

SCHOOL AVOIDANCE & REFUSAL

School avoidance is when a child or teen has a hard time going to school because it feels scary, overwhelming, or upsetting. It's often linked to anxiety or depression. It is different from truancy, where a child skips school without distress.

What school avoidance can look like

School avoidance often shows up indirectly - many kids don't say they feel anxious. It may look like morning meltdowns, physical complaints, sleep problems, repeated requests to stay home, partial attendance, or a sudden drop in school performance.

Ages 6-10: Separation worries ("Something bad will happen"), fear of teachers, bathrooms, the bus, or being away from a parent.

Ages 11-14: Social worries, bullying, peer conflict, fear of mistakes, stress related to school transitions.

Ages 15-21: Panic symptoms, social anxiety, low mood, burnout, avoidance of school, college, work, or important appointments.

Why it happens

School avoidance is usually a "signal," not a character flaw.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Anxiety or mood concerns (worry, social fear, panic, separation anxiety, low mood, hopelessness, withdrawal) ● School-based stressors (bullying, social conflict, feeling unsafe, learning challenges or ADHD making school feel hard or embarrassing) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Major life changes or stress (moving, family changes, grief, health issues, new sibling) ● Emotional or sensory factors (sensory overload, perfectionism, fear of being judged) |
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Avoiding school brings short-term relief, which teaches the brain that school is dangerous. The goal isn't eliminating anxiety - it's learning to go *with* anxiety.

First steps that help

A) Lead with empathy + confidence: Try statements that hold both understanding and direction, such as: *"I believe you. This feels really hard."* AND *"We will help you get back to school step by step."*

B) Keep mornings simple and calm: Reduce stress by preparing the night before (clothes, backpack, lunch), using fewer words in the morning with short, calm coaching, and avoiding long debates at the door.

C) Focus on function, not feeling: Instead of waiting for calm - *"You must feel calm first"* - focus on action: *"Let's do the next step, even if you feel nervous."*

D) Don't "accidentally reward" avoidance: If staying home includes screens, treats, or special activities, the brain learns *"avoiding school = better day."* If your child must stay home, keep the day boring and school-like by maintaining a normal wake-up time, completing schoolwork as able, limiting screens, and encouraging quiet activities.

E) Build connection with the school: Support attendance by putting gentle strategies in place, such as identifying a safe person and planning a calm start to the day, reducing pressure in the short term, and creating a clear, shame-free plan for missed work.

The "Brave Ladder" - A simple return to school plan

Small steps are better than big battles. Pick a starting step your child can do today

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Wake up at school-day time2. Put on school clothes3. Ride to school4. Walk into the building5. Stay 10 minutes in a safe space6. Attend one class7. Attend half-day8. Attend full day (with supports) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Go every day, even if it's for a short time (consistency helps most)● Increase steps gradually (every few days or each week)● Expect discomfort and celebrate effort, not perfection |
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Extra help may be needed if school absence is increasing, emotional distress is significant, or mornings involve panic or physical symptoms, and support should be sought right away if there are bullying, safety, or trauma concerns, or if family stress is escalating and everyone feels stuck. Therapy can help by building coping skills and CBT strategies, supporting gradual "brave ladder" returns to school, and helping parents and schools respond in ways that reduce avoidance over time (with consent).