

SCHOOL REFUSAL: Every School Day Counts



A collaboration between



About this resource

This resource *School Refusal: Every School Day Counts* has been produced to assist education staff and the families that they work with in identifying and supporting children and adolescents who are avoiding going to school in the context of mental health difficulties. This resource provides basic information for primary teachers, high school teachers and parents/caregivers in understanding School Refusal and what can be done to help support children and young people who are refusing to attend school and experiencing mental health challenges.

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Background

In NSW, all children between the ages of six and seventeen years are legally required to enrol at and attend school, or be registered for home schooling (NSW Education Act 1990).

All students must complete Year 10 or its equivalent, and then until they turn 17 years old students must be in:

- School, or registered for home schooling; OR
- Approved education or training (e.g. TAFE, traineeship, apprenticeship); OR
- Full-time paid employment (average 25 hours per week); OR
- A combination of work, education and/or training

Parents and caregivers are responsible for making sure that their children comply with these legal requirements. Schools support parents and caregivers by monitoring student attendance and by helping to address attendance issues when they emerge.

Sorry Business

Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people refer to the period of practices & protocols associated with someone's passing as Sorry Business. When Sorry Business occurs in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, there is a cultural expectation that families and kinship get together and support each other, regardless of the distance or for how long that support is required. It will not be unusual for students to need to be absent for extended periods of time while dealing with Sorry Business. It's recommended that schools try to work closely with families and communities to fully understand their needs during Sorry Business.

Defining 'School Attendance Problems'

It is important to clearly understand the multifaceted nature of school absences. There are various terms that have been used interchangeably. This document will delineate the different terms, as they represent different behaviours and motivators. When students miss 10% or more of the school year it is considered a School Attendance Problem (Kearney and Graczyk, 2020).

School Attendance Problems (SAPs) are defined by Heyne, Gren-Landell, Melvin, & Gentle-Genitty (2019, p.22-24) within the following categories:

School Refusal is said to occur when some or all of these are present:

- a young person is reluctant or refuses to attend school, in conjunction with emotional distress
- the young person does not try to hide associated absence from their parents or caregivers
- the young person does not display severe antisocial behavior
- the parents/caregivers have made reasonable efforts to secure attendance at school, and/or express their intention for their child to attend school full-time.

When students miss

10%

or more of the school year it is considered a School Attendance Problem

Truancy is said to occur when:

- a young person is absent from school for a whole day or part of the day, or they are at school but absent from the proper location
- the absence occurs without the permission of school authorities
- the young person typically tries to conceal the absence from their parents or caregivers.

School Withdrawal is said to occur when a young person's absence from school is:

- not concealed from the parent(s) or caregiver(s)
- attributable to parental effort to keep the young person at home, or
- attributable to there being little or no parental effort to get the young person to school.

School Exclusion is said to occur when a young person is absent from school or specific school activities, for any period of time, caused by the school:

- employing disciplinary exclusion in an inappropriate manner
- being unable or unwilling to accommodate the physical, social-emotional, behavioral, or academic needs of the young person
- discouraging a young person from attending, beyond the realm of legally acceptable school policy (e.g. excluded from NAPLAN).

School Refusal

Many children and young people will express a reluctance to go to school at different times. For a small number of these children and young people the difficulties around attending school escalates to become School Refusal. There is no single 'cause' for School Refusal and reasons for School Refusal will differ from student to student.

Transition to both primary and secondary school has been identified in the research as a stressful time and a trigger for School Refusal in some children. Children who had some separation anxiety when younger may find entry into the primary school environment difficult, and their separation anxiety may re-emerge. The larger, more complex environment of a high school and the unpredictability of the new setting can sometimes contribute to increased risk for young people (Ingul et al, 2019).

School issues such as bullying, academic difficulties, problems with teachers and peers, and stressful events such as a move or change in schools are also common reasons that may contribute to School Refusal (Wimmer, 2004; Wimmer 2008).

Some students may be living in complex family situations with stressors such as the death of a loved one, a parent/caregiver with physical and/or mental health concerns, parental separation, unresolved legal issues, exposure to acts of family violence and the difficulties associated with resettlement from another country. These factors can all contribute to School Refusal behaviour. Some young students may be taking on the role of a young caregiver and be caring for a family member who is living with an illness, disability, mental health issues or an alcohol/drug problem. This can be an additional stressor that can impact on school attendance.

School Refusal can become entrenched for some students and when this occurs it can become very difficult to turn around. Entrenched School Refusal often leads to early school-leaving, and once disengagement has set in school may feel irrelevant to the young person.

Further detail on some of these contributing factors can be found later in this document.

Schools will be familiar with the situations described in the case studies. This resource aims to address some of the processes that can be used to identify and support students who are refusing to attend school.

Research has struggled to provide a consistent School Refusal figure due to the difficulty in quantifying School Attendance Problems. A general consensus suggests a prevalence of approximately 0.4-5.4% of all school aged children and young people are affected (Ingul et al., 2019). School Refusal can occur throughout the school years but there are noticeable peaks around certain ages (i.e. usually between 5-6 years and 10-11 years) and transitions (i.e. starting primary school and starting high school) (King & Bernstein, 2001; Sewell, 2008). Some of the difficulties in capturing School Refusal data are due to the nature of School Attendance Problems and recording of absenteeism. Globally it has been found that complete absences, partial absences and/or lateness to class can be recorded inconsistently, and schools each define and track absenteeism differently (Kearney et al., 2019).

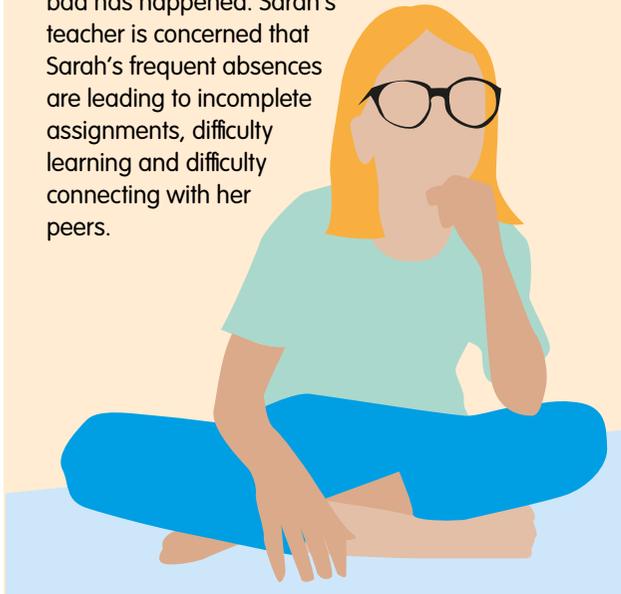
School Attendance Problems, including School Refusal, can occur in the context of child wellbeing and child protection concerns. These may occur as part of a picture of other concerns related to parenting vulnerabilities leading to child abuse and neglect. Refer to the NSW Mandatory Reporter Guide (MRG) and/or contact the NSW Education Child Wellbeing Unit for Department of Education schools, or your organisation's equivalent, for consultation.

