

School Refusal / School Can't

What is it?

It's not unusual for young people to sometimes feel anxious about going to school. For some, these feelings can be overwhelming and may build up until they result in school refusal, or "School Can't".

The term "School Can't" is increasingly being used to replace the term school refusal. As research grows in this area, we are learning that for the young person, their difficulty in attending school is not usually a choice, and most young people would like to be able to attend school.

School Can't is different to truancy, or 'skipping school', because rather than being driven by desire to have fun outside of school, it's driven by avoidance of school itself. In truancy, young people will try to hide their behaviour, whereas in School Can't, parents/caregivers are aware of the young person's difficulty attending school.

Early signs of School Can't can be seen both at school and at home.

At school, teachers may notice:

- Unexplained absences or often running late to school
- Absences on significant days such as tests, speeches, PE classes
- Decreased participation in class
- Frequent visits to the sick bay or the wellbeing office
- Frequent requests to go home early
- Excessive worry about a parent when at school
- Social isolation or withdrawal

At home, parents/caregivers may notice:

- Struggling to get out of bed, leave the house or get out of the car
- Disrupted sleep cycle; oversleeping or not getting enough sleep
- Complaints of feeling sick before school
- Tearfulness, clinginess and dawdling before school



- Complaints about attending school and reluctance to talk about school
- Difficulty attending school after weekends and holidays
- Difficulty separating from caregivers
- Panic symptoms,
- Threats of self-harm
- Isolating behaviours at home
- Excessive screen time e.g. gaming, YouTube and social media
- Extreme distress or aggressive behaviour

Not attending school can negatively impact a young person's learning and development. It can affect friendships as well as social standing due to missed opportunities to connect with friends and other students. The longer the issue persists, the more difficult it can be for your young person to get back into the routine of going to school, so it's important to respond early.

Why does it happen?

There are many factors that can contribute to a young person not being able to attend school. Individual factors may include mental health conditions like depression and anxiety, social difficulties, trauma and neurodiversity. Family factors may include separation, change in family dynamics, high stress levels, parental mental health, grief and bereavement, homelessness, family and domestic violence, and substance use. School factors may include bullying, learning difficulties, academic pressure, feeling unsafe, and relationship difficulties with students, teachers and other staff.

Getting back to school

Schools and families will often feel a sense of urgency to get the young person back into the classroom as soon as possible. This is completely understandable, however, taking a collaborative approach between schools and families, and taking things at the young person's pace is likely to have a higher chance of success.

It's important that all parties communicate openly and come to an understanding about underlying reasons for School Can't, as this will influence the intervention or approach that is taken. Types of interventions and supports that might be considered to assist could include:

- Building positive connections and increasing communication between school and family - and working on a unified plan
- Supporting the child to learn anxiety coping strategies,
- Adjusting the school environment as appropriate,
- Setting helpful morning and drop-off routines to reduce distress,



- Identifying safe people and places at school so the student has somewhere they can go to manage feelings that might arise,
- Assisting the child to manage relationships at school,
- In cases where learning difficulties might be present, having these difficulties appropriately assessed so that strategies can be applied at home and school to increase the chances of successful learning.
- Addressing any issues of bullying
- Linking the child and family to external supports such as mental health supports, government and social supports, for example.
- Gradual return to school at the young person's pace and with supports in place.

