Support Guide

For teachers and schools

This document aims to support you on-the-ground and includes best-practice considerations, strategies, and examples you and your school can use to better support students experiencing school refusal.

We suggest keeping this document on-hand for reference to help you provide appropriate support for your students.

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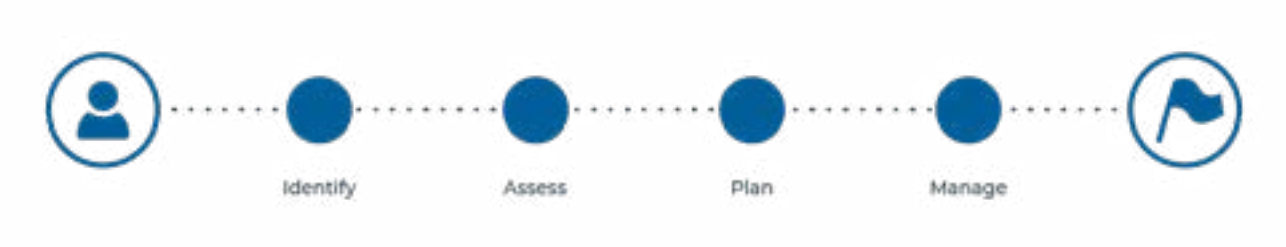
What is school refusal?

School refusal is when a child or young person has problems attending school due to high emotional distress at the idea of going.

It's different to truancy or wagging as the parents usually know about it.

Students who refuse to go to school can get caught in long-term patterns of poor attendance and are at an increased risk of not completing their schooling.

The Support Process



Identify

Teachers and **other school staff** observe indicators of school refusal, including by parent report, and raise these concerns with **school leaders** and/or the **school learning support team** for further action.

Assess

Once identified, the student may be referred for an assessment by the **school counsellor/ psychologist** or **external clinician** or **health professional.** This typically involves interviews with the student and parent and sometimes school staff.

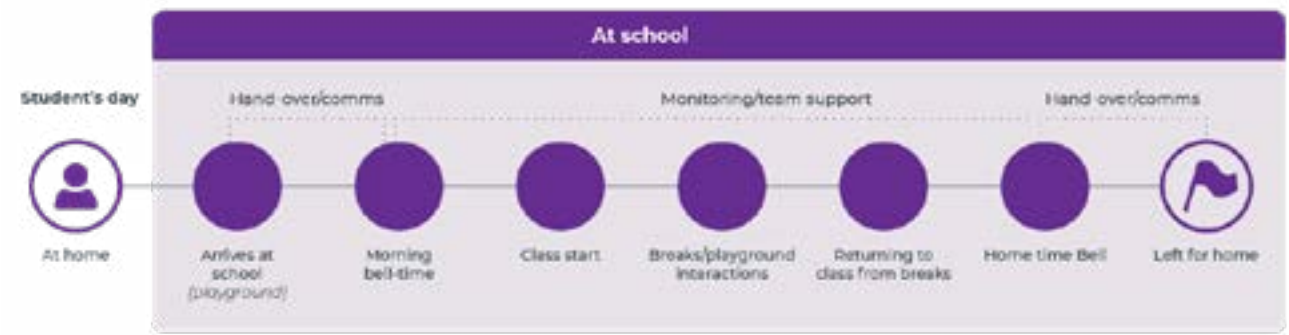
Plan

The clinician (school counsellor/psychologist or external professional) will collaborate with the **student, parents, and school staff** in the development of a holistic treatment plan.

Using this information, the **school support team** will work together to create a plan to support the student while at school

Manage	
Implementing the support plan	**Teachers, parents, principal/leader, Home School Liaison Officer (HSLO), and the learning support team** will work together to implement the support plan. Good communication between all parties is essential for the successful implementation of the plan.
Monitoring, reviews and adjustments	**Teachers, parents, a school counsellor/psychologist, clinician and the learning support team** all play a role in the continuous monitoring of the effectiveness of the treatment and support plan. Reviews should be scheduled at regular intervals and adjustments made as needed.
Managing setbacks	**Teachers, parents and the learning support team** can help to prevent setbacks by monitoring the student's attendance after they return. **A school counsellor/psychologist or clinician** can support the student to get back on track if setbacks occur.

Strategies for teachers



Often students experiencing school-refusal may arrive late – either because they have struggled to leave the house or as it is part of their return to school plan. Developing a plan for managing late arrival can be helpful. You may need to consider:

- How can the student arrive discreetly?
- How can a member of staff welcome the student into class without drawing attention to the lateness?
- Can an exception be made for school policies such as a late note?

Key moments

Arrival

Ask the student what they would find helpful on arrival. This could be:

- a support person to meet them at the gate (peer or staff member)
- having access to a comfortable place to arrive (eg., library or classroom)
- having a designated job for them to do before the bell goes.

Morning bell-time

Ensure staff are in the classroom when the bell goes, so students are not waiting. This will help to decrease anxiety and facilitate a smooth transition into the classroom.

Warmly welcome all students to class, and monitor students known to experience SR for signs that they may need more support.

Learning

Create a culture in your classroom of 'giving things a go'. Reward effort rather than correct work. Encourage students to do the same to each other.

For a student experiencing school refusal, it's important to focus on making a start and getting things done rather than quality of work.