The Mandatory Reporter Guide (MRG) under the Neglect Concerns – Education: Habitual Absence decision tree refers to when a 'child/young person is of compulsory school age AND is habitually absent'. Habitually absent is a minimum of 30 days absence within the past 100 school days. Other factors may warrant action earlier than the 30 days indicated (Keep Them Safe: A shared approach to child wellbeing, 2009-2014).

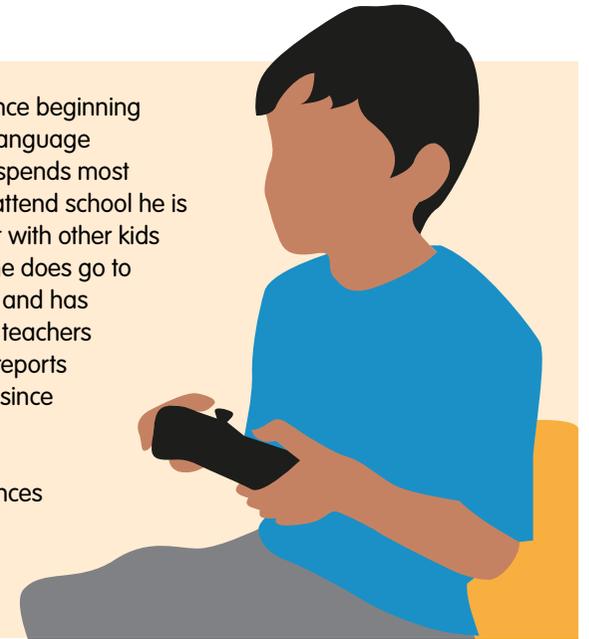


Consider the following case scenarios

Sarah is an eight-year-old girl having difficulty attending school. Since she began Year 3, two months ago, her problems have significantly worsened. Every morning she begs to stay home from school and has tantrums that delay her dressing and often result in her missing the bus. After arriving at school, Sarah frequently complains of stomach-aches, headaches and a sore throat to her teacher and asks to visit the sick bay. When she gets to the sick bay, she then pleads to call her mother, who has been picking her up early twice a week. When Sarah gets home she spends the remainder of the afternoon watching TV and playing with her toys. When her mother is unable to pick her up early, Sarah asks to call her mother's mobile phone periodically throughout the afternoon to "check in" and reassure herself that nothing bad has happened. Sarah's teacher is concerned that Sarah's frequent absences are leading to incomplete assignments, difficulty learning and difficulty connecting with her peers.



Samir is a 13-year-old boy who has missed 12 days of school since beginning Year 7 one term ago. Samir's family almost exclusively speak a language other than English in the home. When home from school, Samir spends most of the day online or playing video games. On the days he does attend school he is typically late for his first period, which lets him avoid hanging out with other kids before class. He always goes to the library during lunch. When he does go to class, he sits in the back of the classroom, never raises his hand and has difficulty joining in with others to work on group projects. Samir's teachers have noticed that he is always absent on days that tests or oral reports are scheduled. His parents are concerned about him, especially since he failed his first English assignment. The year coordinator has received numerous doctors' certificates from a range of different doctors about his absences. The reasons described for his absences have been vague such as "not feeling well" and "feeling too sick to be at school".



Koen is a 15-year-old Aboriginal boy in Year 10 who lives with his mother and also resides across different households for some of the time. He has no contact with his father. Koen has a younger sister in Year 8 at the same school and she has recently disclosed to the school counsellor that their mother is having some difficulties with depression. Koen's high school attendance record is irregular with several partial and whole days of school missed since he started Year 9, but his academic performance is nevertheless very solid. In the last term, his non-attendance has escalated. He has missed 18 whole days of school and has not completed assessment requirements for three of his subjects. There have been insufficient reasons provided for his absences such as, "he wouldn't get out of bed" or "he refuses to go to school", or none at all. His year coordinator has had difficulty contacting his mother to raise the concerns and has left numerous phone messages, emailed, and mailed several letters to the home.



Why target School Refusal?

School Refusal may be thought of as a symptom, similar to when a child develops a high temperature. Investigating to find out the cause early on and then taking appropriate steps is the best way to keep the situation from developing into something more serious.

The typical Australian primary school student misses 16 days on average per school year adding up to approximately half a school year by the end of Year 6 (Zubrick, 2014, Victorian Department of Education & Early Child Development; NSW Centre for Education Statistics & Evaluation). For adolescents in high school, the average days missed rises to 24 days per school year or the equivalent of half a term (Zubrick, 2014).

Studies have found that students from as early as Year 1 exhibit clear school attendance and non-attendance patterns, and these patterns are highly predictive for subsequent schooling years. As non-attendance continues in high school, the effects accumulate and impact on academic and social development. Therefore, there is no safe threshold for absences from school (Zubrick, 2014).

Missing one day of school each week adds up to 2 months worth of learning missed over a year.

Missing one day of school each week adds up to 2 months' worth of learning missed over a year, and it has been shown that each day absent in high school has a negative impact on academic skills. Numeracy skills in particular develop sequentially, relying on previous learning (Adams et al., 2020). Students who school refuse can become entrenched in long term patterns of poor school attendance and are at an increased risk of not completing their schooling. Prolonged School Attendance Problems including School Refusal have also been shown to be associated with (Ingul et al, 2019):

- failure to complete school
- failure to develop satisfactory social relationships
- significant family conflict
- increased risk for adverse outcomes such as poorer physical and mental health in adulthood, substance abuse problems, and likelihood of becoming engaged in criminal activity (Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2013).

