

SCHOOL REFUSAL

What is 'School Refusal'?

You might have come across this term. This occurs when a young person frequently misses school due to vague illnesses or symptoms. From our experience, students tend to avoid coming to school due to friendship fallouts or difficulty with the curriculum, leading to avoidance of certain lessons, especially before tests or when homework is incomplete.

Recognising School Refusal Symptoms:

- A young person complains about symptoms similar to those associated with worry (eg, stomach aches, diarrhoea, nausea, headaches, fatigue, dizziness, vague and general aches and pains, etc).
- The young person shows extreme determination not to attend school, for example, reluctance to get dressed, leave the house, or enter the school premises.
- The young person appears to be anxious or agitated on the mornings of school.
- The young person may have difficulties settling to sleep on school nights.
- The symptoms appear to settle fairly quickly after getting into school.
- These symptoms are worse the night before starting a new school week, after school holidays, and are less obvious during weekends and holidays.
- A young person who has a genuine fear of attending school often wants to be on their own at home or outside of school.

What can you do as a parent to help?

If you have displayed school refusal or separation anxiety yourself, it is important to separate your own feelings and experiences from your child's. While it can be useful to empathise, your own experiences can sometimes inhibit you from helping them to the best of your ability. Being aware of the need to be firm and encouraging, despite your own feelings, is important. If you realise that you may be over-identifying with the child's problem or family's dilemma, you may not be the right person to offer the most effective help and encouragement.

- Listen to your child to find out if there is anything specific that is bothering them at school (eg, exam stress or bullying). Remember they may not be forthcoming with this information due to fear or embarrassment.
- If there are no genuine problems at school, then school refusal/separation anxiety symptoms can be improved with firm and supportive encouragement to attend school every day.
- Keep a diary of when your child is reluctant to attend school or experiences non-attendance and note the type and frequency of their physical symptoms to determine if there are any patterns.
- Have there been any significant changes or stressors in their life (eg, bereavement or parental disharmony)?
- Explain to them that you understand how upset they feel, but experience tells us that this upset will settle fairly quickly if they attend school consistently and will get worse if they continue to avoid attending.
- Encourage support from their friends.
- Try to be firm in your expectation that they attend school.
- If appropriate, introduce a reward for attending school.

Seeking help:

- Speak to a member of your child's house team to share your worries and concerns. Please be reassured that they are highly experienced in supporting parents in this area and are here to help.
- Contact your GP for guidance.
- Explore mental health support organisations such as Visyon [Visyon | Empowering Young People](#) and Young Minds. [YoungMinds | Mental Health Charity For Children And Young People | YoungMinds](#)