

When School Feels Hard: Understanding attendance difficulties and what helps

For some young people, attending school can become overwhelming. What may appear as reluctance, avoidance, or refusal to attend school is often linked to anxiety, stress, emotional distress, social difficulties, learning challenges, or other wellbeing concerns.

School attendance difficulties are rarely about a young person simply “not wanting to go.” Often, they are communicating that something feels difficult, unsafe, overwhelming, or beyond their current capacity to manage.

Signs that a young person may be struggling include:

- Increased anxiety before school
- Difficulty sleeping
- Frequent physical complaints such as headaches or stomach aches
- Emotional outbursts before school
- Withdrawal from friends or activities
- Refusing to leave home or get ready for school

These experiences are common among young people experiencing school-related anxiety.

What helps?

Research and clinical experience suggest that supportive, collaborative approaches are often most effective.

Helpful strategies include:

- Remaining calm and consistent during school-related distress
- Validating feelings while maintaining expectations around attendance
- Breaking attendance goals into manageable steps
- Focusing on connection before correction
- Working closely with school staff to identify barriers
- Seeking professional support when concerns persist

While it can be tempting to allow extended absences when a young person is distressed, avoiding school for long periods can sometimes increase anxiety and make returning more difficult.

These [Parent/Carer Fact Sheets](#) provide more specific information and strategies:

- Understanding School Avoidance
- Helping Your Teen Manage Anxiety About School
- Making School Mornings Easier

- Supporting Your Teen's Mental Health
- When Your Child Doesn't Want to Go to School

[Parent/Carer Fact Sheet: Understanding School Avoidance](#)

Attendance Support

When should you seek support?

If your child is regularly missing school, experiencing significant anxiety about attendance, or finding it increasingly difficult to attend, reaching out early can make a positive difference.

School-Based Supports

Please contact your young person's:

- Sub-School Leaders
- Student Wellbeing Team
- Trusted teacher or staff member

Early communication allows schools and families to work together to identify barriers and develop practical support strategies.

Other Resources:

[ReachOut Parent Resources – School Refusal](#)

[Victorian Department of Education – Attendance and Missing School](#)

[Victorian Department of Education – School Refusal and Anxiety About Going to School](#)

Parent/Carer and Student Surveys

The below surveys will provide us with more information around the difficulties our students (and parents/carers) are experiencing.

Please consider filling them out when you have a couple of minutes.

[Parent/Carer Survey – Attendance](#)

[Student Survey – Attendance](#)