Students who school refuse and who do not complete their schooling are more likely to:

- experience difficulties with the transition from school to post-school education and training
- have problems attaining and maintaining employment
- encounter longer periods of unemployment, and
- be more reliant on government assistance (Allison et al, 2019).



Early identification and response to school refusal is crucial, since the longer the underlying issues contributing to School Refusal continue, the harder it is for the student to make a full return to schooling.

"When a child or adolescent regularly misses school there are ongoing impacts on education and personal development, including poor academic performance, poor peer relationship skills and potential for developing mental health disorders in adulthood."

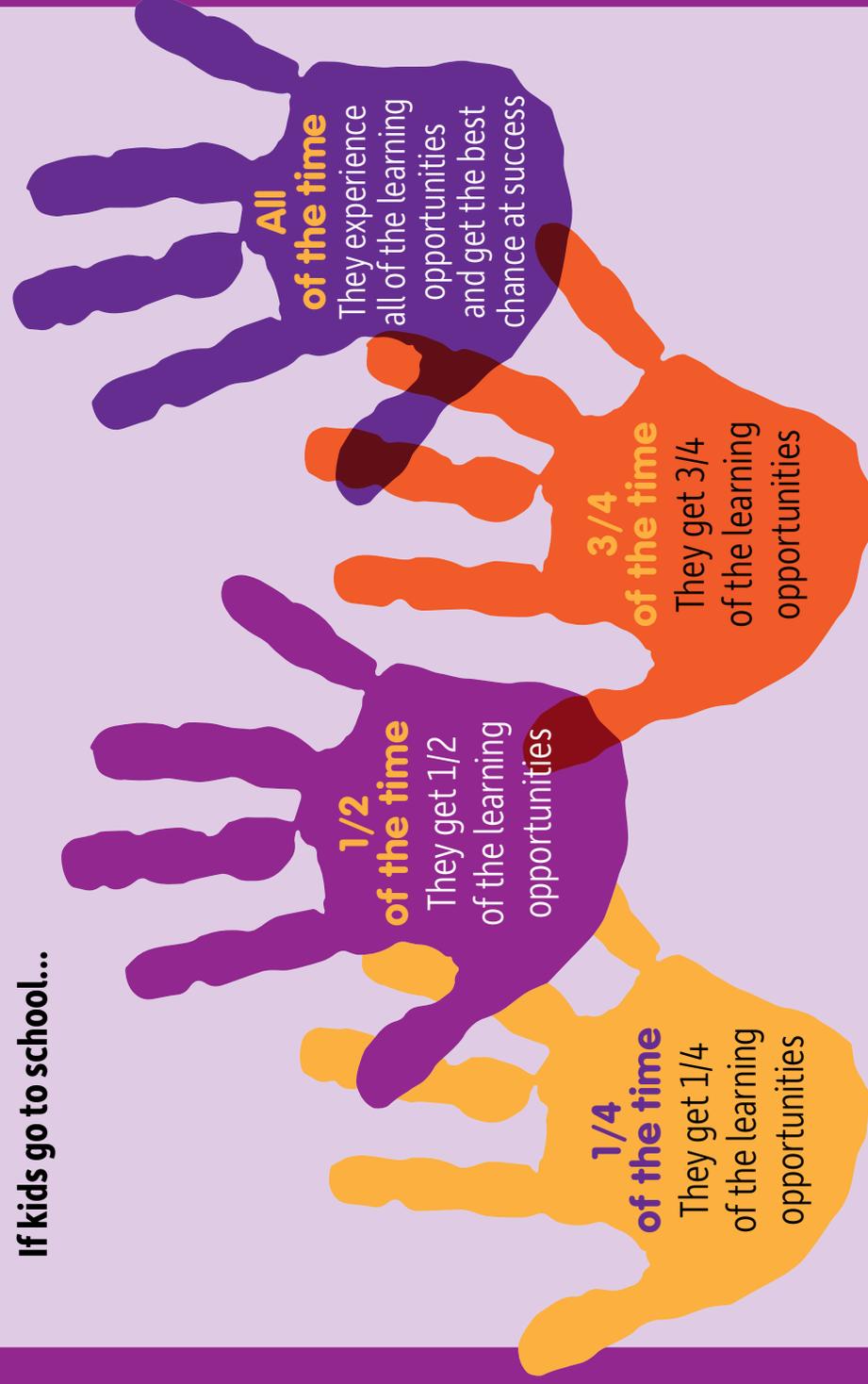
Everybody has a responsibility to help children

Families, caregivers, the student, the school and the community

- All kids in NSW must go to school by the time they turn 6.
- They must go to school or be involved in training or employment up to the age of 17.
- The law says they must attend school every day.
- If they do not go to school they will fall behind in their learning.
- Children who go to school every day do better and have more opportunities.

Missing school matters and EVERY DAY counts

If kids go to school...



Take notice take action

Most children are occasionally reluctant to go to school or have some anxiety about activities like class tests or talking in front of the class. While it is normal for children to miss a few days of school during the year, schools should not wait before intervening. Initial absences may be a sign of emerging School Refusal, which if left unaddressed can lead to more absences and an increased risk of established School Refusal (Ingul, et al, 2019; Kearney et al, 2019).

While it is normal for children to miss a few days of school during the year, schools should not wait before intervening.



When to become concerned

In primary school, School Refusal behaviour may be characterised by some of the following:

- tearfulness, tantrums or clinginess upon arriving at school or repeated pleas to go home
- frequent complaints of illness during school such as stomach aches, headaches, dizziness or fatigue
- regular non-attendance after weekends, school holidays, school camps or sports days
- long, unexplained/unjustified absences from school
- frequent lateness to school
- long periods spent out of class in the sick bay or principal's office.

High school students who refuse to go to school may show some of the following behaviours:

- frequent unexplained/unjustified absences especially on Mondays, after holidays, school camps or sports days
- frequent lateness
- frequent partial attendance
- absences on significant days e.g. days on which tests, speeches, or physical education class are scheduled
- frequent requests to go to the sick bay
- frequent requests to call home or to go home during the day

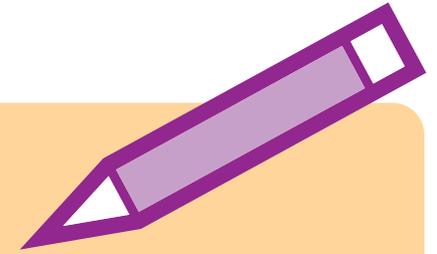
Patterns of unexplained or unjustified absenteeism need to be followed up assertively.

