

## Who are these guidelines for?

These guidelines are a general set of recommendations on how you (as a **parent or caregiver**) can reduce your child's risk of school refusal and support their mental health and school engagement if they are having problems with school attendance. The strategies included in these guidelines are intended to apply to parents of both **primary and secondary school-aged** children.

The guidelines may be useful for parents who are worried about their child's engagement with school and those whose child is already experiencing school reluctance or refusal. Each family is unique, so you may need to adapt these strategies to your specific situation.

The guidelines are **not** intended for parents whose child is experiencing truancy (i.e., 'wagging' or skipping school) or those who are unable to attend school due to other circumstances that prevent them from attending (e.g., medical illness).

## What do we mean by school reluctance and school refusal?

A child is experiencing **school reluctance** if they are unwilling to attend school, but they are still attending school.<sup>1</sup>

A child is experiencing **school refusal** if they have difficulties attending and/or remaining at school during the day due to emotional distress about attending school.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note that school refusal is not a diagnosable mental health condition; however, it may be a consequence of mental health issues (e.g., anxiety, depression).

Although widely used, we acknowledge that the term 'school refusal' is not universally accepted as the best term to describe the behaviour. We acknowledge that there are numerous and interacting child, family, school, community and other circumstances that contribute to a child's attendance at school.



## What increases children's risk of developing school reluctance or refusal?

Some children are at higher risk of school reluctance or refusal than others (see *Box 6: Risk and protective factors for developing school reluctance or refusal, page 14*). You might find it helpful to consider which risk factors apply to your child and whether these can be changed to reduce their risk. Even if any of the risk factors that apply to your child are difficult to change, you as a parent can still support your child to reduce the effect of these factors on your child.

## What are the potential consequences of school reluctance or refusal?

There are both short- and long-term consequences a child may experience if school refusal is ongoing. These consequences include:

- missing out on learning/education<sup>3,4</sup>
- exiting school early<sup>5</sup>
- difficulties with friendships/peer relationships<sup>3,4</sup>
- later problems with working life (e.g., unemployment)<sup>3,4,5,6</sup>
- mental health problems<sup>3,5,7</sup>
- conflict and strained relationships within the family<sup>3,4,5</sup>
- decreased income in the family (e.g., if family members stay home from work to care for the child).<sup>5</sup>

It is important to help your child to engage with school to minimise the potential consequences of not attending school.

1 Jones, A. M., & Suveg, C. (2015). *Flying under the radar: School reluctance in anxious youth*. *School Mental Health: A Multidisciplinary Research and Practice Journal*, 7(3), 212–223.

2 Berg, I. (2002). School avoidance, school phobia, and truancy. In M. Lewis (Ed.), *Child and adolescent psychiatry: A comprehensive textbook* (pp. 1260–1266). Lippincott Williams & Wilkins

3 King, N. J., & Bernstein, G. A. (2001). *School refusal in children and adolescents: A review of the past 10 years*. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 40(2), 197–205.

4 Sewell, J. (2008). *School refusal*. *Australian Family Physician*, 37(4), 406–408.

5 Kearney, C. A., & Bensaheb, A. (2006). *School absenteeism and school refusal behavior: A review and suggestions for school-based health professionals*. *Journal of School Health*, 76(1), 3–7.

6 Mcshane G., Walter G., Rey J.M. (2004). *Functional outcome of adolescents with 'school refusal'*. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 9(1), 53–60.

7 Fremont, W. P. (2003). *School refusal in children and adolescents*. *American Family Physician*, 68(8), 1555–1560.

# Warning signs of school reluctance or refusal

It is important for parents to know the warning signs for school reluctance and refusal. Responding early to these warning signs may prevent school reluctance or refusal from happening or becoming an ongoing problem.

Below is a list of warning signs that children may show. Children who develop problems with school reluctance or refusal will often show several, but not all, of these warning signs.



## Feelings about school

- Negative feelings about school (e.g., anxiety, embarrassment, fear, irritability, loneliness, sadness, shame)
- Negative thoughts and feelings about school that affect other parts of their life (e.g., interfere with social activities or family life)
- Feeling under pressure (e.g., to perform academically or when with other students).



## Behaviours

- Protesting about going to school
- Tantrums or outbursts of anger, especially on school mornings
- Inability or reluctance to wake up and get ready for school on time
- Other behaviours that show reluctance to go to school (e.g., slow to get out of bed or get ready for school, locking themselves in the bathroom)
- Oppositional, aggressive or other challenging behaviour with the intent to avoid school
- Skipping class or school repeatedly
- Not attending school on significant days (e.g., days on which tests or specific classes are scheduled)
- Threatening to harm themselves if made to go to school
- Behavioural or emotional problems that are present on school days but subside on weekends or holidays.



## Physical

- Frequent physical complaints, which may be unexplained (e.g., nausea, stomach aches, headaches, dizziness, fatigue) and subside when the child is allowed to stay home from school.



## Behaviours when at school

- Falling behind with schoolwork
- Challenging behaviour on arrival at school (e.g., tantrums, clinginess, running away)
- Frequent requests or begging (e.g., phone calls or texts to parents) to leave school early during the school day
- Running away from or hiding at school (e.g., in the bathroom/toilet)
- Leaving school before the school day ends
- Long or regular visits to the health centre, sick bay, school nurse or school office
- Persistent distress (e.g., crying) during class.



## Emotional, psychological and social changes

- Difficulties falling asleep the night before school
- Morning tearfulness prior to school
- Withdrawal from others
- Wanting to stay home when invited to school-related events or events with school peers (e.g., birthday parties).

