



# Preventing anxiety-related school refusal



## When attendance is low, performance is low

School refusal isn't just skipping class. It's due to underlying mental health issues that require treatment and support.



## Common causes of school refusal

- Fear of social interaction
- Separation anxiety
- Psychological distress
- Academic stress
- Class presentations

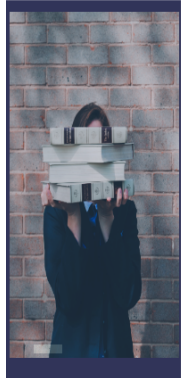
### Social determinants

Emotional distress, mental health problems, neglectful parenting, stressful life change, family with high expectations.

### Signs to watch for

- Complaint of headache, stomachache or tiredness
- Frequent visits to school nurse
- Crying, hiding, or lashing out in the morning--especially after a weekend or vacation
- Willingness to study at home

Sources: Fremont, W.P. (2003). School Refusal in Children and Adolescents. *American Family Physician*. Finning, K., Ukoumunne, O.C., Ford, et al. (2019). Review: The association between anxiety and poor attendance at school - a systematic review. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*. Richardson, K. (2016). Family therapy for child and adolescent school refusal. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*.



## Goal is to get the child back to class

01

The longer a child is out, the harder it is to return. Refer to a doctor to rule out a medical condition. If none, getting the child to attend class is top priority.

02

Therapy and coping skills  
Children with anxiety benefit from cognitive behavioral therapy and learning coping and problem-solving skills. They might also like journaling about their feelings.

03

Include family in treatment  
Caregivers can help the child feel safe and supported. The underlying cause of anxiety should be treated.

04

Minimize activities and create routine  
Too many activities can trigger stress in anxious children. Following a routine--which includes school--can ease anxiety.

Fremont, 2003  
Finning, et al., 2019

## Help at school

### Therapy delivered

It's hard for children to get mental health care. Work with the school to offer it on-site.



### Buddy up

Some kids love unstructured time. Others fear it. A peer buddy or optional activity can ease anxiety.



### Allow a break

The child might benefit from arriving before peers to settle in and taking breaks as needed.

### Start slow

Start with a couple of hours per day in the classroom and gradually increase. The child might revert some weeks.



Fremont, 2003

## The role of the family



School refusal is frustrating for parents. They have to force children who are anxious or unmotivated to return to school. Parents are often dealing with their own anxiety.

Family therapy can help! 2/3 of families who go to therapy together have success--higher than when the child goes alone.



## Sibling support

Siblings might be jealous or angry at the situation and may benefit from being heard in therapy.

When parents need to get tough, siblings can be supportive and show empathy.

### Parents unite

Often one parent is very concerned about the absenteeism while the other less so. The child can pit one against the other.

### Family dynamics

- High expectations and stress are passed down through families
- Lack of family unity, can cause an overly close bond to one parent and leave the child afraid to leave.

Source: Richardson, 2016

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