Two days or more absent over a 2 week period is significant and considered established School Refusal.

If you are concerned about a student's class attendance, even if it doesn't meet the guide above, you should follow up your concerns and seek advice from your supervisor and the school counsellor/school psychologist.

It is also helpful to adopt a curious approach in trying to work out what may be happening for a student who is school refusing and also for their family.





What can be done at school?

Schools are ideally placed to identify students at risk of School Refusal and can implement strategies as soon as possible to prevent School Refusal behaviour becoming entrenched. The key to effective support is early identification, assessment and profiling of student needs. This will help with planning interventions and referral to other services (McLaughlin & Peace, 2012; Sewell 2008; King & Bernstein, 2001).

If you are concerned about a student's attendance patterns, a prompt response is required.

-  Familiarise yourself with the required processes at your school. Your school will have defined processes and policies about whose responsibility it is to make the first contact with the family to discuss the attendance patterns you are concerned about. It is important you are familiar with these processes, as they will differ from school to school.
-  Consult with your supervisor/coordinator. It is important to seek assistance from school leadership in determining a way forward.
-  Liaise with your school counsellor/school psychologist. They can support actions around any common childhood behaviours and mental health problems.
-  Collaborate with the team that supports student attendance. This could include the learning and support team, welfare team or student wellbeing pastoral team. These teams will be able to provide ongoing support and advice regarding case management and follow up for the student you are concerned about.
-  Make contact with the student's parents or caregivers to understand the student's situation. Refer to the section later on in this resource: Speaking with Parents and Caregivers.
-  Develop a support plan. Consultation with the student and their family is essential. In most instances school attendance concerns can be resolved quickly by working with the family once the concerns have been raised with them. Flexibility is key. Once a support plan is established, a follow up letter to the family outlining the issues, the actions to be undertaken with a nominated review date is recommended.
-  Establish a pattern of regular communication with the parents/caregivers and student. It is important to support and reassure families and to work with them to develop and implement the plan. Keep them well informed of the student's progress at school. The parents/caregivers are the ones who can put in place strategies at home to help their child to return to school and overcome any emotional issues.
-  Provide parents/caregivers with information on School Refusal, such as the handout included in this resource. It is imperative that the parents/caregivers understand the causes of School Refusal, particularly if mental health issues such as anxiety are involved. Without an understanding of how best to help their child, even well-intentioned efforts may inadvertently exacerbate or reinforce the School Refusal behaviour.

Identifying and responding to School Refusal

As a teacher have you noticed that a student has had 2 days or more absent over a 2 week period AND that one or more of the following behaviours are occurring:

Lateness to school or classes

Requests to go to the sick bay

Unexplained whole or partial absences

Complaints of illness

Displays of tearful, clingy behaviour on arrival at school

Requests to call or to be allowed to go home

Patterns of full or partial absences on Mondays or Fridays, after school holidays, family holidays, school camps on or after sports days/carnivals

If yes, then proceed with the following:

Follow system policy and school procedures for non/partial attendance

Contact and discuss your concerns with parents/caregivers

Liaise with your supervisor

Liaise with the Attendance Officer, learning support team, wellbeing team or student wellbeing/pastoral care team

Liaise with the school counsellor/school psychologist

In consultation with student and parents/caregivers develop a plan to assist the student to return to full school attendance.

Once a plan has been put into place review the status in two weeks.

Note to School Counsellor/School Psychologist and key Wellbeing Staff

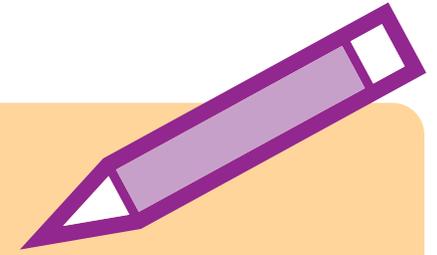
If there is a known mental health issue or there is evidence of an emerging mental health concern, support the family to consult/liaise with a General Practitioner and gain access to mental health support.

If a regular school attendance pattern **HAS** been achieved or is in the process of being achieved, then

- Celebrate the success with the student and family
- Have an agreed support plan in place in case of a relapse and for transition times

If a regular school attendance pattern **HAS NOT** been achieved within the fortnight, then consult with all parties and consider whether to:

- Review and modify the attendance plan
- Seek additional support from:
 - external family support agencies as appropriate
 - student wellbeing support services within your system of schools
 - NSW Department of Education Child Wellbeing Unit or your system's equivalent
 - Child Protection Helpline



Strategies to support Positive School Attendance



Environment

Create a welcoming, engaging environment that helps students feel connected to their school and teachers. This could be as simple as saying “hello” to each student and addressing them by their first name when they arrive in the morning, or introducing a personalised greeting when students arrive.



Feedback

Provide recognition and positive feedback for any efforts towards school attendance.



Approachability

Be viewed by students as approachable. This means listening, not judging, and taking a general interest in each student as an individual.



Empathy

Show empathy when students express concerns or experience difficulties. For many students, a positive relationship with their teachers can have a profound effect on their wellbeing and resilience.



Encouragement

Provide and encourage the use of a safe place where students can go when feeling stressed or overwhelmed.



Academic supports

Provide academic supports for students who refuse school and require adjustments.



Flexibility

Be flexible in your expectations when students are experiencing difficulties. This may include giving an extension for homework, allowing them to work in a quiet space rather than the classroom, or providing alternative tasks.



Boundaries

Define what the boundaries are around your role: be aware of what you are able to do yourself, and when you might need to seek or suggest other supports.

Preparing for your conversations with parents and caregivers about School Refusal

In any communication with parents and caregivers it's important to think about the relationship. It can be helpful to have one person who will consistently follow up the support.

