



## WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT SCHOOL REFUSAL TO SUPPORT YOUR CHILD

When children struggle to go to school, it can be upsetting for both the children and parents.

### WHAT IS SCHOOL REFUSAL?

School refusal, sometimes called school avoidance, is a behavior where a child regularly resists or refuses going to school. There is often emotional distress at the thought of going to school, which leads to them staying at home with the parents' knowledge. While school refusal can be distressing, it is a symptom, not a diagnosis or disorder.

School refusal is [\*highly treatable\*](#). The key to success is:

1. [\*Early identification\*](#)
2. [\*Identifying the underlying cause of the behavior\*](#)
3. [\*A quick return to school\*](#)

This guide offers you tips to better understand the behaviors related to school refusal, and what you can do to help.

#### How Common Is School Refusal?

School refusal impacts less than 1 in 20 children, and usually first shows up between ages 5-11. That said, more than 1 in 4 students refuse to go to school at some point, and [\*this can take many forms\*](#): regularly being late for school; leaving before the school day ends; missing classes throughout the day (hiding out in the nurse's office, a bathroom, or school counselor's office); or not attending school at all.

#### When Is School Refusal Most Likely to Happen?

School refusal can happen any time, but the most common examples include:

- When children [\*transition back to school\*](#) each fall and after long school breaks (most common)
- Making the transition from elementary to middle school, or middle school to high school
- Following a stressful life event
- Because of conflict with a peer or a teacher

COVID-19 has added another layer to how well children return to school. While most children have looked forward to going back to school in person, it has been challenging for others. After nearly 2 years of different life experiences through the pandemic, some children who never struggled may now be having a hard time returning to, and participating, in school.

# 1. EARLY IDENTIFICATION

The first step in addressing school refusal is to recognize it in your child. Below are common behaviors in children with school refusal. Some of these are similar to symptoms of mental health disorders like [anxiety](#). One way to know if it is related to school refusal is if the symptoms get better when the child is allowed to stay home.

## Common Signs and Behaviors in Children With School Refusal

### All Children

- Physical complaints: headaches, stomachaches, dizziness, aches and pains
- Fear of impending doom or that something horrible will happen to loved ones while they are at school
- COVID-19 worries: catching Covid or spreading it to loved ones; the school shutting down; getting behind in schoolwork due to Covid-related issues.

### Younger Children

- Extreme clinginess
- Crying
- Temper tantrums

### Older Children

- Panic attacks
- Threats of self-harm
- Refusal to leave for school

# 2. IDENTIFYING THE UNDERLYING CAUSE

Remember, school refusal can be a symptom of an underlying physical and or behavioral health issue. Once you have identified school refusal, it is important to figure out the true cause of this behavior in your child. Possible causes may be a health issue, a family or social issue, or a combination of both.

## Underlying health concerns that can lead to school refusal:

- Separation Anxiety Disorder
- Social Anxiety Disorder
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder
- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder
- Panic Disorder
- Depression
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Learning Disorders
- Major Medical Conditions
- Substance Use Disorders

## Underlying family or social concerns that can contribute to school refusal:

- [Bullying](#)
- Close family member with major medical illness (Sibling/Parent, Grandparent)
- Parental Separation/Divorce
- Death in the family
- Relocation – New School
- Student-Teacher Mismatch

### 3. QUICK RETURN TO SCHOOL

The longer a child is away from school, the more the anxiety will grow about returning, and the harder the return will be. Successful treatment of school refusal is built on strong communication and cooperation with parents, [schools](#), and doctors involved.

#### What Parents Can Do

- **Be Quick!!** The longer your child is out of school, the more schoolwork and social events they will miss, and the more anxiety they'll have about returning to school.
- **Talk To Your Child.** [Ask them about](#) what makes going to school so hard.
- **Problem-Solve Together.** Think together of ways to address the barriers that make it hard to go to school. Role-play with them. Come up with creative scripts for them to use when they go back or to handle issues at school.
- **Be Clear and Firm About School.** Set clear rules on the conditions under which staying home is acceptable (fever, vomiting, diarrhea, etc.), and make it clear that otherwise they are expected to go to school.
- **Work With the School.** Work with their teachers and anyone else at the school to create a plan to gradually get them back into school. They may need to return in phases; small steps until they are able to return to full time.
- **Identify Supports.** Together with your child and the school, identify trusted people that your child can turn to should they need additional support at school.
- **Be Positive.** Speak in a positive way and focus on the good aspects of school, friends, favorite subjects, special teachers, or fond memories or experiences. Try to strike a balance of being positive while also validating what they are feeling and experiencing.
- **Don't Shame Them.** Try not to shame or blame your child for not going to school.
- **Make Home Boring.** Returning to school *must* seem more rewarding than staying home. This is the case for both younger and older children – this is not a vacation day. For example, just as if they were in school, no playing video games or watching TV, no sleeping in or spending quality time with parents, no going out shopping.
- **Seek Treatment for Any Underlying Health Concerns.** If you are worried about your child, [talk to their pediatrician](#).

School refusal can be a difficult challenge, but with early identification and a plan to get your child back to school it can be treated.

To learn more about mental health concerns by child age group, visit the Project TEACH Parent and Family Page: <http://bitly.com/PTEACH-Family>

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