

What is school refusal?

Here's how students experience school refusal over time. Students 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
- **experience 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 student is vulnerable (such as starting a new school or beginning a new term) and may start gradually or come on suddenly.

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

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

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

Risk factors

Being aware of common risk factors that make students vulnerable will help you understand and assess their behaviour. Students may have one or multiple risk factors across the different domains and these risk factors are often related.

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, difficult parent/child relationships, and external stressors 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 get to school. A parent that suffers from mental illness **may need support to help their child return to school**, or the child may want to stay home to look after their parent.

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School	
Social problems	Social problems at school, including bullying, social isolation, or falling out with friends , may contribute to a student's negative feelings about school.
Academic problems	There's a link between academic difficulties and reduced school attendance. Academic difficulties include learning difficulties, low self-confidence , and anxiety about catching up after missing weeks of school.
School environment	School-refusing children and young people may feel disconnected from their school environment. This may be caused by moving to a new school or changes to their class/classroom (including a new teacher).

Why attendance matters

When your child misses school they miss important opportunities to...



Learn



Make friends



Build skills through fun

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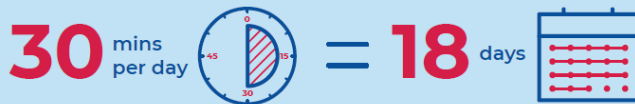


Minutes lost = days lost per year

A couple of minutes here and there doesn't seem like much, but...

When your child misses just...

they miss days per year



Patterns of lateness can have a serious impact on your child's education.

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Days missed = years lost

A day here and there doesn't seem like much, but...

When your child misses just...

they miss weeks per year

and years over their school life



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