

What is school refusal?

Here's how children experience school refusal over time. Children may:

- fall behind on schoolwork, delaying development, impacting on learning, and further driving anxiety not to attend
- become disengaged from peers and teachers, and gradually lose their sense of belonging at school
- have increasing anxiety the longer they're absent.

School refusal can happen at any stage of schooling and may present differently at different stages. It often starts at transition times when a child is vulnerable (such as starting at a new school or new term), and may start gradually or come on suddenly.

While each child presents differently, here are some common symptoms and signs of school refusal.

Before school	At school
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Complaints about 'feeling' sick in the morning or the night before• Trembling, shakiness, wavering voice, or tears• Loss of appetite• Trouble getting to sleep and/or staying asleep, or sleeping alone• Refusing to get out of bed• Arguments and/or tantrums about going to school• Taking excessive time to get ready for school• Lying about why they can't go to school• Trouble completing homework• Threats or actual physical aggression or self-injury motivated by the desire to avoid school	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Persistent lateness• Frequently asking to leave school early or speak to parents• Difficulty spending time away from parents• Low self-belief in and ability to cope with school• Difficulties with peers• Avoiding friends• Avoiding activities that involve a break in routine (for example, school camp)

Effects of school refusal

Attendance issues comparison chart

Use this to compare different attendance issues and help you identify school refusal.

	School refusal	Truancy	School with- drawal	School exclusion
Description	Child refuses to attend school, with parental permission	Child is absent without permission	Child is taken out of school by parent/family	School suspends or expels child
Motivated by	Child	Child	Parent/family	School
Common feelings/ behaviours	Anxiety Depressive symptoms	Antisocial, delinquent behaviour	Parent/s may keep child at home for various reasons, such as caring or work responsibilities	School may send the child home
Other considerations	Child may have negative feelings about school	Lack of parental involvement	May be well-intentioned withdrawal (eg, for holidays)	Schools may need to access additional resources to support the child's needs

Risk factors

While children experience school refusal differently, being aware of common risk factors that make children vulnerable will help you understand and assess their behaviour.

Health

Anxiety

Anxiety often plays a part in school refusal. Most student anxiety can be classified into three types:

- school-based – anxious or sad feelings triggered at school
- social – fears in social situations with peers or teachers
- separation – trouble being away from parents, which can include a difficult parent/child relationship.

Depression

Depression is more common in school-refusing adolescents, some of whom also experience anxiety.

Symptoms associated with school refusal include hopelessness about the future, social withdrawal, low mood on school days, and trouble sleeping on school nights.

Physical illness

Other illnesses, especially those resulting in time away from school, can lead to psychological impacts, including disconnection from peers, fear of falling behind, and anxiety about what others will think of them when they return.

Family

Home life

Parenting practices and family dynamics, such as conflict, lack of routine, and difficult parent/child relationships, are contributing factors for school refusal.

Parents may lack confidence in their ability to get their child to school or not know how to help them to get to school. A parent that suffers from mental illness may need support to assist their child returning to school, or the child may want to stay home to look after their parent.

Risk factors

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School	
Social problems	Social problems at school, including bullying, social isolation, or falling out with friends, may contribute to a child's negative feelings about school.
Academic problems	There's a link between academic failure and reduced school attendance. Academic problems include learning difficulties, low self-confidence, and anxiety about catching up after missing weeks of school.
Physical illness	<p>School-refusing children may feel disconnected from their school environment.</p> <p>This may be caused by moving to a new school or changes in the school environment.</p>