Remember to:

- **Be familiar with the procedures and policies** for contacting parents.
- **Let the student know that you have noticed that they are having difficulties with attending school and that you will be connecting with their parents/caregivers.** This will show the student that you care and want to support them. It will also mean that they're not surprised by the contact with home.
- **Make a short list of things that you would like to address with the parents/caregivers.** This helps to organise your thoughts and gives you a chance to think through the purpose of the contact in advance. The list may include:
 - **Something positive and/or helpful** the student has done in class
 - **Your concern** and some specific examples of it
 - **Assistance** requested from the parent
 - **Timeline** for improvement
 - **Review date** and what changes you would like to see by then
- **Double check** parents/caregivers names, status, contact information and if there are any current custody issues.
- **If you are calling** a parent/caregiver's place of work do not identify yourself unless asked and just use your name to assure privacy for the family. When you get the parent/caregiver on the line introduce yourself, *"Hello! This is Ms. Kumar, from (name your school). I was calling to talk with you today about John. Is this a good time?"*
- **Once you reach the parent/caregiver** and have established it is a good time to speak, be sure to start with a positive or share a quick story about something helpful their child has done at school. As a parent/caregiver, it is hard to hear that your child is having difficulties at school.
- **Ease into the concerns** you have, and provide specific examples e.g. *"Over the last few weeks, I have noticed that John is often late to class in the mornings and that he is frequently asking to go to sick bay. I also see that he has missed 3 days of school in the last 2 weeks. I have been worried about him and also concerned that he is missing out on a large amount of his learning. Have you noticed anything different or concerning at home?"*





The conversations and relationships established early on make the difference

- **Be aware that something may have happened** recently in the family or with their child that might be contributing to their child not attending school. If behavioural changes have been noticed at school, you could ask if the parents/caregivers have noticed any similar changes at home. Ask how things are going and whether there is anything that the school can do to help. It may also be a good opportunity to ask if there are any support services involved.
- **Be direct about your concerns** and explain to the parents/caregivers that a joint approach between schools and parents/caregivers will achieve the best outcome for students and their families when addressing School Refusal behaviour.
- **Ask them if they are able to attend a meeting**, explaining that the main priority would be to work together to support their child and create an attendance plan. Let the parents/caregivers know who will be attending from the school, how long the meeting will last and what will occur during the meeting (e.g. discussion and decisions made on appropriate strategies, people's roles and timelines).

Conducting the meeting

- **Always start** by making the parent/caregiver feel welcome and establishing that you are all there to work together to support their child.
- **Focus** first on building rapport, understanding their perspective, and gathering information. Try to engage them in an agreed joint focus for the remainder of the meeting.
- **Identify** barriers together, then problem solve together.
- **Explore** with the parent/caregiver what might be helpful to do at home. This may be as simple as asking them to look for positive school experiences, reinforcing expectations or having a conversation with their child that acknowledges the efforts that they are making to attend school regularly.

The situation may sometimes require more comprehensive support, for example a documented behaviour plan or a connection with an external provider.

- **Discuss a timeline** for agreed actions to support positive school attendance, and be sure to set a time for a follow-up meeting.
- **Tell the parents/caregivers** what you will be doing to support their child at school. Always make sure to ask them if they can see any problems with this plan and if they have suggestions to help it work better.
- **End the meeting on a positive note:** "Thank you so much for your open communication and your time. Having your support plays an important part in assisting John to attend school regularly. I enjoy (positive observation or anecdote) contributions made by John at school."
- **Always remember to keep the door open**, "If there is anything you need, or if you have any concerns, please don't hesitate to contact me." Give them the number that they can contact you on.

"Thank you so much for your open communication and your time. Having your support plays an important part in assisting John to attend school regularly. I enjoy the musical contributions made by John at school."

"If there is anything you need, or if you have any concerns, please don't hesitate to contact me."

Troubleshooting

Ideally, the conversation goes smoothly and you and the parents/caregivers are in agreement with the next steps; but sensitive conversations are often unpredictable. If the parents/caregivers become defensive, you can try:

- Bringing the conversation back to the agreed joint focus
- Restating your concerns

Remember that you are talking about their child, and emotions are likely to be strong

- Parents/caregivers may have had negative experiences with school in the past, either as students or parents.
- Keep calm and be curious. What is making the parents/caregivers feel defensive? What has happened outside of this situation? What is going on at home? Work?

If the conversation starts to break down you may need to wrap it up on a positive note about their child, such as, *“Thank you for your open communication. I will be acknowledging John for being in class over the next week. I would like to call you and share what I have noticed at that time. Is there a good time for me to reach you?”*

Sometimes a parent/caregiver may become argumentative, verbally aggressive and/or upset. When this happens remain calm and polite. *“I can hear you are upset and understand that you find this news difficult. It’s really important that we work together to support (your child) to return to full attendance at school. I would like to talk with you more about this. How about we catch up about this at another time?”*

Debrief with a colleague when possible, seek advice from your school leadership if needed, and make a follow-up plan.

Adapted from Rice, 2013

“Thank you for your open communication. I will be acknowledging John for being in class over the next week. I would like to call you and share what I have noticed at that time. Is there a good time for me to reach you?”

“I can hear you are upset and understand that you find this news difficult. It’s really important that we work together to support (your child) to return to full attendance at school. I would like to talk with you more about this. How about we catch up about this at another time?”

Getting to school and staying at school

Information for parents and caregivers

What is School Refusal?

School Refusal is a complex issue which can become a source of enormous stress for the whole family. That's why schools want to work with you to come up with a plan to support you and your child.

- Many children and adolescents are reluctant to go to school at some point, but some find it so difficult that they refuse to go.
- The term School Refusal is often used when not going is related to a worry or an anxiety.
- School Refusal can happen at any age, but seems to happen more during major changes in children's lives like beginning kindergarten or the transition from primary to high school.
- There is no single cause for School Refusal, and reasons will differ from child to child.

What might I see?

If your child has missed school twice over two weeks, especially with some of the behaviours below, this may be a pattern of School Refusal.

- Tearfulness before school or repeated pleas to stay at home.
- Tantrums, clinginess, dawdling or running away before school or during drop off.
- Frequent complaints of illness before or during school, like stomach aches, headaches, dizziness or tiredness.
- Difficulty going to school after weekends, holidays, school camps or sports days.
- Long periods spent in sick bay or otherwise out of class.

What are the impacts?

School Refusal is a serious issue and needs to be managed early. Long absences mean that children miss out on both learning and friendships.

