

School Refusal

Reviewed June 2014

What is school refusal?

School refusal is a type of anxiety disorder where the child shows extreme distress about attending school and refuses to go to school on a regular basis, or has a problem staying in school. It is often a symptom of a deeper problem, such as separation anxiety or social anxiety.

School refusal affects 2 to 5 percent of school aged children. It is common from ages 5-6 and 10-11. It is also common in times of change, such as entering middle school or high school.

School refusal is typically identified in youths aged 5-17 who:

- Are totally absent from school, and/or
- Go to school in the morning but leave sometime later in the day, and/or
- Go to school after crying, throwing a tantrum, clinging to caregiver or similar behaviour and/or
- Show unusual distress throughout the school day
- Make pleas to stay home from school in the future

By not attending school on a regular basis, children can lack academic progress. They may fail to develop suitable social relationships.



What does school refusal look like?

Child or youth may:

- Complain of physical symptoms right before it is time to leave for school:
 - headaches, stomach aches, nausea, vomiting, tremors, fatigue
 - these symptoms disappear quickly after the child is allowed to stay home, but then reappear the following morning
- Throw a tantrum, begin to panic, or start crying before having to leave for school
- Show oppositional behaviour, such as physical or verbal aggression
- Worry excessively about:
 - getting lost or kidnapped, that they will become ill, that their parent will be involved in a fatal accident
 - being separated from their primary caregiver
- Become depressed and isolate themselves
- Ask to visit the school nurse repeatedly while at school
- Begin to abuse alcohol or drugs to cope with anxious feelings (among teens)

The onset of school refusal is usually gradual. Symptoms are more likely to begin after a weekend, holiday or illness (when the child has been away from school for multiple days).

What causes school refusal?

School refusal can happen for many reasons:

- Starting school, moving to a new city or new school, or other stressful life events may trigger it
- Child fears that something bad will happen to caregiver while s/he is in school
- Fear that s/he won't do well in school
- Fear of another student
- To avoid school-related things that cause distress, such as the school bus
- To avoid uncomfortable peer interactions (fear of other children)
- To escape academic stress, such as test-taking or oral presentations
- To stay home to get extra attention from important people in their lives (spending alone time with mom or dad)



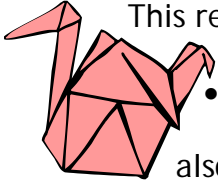
What can parents do to help?

If you think your child's refusal to go to school is an issue, seek help from a mental health professional. Their evaluation of your child will reveal the underlying reasons for the school refusal. It will help determine a treatment plan for your child.

While you wait for help from a professional:

- **Keep your child in school or doing academic work.** By missing school, the child's anxiety is reinforced. Then they fall behind in school work. If the child will not go to school, ensure they are still doing academic work that you get from the school. This is so they won't fall too far behind. It also ensures they are not rewarded (by doing fun activities) for staying home from school.
- **Expose your child to school a little at a time.** You should increase time at school slowly so that your child can realize that there is nothing to fear. Over time, they will see that nothing bad will happen. Tell school officials about your child's school refusal. Ask them if a part-time schedule is possible - perhaps a couple of favorite classes. Perhaps even just lunch time to start. Some school is better than no school.
- **Emphasize the positive aspects of school.** Remind your child that there are upsides to going to school every day. Upsides are being with their friends, getting to learn about their favourite subject, and playing at recess.





- **Encourage interests and hobbies.** When children are having fun they feel more relaxed. This reduces their anxiety. Having hobbies is a great distraction and helps build self-confidence.
- **Learn about your child's anxiety disorder.** The process is easier when you understand what is going on and the treatment options. Your child will also be grateful for your support and understanding.
- **Meet with your child's teacher and guidance counsellor.** They can be a great support for you and your child when working through the school refusal. Help your child get to know their teacher outside of the classroom. This may make your child more comfortable with the teacher. It could reduce their school anxiety.
- **Ask the school for contact information and your child's nonattendance history.** Ensure you have contact information for all school officials and other professionals. Get your child's nonattendance history from the school. Give these to the therapist as soon as you have one.

What can teachers do to help?

- **Be alert for signs of school refusal.** Speak with the child's parents if you think they are showing signs of school refusal. Working together with the parents, you will come up with strategies to intervene early.
- **Welcome the child when they arrive at school.** Help them get themselves organized for the day. Ask them to perform special jobs, such as handing out papers to the class.
- **Assure the parents that school personnel can support their child.**
- **Help children feel more comfortable.** If they aren't comfortable reading aloud to the class, let them read silently and answer questions. Be adaptable to their needs.
- **Assign a peer for recess and/or lunch time.** Being with a peer (such as a friend) may help them feel more at ease during break times.
- **When the child is feeling stressed, allow them a safe and quiet place to go.**
- **Ensure the child feels safe at school.** Talk with the child to see if anything is making them feel unsafe or uneasy about being at school. Then address the issue.
- **Keep in regular contact with the parents.** Send school work home with a parent for the child to do. This is so the child won't fall too far behind.

Treatment for school refusal

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

This therapy helps children learn how to handle their anxiety about being at school. The counsellor will educate your child about their anxiety and why it is happening. They will help your child recognize their anxious feelings. They'll teach your child how to manage them. Children will learn how to identify their disruptive thoughts. They'll learn how to replace them with thoughts that are more helpful to them.

Medication

There are medications that can be used to help reduce your child's anxiety so that they will not be worrying about being at school or what their caregiver is doing while they are at school.





Where do I go for help?

As well as talking to your family doctor, take a look at these resources:

Mental Health Mobile Crisis Team

Provides intervention and short term crisis management for children, youth and adults experiencing a mental health crisis. Confidential, non-judgmental and respectful. 902-429-8167 or 1-888-429-8167 (toll-free)

Finding a Psychologist in Nova Scotia

Visit the Association of Psychologists of Nova Scotia website at www.apns.ca or call them at 902-422-9183

IWK Mental Health and Addictions

Offers services for children and youth up to age 19. 902-464-4110 or 1-888-470-5888 (ask to be connected to Central Referral). www.iwk.nshealth.ca/mental-health

Anxiety and Depression Association of America
www.adaa.org/living-with-anxiety/children/school-refusal

Anxiety BC

www.anxietybc.com/separation-anxiety-disorder%E2%80%94school-refusal

The Child Study Center

www.aboutourkids.org/articles/understanding_school_refusal

Anxiety Canada

www.anxietycanada.ca

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902-464-4110 Central Referral
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