create a plan for managing anxiety AT school.** Make sure they have a plan to regulate themselves *at school*, rather than feeling they must return home.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?



School refusal puts significant strain on parents. Many parents need to get to work in the morning, so the argument usually ends in the parents 'giving up' the fight and leaving angry, or inconvenienced in missing work for the day. I have also seen parents fighting amongst themselves.

Tips for parents managing school refusal:

1. **Communication is key!** Open communication with your struggling child, with the school, between parents and involving health professionals. A team working around the student, who are all being open and honest, with a shared game plan is the best way forward.
2. **Get on the same page.** Parents who disagree on the management of the situation don't get anywhere until they form a united front with consistent, agreed approaches.
3. **Learn to regulate your own emotional state.** Your morning anger is inflaming your child's anxiety. Approach the situation in a calm, consistent way. Nearly make your responses boring, they are so consistent and expected. This will reduce the anxiety experienced by the young person and model positive ways of regulating emotion.
4. **Seek assessment to have a clear picture of difficulties and skills.** If they need help, seek that too. Don't be afraid of a potential diagnosis. It is very helpful for everyone (including the young person) to understand their difficulties and find the best ways to help.

REFERENCES & RESOURCES

School Refusal

<https://beyou.edu.au/fact-sheets/development/school-refusal>

<https://schoolavoidance.org/school-avoidance-102/>

<https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/school-learning/school-refusal/school-refusal>

<https://headspace.org.au/explore-topics/supporting-a-young-person/school-refusal/>

<https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/kidsfamilies/youth/Documents/forum-speaker-presentations/2017/school-refusal-parent-handout.pdf>

<https://ckearney.faculty.unlv.edu/information-on-school-refusal-behavior/>

CPS Model

<https://www.cpsconnection.com/the-cps-model>

<https://drrossgreene.com/lost-at-school.htm>