- The pattern can very quickly become a habit and very hard to change for children and their families.
- Missing one day of school each week means 2 full months' worth of learning lost over a year. This adds up very fast.
- Missing out on education can impact a child's lifelong learning and their social and emotional development in many ways.

It is important to respond

- School Refusal can also be a sign of an emerging mental health difficulty, so it's important to respond.
- That stomach ache might not be due to a bug, but a real symptom of your child's worry about going to school.
- Research shows that every day absent in high school has an impact on numeracy.
- Frequent absences might also jeopardise your child's relationships with their friends.
- Acting early is the best way forward. Seek help as soon as you are concerned.

Find support

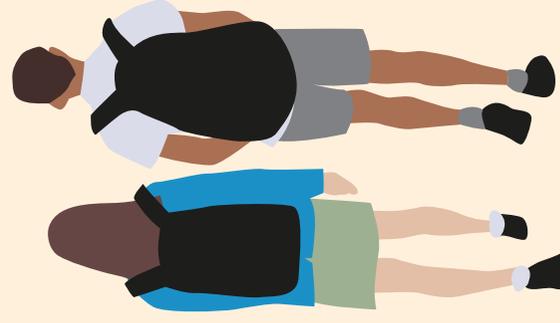
You might find support for you and your child through your family doctor, the school counsellor, a family friend, a community-based support worker, an Elder, or a religious or spiritual leader.

Is your child refusing to attend school?

We really understand that this isn't easy!

Talking with your child's teacher is the best place to start

You might also find it helpful to seek support for yourself



Every minute counts, every day!

What can I do at home?

- Really listen to your child's concerns and fears about going to school - issues can be addressed if they're understood.
- If your child is 'feeling sick', check it out with your family doctor.
- If you're worried about their mental health, then your GP or school counsellor can be a great place to start.
- Being firm and kind in getting your child to school regularly and on time will help, including not prolonging the goodbyes.
- Praise your child's positive behaviours to reinforce their success.
- Keep up family and other activities for your child and the whole family wherever you can.
- Seek professional help for yourself and your child.

Where else can I go for help?

At school:

- Try the class teacher or year advisor, the school counsellor/school psychologist, or the school leadership team.
- If you feel you haven't yet got the support you need, don't give up - try approaching someone else at the school.

In the community:

- Your GP/family doctor, a community-based support worker, an Elder, a religious or spiritual leader, a friend or relative, are all possible options.

Useful links for families

Family Connect & Support www.familyconnectsupport.dcj.nsw.gov.au

Parent Line NSW www.parentline.org.au 1300 1300 52

Kids Help Line (5-25 years) www.kidshelp.com.au 1800 55 1800

NSW Mental Health Line 1800 011 511

headspace (12-25 years) www.headspace.org.au

Raising children Network www.raisingchildren.net.au

Well Mob www.wellmob.org.au

A local contact for support is:

EVERY MINUTE COUNTS!



Your child has arrived in time to settle well and has the best start possible.



Your child has probably arrived just after most children as the school day starts at 9:00am.



Your child is late and has missed the beginning of the school day. Being late often unsettles children.



15 minutes late = 8 days lost a year



20 minutes late = 11 days lost a year



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Sometimes just a few minutes late of a morning can set your child back for the whole day - it's all lost time which they can't get back.

Sometimes children worry about their parents when not with them. Reassure your child that you'll be safe while they're at school.

If they do stay home, don't make it more fun than school. Video games, TV, toys, snacks and parental attention are all high reward items for kids.

This isn't easy for parents and you might find yourself becoming pretty frustrated. Remember, it will take patience and time to resolve this. Be open to getting support, and know that occasionally you might have to change your approach to find what will work for you and your family.

Getting to school and staying at school

Information for parents and caregivers

What is School Refusal?

School Refusal is a complex issue which can become a source of enormous stress for the whole family. That's why schools want to work with you to come up with a plan to support you and your child.

- Many children and adolescents are reluctant to go to school at some point, but some find it so difficult that they refuse to go.
- The term School Refusal is often used when not going is related to a worry or an anxiety.
- School Refusal can happen at any age, but seems to happen more during major changes in children's lives like beginning kindergarten or the transition from primary to high school.
- There is no single cause for School Refusal, and reasons will differ from child to child.

What might I see?

If your child has missed school twice over two weeks, especially with some of the behaviours below, this may be a pattern of School Refusal.

- Tearfulness before school or repeated pleas to stay at home.
- Tantrums, clinginess, dawdling or running away before school or during drop off.
- Frequent complaints of illness before or during school, like stomach aches, headaches, dizziness or tiredness.
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Speaking with parents and caregivers...

Some ideas for speaking with parents and caregivers about the information sheet.

An information sheet is only as good as the way we use it. For whatever reason, this family is doing it tough – so here are a few tips for making this a conversation, not just another handout. Remember to approach each family supportively and with an open mind.

Start by putting their minds at ease a little, e.g. "Thanks for being here. It can be really tough to know how to respond" and "There are other families going through similar things" and "We really want to work with you to help".

Check in on their wellbeing, e.g. "I imagine it's not easy on you as parents/caregivers" and "We're here to help, but do you have someone to talk to for support?" and "Remember to look after yourself so you can look after them".

Establish a team together, e.g. "Your child is our priority as well as yours" and "We know from experience that if we work as a team we'll be more successful" and "Is there anyone else already involved who might help us?" (e.g. psychologist etc.).

Give some brief background, e.g. "We can go through what School Refusal is on this info sheet if you like?" and "It can look different in different kids, and be for all sorts of reasons" and "There are reasons for this behaviour – it's genuine".

Every minute counts, every day!

What can I do at home?

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Speaking with parents and caregivers...

Some ideas for speaking with parents and caregivers about the information sheet.

Offer some hope of making an impact, e.g. "Sometimes there are ups and downs, but what we all do together can help to resolve this" and "Try to stay positive for you and your child - show them you're confident that you'll get there together".

Impress the urgency upon them if you can, e.g. "The longer the refusal goes on, the harder it is to change, so we need to act now" and "It may not seem like much now, but take a look at this Every Minute Counts graphic...".

Enlist them in the solution, e.g. "There are some good ideas in this 'What can I do at home section'. You could go through them together and try something like. Are there any that sound OK, any you think you could try?".

Plan the next step together with them, e.g. "Your contact here at school will be me (or whomever), and you can get in touch any time" and "So now we're going to do (a) and you're going to do (b), and then we'll speak/meet next on ____".

