

## **School Refusal in a time of transition from COVID-19**

In a time of rapid change attributed to the Coronavirus, where families have had to change the way they live their lives in order for them to keep themselves and the community safe. This has meant staying at home and doing many of the things that they once did such as going to work and school in the home environment.

For many this seemed like the ideal, which was the honeymoon faze, however, as time has gone on many people are looking forward to returning to school and work to see friends and teachers, or work colleagues.

However, there are some young people for who staying at home is an easier and ideal option, as they find the reality of going to school quite difficult. Many of these children often have an underlying mental health condition such as anxiety or depression, so use staying at home as a way of managing their condition. Often they wish they could go to school, but struggle to get there.

Unfortunately this strategy can have further detrimental effects on their lives, in which they miss many opportunities to grow and develop certain keys skills.

There is a condition called school refusal in which the young person ceases to attend school as a way of managing their overwhelming feelings of anxiety. Unfortunately the statistics show that the longer it goes on, the greater the chance that it becomes harder for young people to return.

For many that have this condition the current circumstances have been ideal. For others it could develop as a result of the current circumstances whereby anxiety develops about the welfare of their parents, grandparents and other loved ones, out of concerns about keeping their loved ones safe and now see social interaction as a threat. Therefore making them susceptible to school refusal. For others the comfort of being with loved ones for an extended period is a new normal that they enjoy.

However, the importance of attending school and developing academic, social and emotional skills is invaluable and sets them up for a potentially better quality of life, whilst staying in the comfort of their homes to manage their mental health can impact their futures in terms of a lower quality of life.

Below is a list of influences and signs for school refusal:

### **What factors can influence school refusal?**

There is no one particular cause for school refusal, it can stem from a complex interaction of multiple factors including but not limited to:

- stressful life events
- major transitions such as starting primary or secondary school
- moving or other big change
- fear of harm coming to a parent
- illness in the family
- separation and divorce
- academic problems
- overprotective parenting
- friendship difficulties
- separation anxiety

### **What are some of the signs of school refusal?**

- Complaining of not feeling well before it's time to leave for school
- Separation anxiety
- Lots of visits to the school nurse if at school
- Easily upset and teary
- Headaches, nausea, diarrhoea
- Withdrawal from class activities
- Withdrawal from friends
- Missing half of school or less over previous month
- Difficulty concentrating

The positive is that school refusal can be treated, but means that the collaboration between parents, the young person, health professionals, and the school (teachers and the school psychologist) is essential. This can be particularly difficult for parents/carers who want to act protectively particularly when they may have their own stressors, or seeing the distress it creates in the young person.

Below are strategies that help address school refusal.

1. Recognising and acknowledging that there is a problematic pattern of behaviour, and that action is required, rather than letting it be because it is easiest and least distressing. Recognition and moving towards action is the first step towards making a positive change.
2. Make an appointment with your GP to discuss the issue as it helps explore potential avenues for help, such as other health professionals.
3. Open a conversation with your child about what you have noticed, and that you want to understand what is happening for them. The conversation is best done when both parties are in a calm and relaxed state. Be "Curious rather than furious", as this creates an alliance for the child to feel safe to talk about the issue, and that you are there to understand and help. Becoming forceful and aggressive can damage a collaborative relationship with your child, and make them feel that no one understands, therefore further

entrenching the behaviour. It can be difficult when our own anxiety comes into play about the welfare of our child, or concern about the quality of our parenting, or other life pressures.

4. Parent like a cat and a dog in a book 'Anxious Kids' they write about the parenting styles that are helpful depending on the situation at hand. When parenting like a cat, you're adopting a more firm but fair approach. The dog approach to parenting brings more warmth and nurturance. School refusers need both. They need your empathy, to let them know you understand it's hard for them to go to school (dog), but they also need you to be firm and to continue to reinforce the message that school is important and that attendance is expected. Of course, depending on where your child is at with their school refusal you will temper these to fit the circumstances.

5. Help your child develop the willingness to tolerate discomfort. For school refusers the idea of going to school can cause a lot of distress and many will want to wait until they feel completely relaxed and calm about going to school to actually get back to their classes. Teaching your school refuser to tolerate discomfort is a way to help them get back to school sooner. Having the recognition of what makes them feel fearful and avoidant is helpful, and with the help of a professional your child will, over time, begin to learn that putting into practice the skills of mindfulness, breathing will help them remain more relaxed in the lead up to school. Also, a willingness to tolerate any residual discomfort and still go to school is an important step to work towards. We want our kids to know that they can feel unhappy, annoyed, frustrated, scared and uncertain, and still do the things that matter. In this case, going to school. Also get them to reflect on times when they have tolerated this distress and still managed to achieve their goal despite the discomfort – i.e. a sporting competition or event.

6. Stepladder their way back to school full-time. School refusal can cause a lot of distress for parents and child, and when it comes to getting back to school, a stepladder approach can work well. This approach requires input from the child's psychologist (external or school) or other health professional, to ensure that the approach is a good fit for your child's needs. In essence, this approach is about moving your child in the direction of what matters, going to school, but doing so in a way that is incremental. The child's input here is important too.

7. Keep communication lines open with the school. Inform the school about your child's progress and the steps you're putting into place to support their transition back to school. Keep these lines of communication open and collaborative, and demonstrate to your child that everyone is on the same page and working towards the same goal of helping them.

8. Look after yourself. Parenting a school refuser can be distressing for parents and other family members. It can be disruptive and the uncertainty about how long it will continue for and what the future holds can prompt a whole host of difficult thoughts and feelings for parents. Talk to someone you trust about how you're feeling and be sure to look after your own mental health. Exercise is excellent and will help, as will engaging in your own mindfulness practice as well as creating opportunities for your family to have fun together when school refusal is not a factor.

If you have any questions please speak to your school.

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References:

<https://drjodirichardson.com.au/school-refusal-what-you-can-do-to-help/>

Work by Sandy Francois from the ACT Education Directorate