Recess / lunch

Transition to social settings can be a difficult time for students who have experienced school refusal. This may be because they find social situations tricky, or they feel disconnected from their friends due to their absence.

Supporting the student to identify what they might do, where they might go, and who they might go with during breaks can be helpful.

Returning to class

Ensure staff are in the classroom when students return from breaks so they are not waiting. This will help to decrease anxiety and facilitate a smooth transition into the classroom for the afternoon.

Home bell-time

Communicate with/update parents if necessary. Give students a friendly farewell with the expectation they will be attending school the following day, such as, “we’ll see you tomorrow!”

Building relationships

Relationship building with the student

Look for ways to build and maintain your relationship with the student when they are not attending school. This could be regular communication, ‘we miss you’ messages and provision of work the student is capable of independently completing.

Engagement

Use the student’s interests to engage them in school and learning.

Validate the student’s feelings

Model contagious calm while validating and normalising feelings, provide empathy, and genuine positive regard.

Emotion coaching

This is a powerful tool that can make a student feel validated and improve their own skills in recognising and managing their emotions. The five essential steps of Emotion Coaching are:

1. Be aware	Try to notice and tune into the student’s feelings.
2. Recognise the moment	Think of it as an opportunity to connect with, and build a stronger connection or relationship with the student and teach them a new skill.
3. Listen	Show the student that you’re listening and let them know it’s OK to feel that way.
4. Label emotions	Help the student to give the feeling a name.
5. Set limits	Set limits while helping the student to problem solve.

Practical strategies

Support distress tolerance

Support the student to face their fears, one step at a time by gradually reintroducing tasks, situations and/or activities that have caused the student to feel distressed.

Model ways of coping with emotions, such as telling yourself 'it will be OK', relaxing your body, or using a breathing technique.

Reinforce positive behaviours

Ignore negative behaviours (safely), provide recognition for progress towards goals (individually and/or publicly, if appropriate), starting small. Celebrate attendance achievements. Consistent communication between school and home (and vice versa) is vital in order for gains to be celebrated, and rewards to be effective.

Provide opportunities for success

Modify learning tasks to promote competence and build confidence while transitioning back to school. Use the student's preferred activity to help them re engage and Introduce opportunities for safe risks when appropriate.

Provide accommodations

Adjust or modify the learning environment or activities to accommodate for the specific student concerns. Support the student to navigate questions from peers about their situation.

Support Wellbeing Strategies

Consider wellbeing strategies to support the student– identifying negative self-talk, cognitive restructuring, psycho-education about anxiety/school refusal cycle, mindfulness/relaxation techniques, and problem-solving/coping strategies. It is important to ensure these strategies are consistent with the student's treatment plan.

Strategies for schools

Attendance friendly schools

An attendance friendly school combines a positive school environment with activities and curriculum that are engaging for students.

Here are some tips on how you can encourage attendance.

A welcoming environment

- **Establish school attendance as a priority for your school**. Advertise this to your school community. Set an attendance goal and give awards to demonstrate that attendance is valued by the school community.
- **Maintain or enhance anti-bullying efforts** to provide a welcoming, supportive environment for all students.
- **Ensure school staff are appropriately trained** to respond to students who are struggling with attendance issues or are otherwise in distress.
- **Train staff in mentoring.** Establish a mentoring program that can target students with school attendance problems. Mentoring may provide an opportunity to problem solve barriers to attendance within a supportive relationship.

Student engagement

- **Aim for productive engagement** in curriculum where students can see school as personally meaningful and interesting enough to persist with, in the face of difficulty.
- **Create reasons for attendance** for those who may be struggling to attend. Consider lunchtime and/or after school activities that might engage them such as, a computer game club, board games group, or additional art room access.
- Allow student representatives to have **input into initiatives** to improve attendance.
- During secondary school, maintain a focus on careers and the expectation that all students can have a career.
- **Create opportunities for involvement** using the student's individual character, skills, or learning strengths.

Parent engagement

Parents play the most important role in getting a child back to school. They provide support for their child and are in most cases the ones that bring them to the school. Supporting parents to become more connected to their child's school community may assist their child to feel a sense of connection and belonging too.

- **Focus efforts on engaging parents** and communicate the integral role parents have in back to school success.
- **Involve parents in decision making** wherever possible.
- **Empower the parents** as the leaders of their family. Support them as they make the necessary decisions that are part of returning a child to school.
- Acknowledge that getting a child back to school can be **exhausting and frustrating.**
- Communicate to parents that **support is available** within the school to help those having trouble attending school. Prepare handouts for parents with details of these resources.

Applied at a school level, the following initiatives can assist with early identification of school refusal, monitoring attendance and identifying risk times for non attendance.

Screen new students	Review available attendance data, requesting information regarding attendance from their previous school or adding a question on transition documents, such as, "Has your son/daughter ever struggled to get to school, or missed school as they were anxious or worried about attending?"
Follow up	Follow up with the parents of those students who have had attendance difficulties in the past and determine whether additional support is required for the student's entry to your school.
Monitor and respond	Establish a sub-committee or staff member to be responsible for reviewing school attendance data. Look for patterns in non-attendance.
Identify	Watch for students who regularly miss certain days of the week or at the beginning/end of each term or other patterns of absence.