

Fact sheet: School Refusal In Australia

*Strategies to address the
growing trend of school
refusal*

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What is school refusal?

School refusal is when a young person becomes very stressed and anxious about attending school that they do not go (Prabhuswamy, Srinath, Girimaji & Seshadri, 2007, p. 375; (ReachOut, 2023). School refusal differs from regular truancy. When a student is truanting, they conceal it from their parents or carers. School refusal isn't concealed; it's an open refusal to attend that comes from the young person's belief that they cannot handle attending school (Dube & Orpinas, 2009, p. 87; ReachOut, 2023).

Signs of school refusal

- Anxiety before attending school
- Skipping classes
- Leaving school or continued absenteeism
- Crying or screaming related to school attendance (ReachOut, 2023)
- Frequent and continuous health complaints, such as stomach ache, headache, light headedness, or fatigue
- Physical symptoms such as vomiting, refusal to eat, shaking or panic attacks
- Constant requests to go home from school
- High instances of absenteeism or frequent lateness to school
- Difficulty falling asleep the night before school (ReachOut, 2023)

If you are noticing that your child is exhibiting these signs, it's important to speak to the school and a mental health practitioner (ReachOut, 2023).

They will be able to assist your child in ruling out any health concerns that may be causing these symptoms and suggest management and support availabilities (ReachOut, 2023).

What causes school refusal?

There are many reasons for school refusal and it can start subtly or happen suddenly (Kearney, Lemos & Silverman, 2004, p. 275; ReachOut, 2023). School refusal can be associated with mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, OCD or PTSD, or to experiences such as difficulties at school, bullying, or major life events (such as separation, divorce, moving, being away from family, or death). It can also be caused by worrying about declining grades or about keeping up with schoolwork. Although school refusal isn't directly related to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, these challenges do appear to have impacted on the frequency of school refusal. The Youth Survey 2022 report by Mission Australia found that young people required more support for returning back to face-to-face learning and extra help in recovering from the effects of lockdowns and remote learning (ReachOut, 2023).

Common feelings for parents and carers

- Shock and disbelief about what your child is going through (ReachOut, 2023)
- Fear and anxiety about your child's future
- Sadness for your child
- Loneliness and isolation
- Feelings of guilt that you're not doing enough
- Fear of being judged
- Confusion

It's important to acknowledge these feelings and to see help if required (ReachOut, 2023)

Can I get into legal trouble if my child refuses to go to school?

School attendance is a legal requirement for all Australian school-aged children (ReachOut, 2023). The rules vary depending on the state or territory you live in, but there can be legal or financial implications for parents (ReachOut, 2023).

In NSW, students are required to participate in full-time education from age 6 until they complete Year 10, then participate full-time in approved education, training, or employment until they complete Year 12 or they turn 17 (whichever happens first) (ReachOut, 2023).

A child's school attendance is the responsibility of their parent or guardian, and it is an offence if a child consistently fails to attend school (ReachOut, 2023).

Parents may lodge a defence for non-attendance, including:

- Medical conditions
- Accidents or unforeseen events
- Suspension from school
- Written permission from the principal of the school
- Disobedience of the child that was out of the parent's control (ReachOut, 2023)

Under the EDUCATION ACT 1990 - SECT 23 (1) A parent of a child of compulsory school-age is guilty of an offence if the parent fails to cause the child--

- (a) To be enrolled at, and to attend, a government school or a registered non-government school, or
- (b) To be registered for home schooling under Part 7 (ReachOut, 2023)

Strategies for parents dealing with school refusal

- Take it day by day (ReachOut, 2023)
- Establish a morning and evening routine
- Focus on mental health, rather than enforcing school attendance
- Encourage open conversation
- Acknowledge what is and is not in your control

- Research alternative pathways of learning (e.g. different school, online learning, apprenticeship)
- Work with your child's school on management plans (ReachOut, 2023)

Self-care tips for parents and carers

Dealing with school refusal is challenging and stressful. It's important to look after one's own self to prevent burnout.

Some self-care tips include:

- Regular exercise (ReachOut, 2023)
- Listening to music/podcast
- Meditation
- Mindfulness
- Spending time with family and friends (ReachOut, 2023)

Finding support with school refusal for children

- Make an appointment with CAFS, our experienced psychologists and counsellors can suggest treatment and support options
- Ensure your child has a reliable personal support network of family and friend
- Let your child know about mental health hotlines and crisis chat services such as Lifeline and Kids Helpline so that they're aware they have support available to them. You could also encourage or help them to make an appointment with ReachOut PeerChat, so they could chat online with a friendly peer worker (ReachOut, 2023)

Finding support for parents and carers

- Sign up for ReachOut Parents One-on-one Coaching for free, personalised support. The coaching sessions will help you to understand your child's school refusal and help you to create an action plan (ReachOut, 2023)
- The ReachOut Parents Online Community is a safe and anonymous space to discuss what's going on for you and your child with other parents going through the same thing (ReachOut, 2023)
- A referral to a CAFS mental health professional such as a counsellor or psychologist will be able to support you during this challenging time

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