Provide them with a local option or two for seeking support, e.g. "We've found that Family Connect and Support [and other local services] can be really helpful". Write these in the blank space and offer to help them make contact.

Other contributing factors

School Refusal occurs across all ages, genders, ethnic groups, and income groups. School Refusal is not a diagnosis but rather a reflection of, or response to, underlying factors, problems, and circumstances. A range of symptoms are often observed as well as a range of anxiety disorders. School Refusal can also be linked to different diagnoses including developmental disabilities, autism and intellectual disability which may make children and young people more vulnerable to school pressures.

Commonly Associated Mental Health Factors

School staff are expert educators. The information below is provided to give you a context, but it should not replace collaboration with mental health experts when supporting students who may have additional mental health concerns.

Anxiety disorders are among the most frequent, but often under-recognised mental health problems found in students who refuse to attend school (Egger et al, 2003; Wimmer, 2008). Of young people referred for treatment of School Refusal 50% meet diagnostic criteria for an anxiety disorder, depressive disorder or both (Henye et al, 2015).

Types of Anxiety disorders

These are the anxiety disorders that you are most likely to observe with your students who are refusing to attend school.

Separation Anxiety

This is most common in younger children, but can still be seen in adolescents. Students who have separation anxiety become preoccupied with thoughts of harm befalling a loved one and are overly dependent on parents and other caregivers. Adolescents with a history of separation anxiety in early childhood are at increased risk for other anxiety problems and School Refusal in high school.

Social anxiety and Performance Anxiety

Students with social and performance anxiety worry about what others think of them, are concerned about being judged, and fear humiliation. They may have intense anticipatory anxiety about giving speeches, taking tests, participating in sports, or other social activities.

Generalised Anxiety Disorder

Students who have generalised anxiety disorder have excessive worry about a variety of situations and events. They may be concerned about their competence, unsure of themselves, and are often perfectionistic about their school-work. They tend to perceive the world as threatening and may experience anxiety about such situations as war or natural disasters even when actually being exposed to these events is highly unlikely. Their anxiety interferes with school performance and can cause fatigue, restlessness, difficulty concentrating, irritability, sleep disturbance, and muscle tension.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

Children with OCD suffer from unwanted and intrusive thoughts that they can't seem to get out of their heads (obsessions), and/or overwhelming urges to perform ritualised behaviours and routines (compulsions). Sometimes obsessions and compulsions are linked: for example, a child with OCD may become obsessed with fears of being contaminated by germs, which compels them to carry out rituals to ensure they remain clean and germ free, such as excessive hand washing, washing of pens and pencils and general worry about being exposed to things that may be dirty. They may spend a long time in the bathroom to perform their cleansing rituals or may become distressed if situations in the classroom trigger their worries and/or prevent them from carrying out their rituals. OCD symptoms can interfere with attending school in a number of ways, for example it may be extremely challenging for the student to leave the house due to the need to complete rituals, and this impacts on arriving at school on time.

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Childhood Trauma

Childhood trauma results from experiencing or witnessing multiple or prolonged adverse life experiences in childhood. Traumatic experiences are experiences of elevated, prolonged stress or trauma that can significantly impact children and young people. In these circumstances, children are overwhelmed with internal reactions that race through their brains and bodies. Children adapt to survive and might shut down their feelings, push away memories of pain, stop relying on relationships around them to protect them and may stop trusting and believing in others.

This changes the child so that even after the stressful or traumatic event has passed, children's brains and bodies continue to react as if the stress is continuing. They become self-protective. They spend a lot of their energy scanning their environment for threat. Their bodies act as if they are in a constant state of alarm, their brains are endlessly vigilant.

Traumatized and stressed children and young people have little space left for learning. Their behaviour can be challenging in a school environment and they can struggle to make positive peer relationships (NSW Department of Education 2021. Trauma Informed Practice for Improved Learning and Wellbeing, Module 1).

School staff are expert educators. Commonly associated mental health factors are provided to give you a context, but this should not replace collaboration with mental health experts when supporting students who may have additional mental health concerns.

Depression

Common characteristics of depression in children and adolescents include depressed mood, lack of interest in activities, irritability, difficulty getting along with others, rebellious or risk-taking behaviour (particularly in adolescents), sleep difficulties, physical complaints, tiredness, feelings of inadequacy or excessive guilt, difficulty concentrating or indecisiveness, and thoughts of death or suicide. The presence of depression in children who are school refusing increases the potential for such severe symptoms as overwhelming anxiety, deliberate self-harm, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts (Kearney & Albano, 2004).



Be You resources for Positive School Attendance

Be You

Schools that actively support mental health and wellbeing in their learning community can help reduce School Refusal.

Be You is a national initiative that equips educators to support the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people from birth to 18 years. The initiative is delivered by **Beyond Blue**, in collaboration with **Early Childhood Australia** and **headspace**.

Be You helps you involve everyone at your school in supporting mental health, so you achieve the best possible outcomes.

Be You provides free online interactive sessions and events, accredited professional learning, fact sheets, planning and implementation tools and other resources. Their resources can support your school to meet national, state and territory requirements that relate to mental health and wellbeing.

The best way to sign up is as a **Be You Learning Community**, giving you access to the full range of resources and Be You Consultant support. You can also register as an individual educator, including if you are **pre-service**.

School Refusal resources

Be You resources on **School Refusal**, **Promoting School Attendance** and **Transitions in Learning Communities** are available to support educators. Educators may also find the 'Provide' Be You professional learning module useful as it details how educators can provide support to children, young people and their families within, and beyond, the early learning service or school.

To access these resources and learn more about **Be You**, visit beyou.edu.au

Useful links

Be You

beyou.edu.au

Beyond Blue

www.beyondblue.org.au

Early Childhood Australia

www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au

headspace

www.headspace.com

Be You Learning Community

beyou.edu.au/account/learning-community/apply

Pre-service

beyou.edu.au/get-started/pre-service-educators

School Refusal

beyou.edu.au/fact-sheets/development/school-refusal

Promoting School Attendance

beyou.edu.au/fact-sheets/development/promoting-school-attendance

Transitions in Learning Communities

beyou.edu.au/fact-sheets/development/transitions-in-learning-communities

'Provide' Be You professional learning module

beyou.edu.au/learn/early-support



Be You helps you involve everyone at your school in supporting mental health, so you achieve the best possible outcomes.





