

Navigating School Can't

For Parents



MINI JOURNAL

SCHOOL AVOIDANCE & ANXIETY

What's Really Going On and Why Traditional Approaches Often Fall Short

If your child struggles to get to school, we know it's not about skipping class or lacking motivation. School avoidance is often driven by deep-seated anxiety, sensory sensitivities, past negative experiences, or an overwhelming sense of not feeling safe or capable. Beneath the surface, they may be battling social anxiety, learning challenges, perfectionism, bullying, or mental health concerns, making school feel impossible to face.

Rather than defiance, school avoidance is often a survival response. When a child experiences intense distress about attending school, their nervous system reacts as if they're in danger, triggering fight, flight, or freeze. Enforcing attendance policies, consequences, or rewards doesn't address the fear and can sometimes make things worse. Since COVID, this challenge has become even more complex, as many young people adapted to isolation and now find school overwhelming and unpredictable.

So, what helps?

The most effective approach is understanding, validation, and gradual support. When a child feels heard and equipped with tools to manage anxiety, they're far more likely to re-engage with school in a way that feels safe.

Shifting the focus to emotional regulation, confidence-building, and creating a sense of safety can make all the difference.

By supporting your child at their own pace and acknowledging their fears while helping them develop coping strategies, you can help them take meaningful steps toward returning to school and thriving.

You're not alone in this. With the right support, your child can rebuild their confidence and navigate school life again.

PARENT REFLECTION PROMPTS

When did you first notice changes in your child's attendance?

What changes (big or small) have you noticed in your child's mood, behaviour, or daily routine since their attendance started to shift?

How does your child express their feelings about school? Have they shared any specific worries or concerns with you? How do you feel about what they've shared?

PARENT REFLECTION PROMPTS

What strategies or approaches have you already tried to support your child, and what has worked (or not worked) so far?

How has school avoidance impacted your family life - your routines, relationships, and overall household dynamics?

How has this experience affected you personally? Be honest with yourself about the emotional and mental toll it may have taken.

PRACTICAL TOOLS FOR PARENTS

1. Start Small & Build Wins

Aiming for full school days can feel overwhelming, especially after frequent absences. Focus on small, achievable steps. Maybe it's getting dressed, driving to the school car park, or attending just one subject. Every step forward counts, and recognising their effort helps build confidence along the way.

2. Validate Feelings, But Keep Expectations Clear

Let your child know you understand how tough this is: "I can see this is really hard for you." At the same time, keep expectations clear, learning is important, and together, you'll figure out a way to make it work.

3. Reduce Morning Stress

Mornings can feel like a battle, so keeping things calm and predictable helps. If you can, try getting up a little earlier to have some 'me time' before the rest of the family wakes up. A quiet coffee, a short walk, or even just a few deep breaths can set a better tone for the day. The more prepared and steady you feel, the easier it is to support your child through the morning routine. Having things ready the night before—like clothes, school bags, and a plan for the morning—can also reduce stress.

4. Work with the School on Flexible Options

A full school day might feel overwhelming right now. Talk to the school about small adjustments, like arriving a little later, starting with a preferred subject, or having a quiet place to settle in. Schools are often willing to help, but may need guidance on what works best for your child.

5. Look for the "Hidden" Barriers

School avoidance is more than just missing school; it's often a response to deeper challenges. Pay attention to what's really going on. Are friendships tricky? Is the work too hard or too easy? Is the noise or busyness of school overwhelming? Understanding what's underneath can help you find solutions that truly support your child.

6. Give Your Child a Sense of Control

School avoidance can feel like everything is happening to them. Let them have a say in small choices—what to wear, which subject to start with, or whether to take a break before walking in. Even small decisions can help them feel more in control and less resistant to going.



SELF CARE

Caring for Yourself Matters

Supporting a child through school avoidance is emotionally exhausting. You can't pour from an empty cup—taking care of yourself is not selfish, it's necessary. When you prioritise your well-being, you're in a better place to support your child.

Key Reminders:

- Give yourself grace - You're doing your best in a tough situation.
- Set boundaries - It's okay to take breaks and protect your energy.
- Find support - Connect with people who understand, whether it's a friend, a therapist, or a support group.
- Breathe and reset - Small moments of self-care, like a short walk or deep breathing, can help ground you.

You're not alone in this. Take care of yourself—you matter too.



If you'd like more support or individual counselling, please reach out. I'm here to help.

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