

When School Feels Too Hard: Supporting School Refusal

School refusal is often less about “I won’t” and more about “I can’t right now.” For younger children, refusing school can be a sign that their nervous system is overwhelmed by separation, uncertainty, sensory demands, social worries, academic pressure, or simply the enormous transition back into routine.

An attachment-focused approach starts with connection before correction.

Start with curiosity, not consequences. Instead of “You have to go to school,” try: “Something about school feels really hard right now. I’m here. We can figure it out together.” You don’t have to agree that school is unsafe to acknowledge that their feelings are real.

Keep your confidence bigger than their worry. Children borrow our calm. Try to communicate: “I know this feels hard AND I believe you can do hard things. I’ll help you.” We want to avoid both pushing through distress without support and accidentally reinforcing the idea that anxiety means they cannot cope.

Make mornings predictable. Reduce decisions where you can. Lay clothes out the night before, use the same breakfast choices, create a simple visual routine, and leave extra transition time. Predictability can help an overwhelmed nervous system feel safer.

Create a connection ritual. A special handshake at drop-off, a note in their lunch, matching bracelets, a heart drawn on each of your hands, or a consistent goodbye phrase can help your child hold onto the connection while you’re apart. Keep goodbyes warm, confident, and predictable rather than stretching them out.



Make the goal smaller when needed. “Go to school all day” can feel enormous. Break it down: get dressed → get in the car → walk to the door → connect with a trusted adult. Celebrate movement toward the goal, not just a perfect school day.

Regulate before you reason. When your child is crying, hiding, yelling, or saying their tummy hurts, lengthy explanations probably won't help. Try connection, a hug if they want one, slow breathing, movement, a snack, heavy work, or sitting together first. Problem-solving works better once their body feels safer.

Partner with the school early. Ask about a predictable staff member who can meet your child, a quieter entrance, a morning job, a visual schedule, sensory supports, or a calm place to land before joining the classroom. Your child shouldn't have to manage the transition alone.

Talk about it outside the hard moment. Bedtime, bath time, colouring, driving, or playing together may be better times to wonder: “If school could be a little easier, what would help?” Younger children often communicate more when we aren't sitting across from them asking direct questions.



And remember: connection doesn't mean removing every hard thing. Attachment-focused parenting isn't about making sure your child never feels uncomfortable. It's about letting them know they don't have to navigate uncomfortable things alone.

If school refusal is becoming frequent, increasingly intense, or significantly interfering with your child's ability to attend, reach out to their school, healthcare provider, or mental health professional for additional support.