Other Links and Resources

Mental Health

Beyond Blue

www.beyondblue.org.au

The organisation provides a large number of resources and links for answering questions and finding treatments for people with depression, anxiety disorders and related mental disorders. The website includes pages of content for parents/caregivers and for young people.

Black Dog Institute

www.blackdoginstitute.org.au

The Black Dog Institute website has information on diagnosis, treatments and prevention of mood disorders such as depression and bipolar disorder.

The Brave Program

braveonline.psy.uq.edu.au

The BRAVE Program is an interactive, online intervention for the prevention and treatment of childhood and adolescent anxiety. The programs are free and provide ways for children and teenagers to better cope with their worries. There are separate programs for children, adolescents, and parents.

Carers NSW

www.carersnsw.org.au

1800 242 636

This service provides information, education and training, resources and referrals to support carers, including young carers. Young carers are children and young people, 25 years or under, who help to support a family member or friend who has a disability, mental illness, drug or alcohol dependency, chronic condition, terminal illness or who is frail.

Children of Parents with Mental Illness (COPMI)

www.copmi.net.au

This national initiative promotes better outcomes for children and families where a parent experiences mental illness, by providing information and support to children and young people who have parents with mental illness, and their families and friends.

Family Connect and Support

www.familyconnectsupport.dcj.nsw.gov.au

Family Connect and Support (FCS) is a state-wide, voluntary service for children, young people and families, who need support to maintain a safe and positive family environment. It is an early intervention and prevention case coordination service aimed at helping families to identify their strengths and resources, and addressing underlying issues and risk.

headspace

www.headspace.org.au

headspace is the National Youth Mental Health Foundation for young people aged 12-25 years. headspace provides online, phone or face to face support across a range of areas including physical health, mental health, education, employment and drug and alcohol services.

Kids Help Line

www.kidshelp.com.au

1800 55 1800

Kids Helpline is a free, 24 hour, private, confidential, telephone and online counselling service specifically for young people aged between 5 and 25 years.

Mental Health Line

1800 011 511

The Mental Health Line is the centralised referral to NSW Health public mental health services. The Mental Health Line operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week across NSW.

Support for Parents

Parent Line NSW

www.parentline.org.au

1300 1300 52

Parent Line is a telephone counselling, information and referral service for parents of children aged 0-18 years who live in New South Wales. The aim of Parent Line is to nurture and support positive, caring relationships between parents, children, teenagers and significant other people who are important to the well-being of families.

Raising Children Network

raisingchildren.net.au

A website formed through a partnership with the Australian Government and a network of leading early childhood agencies to provide parents with reliable information and resources to support them in the day-to-day work of raising children and looking after their own needs.

ReachOut Parents

ReachOut.com

ReachOut Parents provides factsheets, stories, practical tips and tools covering a range of topics that are relevant to young people aged 12-18. There's also an online community forum where parents can share their experiences and work through concerns in a safe, anonymous environment.

Support for Youth

ReachOut Youth

[ReachOut.com](https://reachout.com)

ReachOut.com offers a range of options for young people aged 12–25, with a focus on supporting their mental health and wellbeing through everyday issues and tough times. They offer information, self-help, peer support and pathways to other services for further help.

Support for Caregivers

ReachOut Schools

ReachOut Schools takes a whole-school approach to student wellbeing. The service features easy-to-understand information and classroom activities on a full range of mental health and wellbeing issues to help school staff support students. Additionally, ReachOut Schools offers information for parents and caregivers, referral options for students, and wellbeing tips to help teachers take care of themselves.

Publicly available education resources

NSW Department of Education has an excellent range of resources available at Attendance Matters – Resources for Schools, including a strategic attendance process for schools to utilise in planning their response to supporting school attendance.

education.nsw.gov.au/student-wellbeing/attendance-matters-resources-for-schools

Association of Independent Schools NSW has a fact sheet and guide around intervening to support school attendance.

tinyurl.com/ybms97ye

and

tinyurl.com/yt97mat8

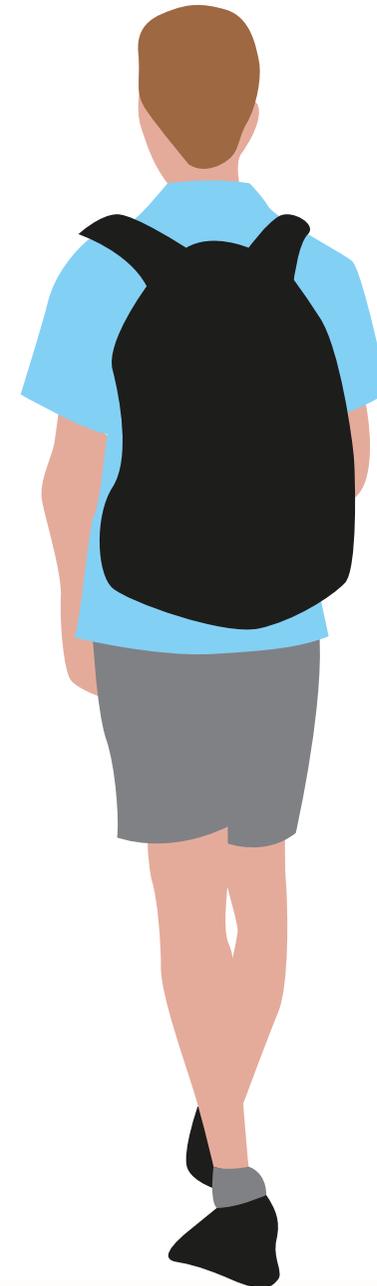
The following links are not from NSW, but may provide additional helpful information and strategies:

Queensland Department of Education and Training has developed a range of resources that aim to improve student attendance at school through a shared commitment by students, parents, caregivers, schools and the community.

education.qld.gov.au/initiatives-and-strategies/initiatives/every-day-counts

Western Australia Department of Education has a range of resources for parents and caregivers around supporting their children, together with real life stories of people dealing with School Refusal.

www.education.wa.edu.au/attendance



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Take Notice Take Action.

**Engage early to make
a difference.**



SCHOOL REFUSAL: Every School Day Counts

