



School Refusal: A Parent's Guide

An explainer, observation log, and gentle return plan · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)

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At a glance

- School refusal is when a child has serious difficulty attending school because of emotional distress.
- It is not the same as truancy or laziness. It's usually driven by anxiety or avoidance.
- The longer a child stays home, the harder returning becomes. Gradual, supported return works best.

What school refusal looks like

- Stomach aches, headaches, or nausea on school mornings that ease on weekends
- Crying, pleading, or tantrums before school
- Frequent calls to come home or visits to the office
- Refusing to get out of bed or leave the car
- Missing more and more days

Understanding the "why"

Researchers describe four common functions of school refusal. Knowing which applies to your child helps guide the plan:

Function	What it might look like
Avoiding upsetting feelings at school	General anxiety, sadness, or sensory overwhelm
Escaping social or performance situations	Fear of tests, presentations, peers, or bullying
Seeking attention or time with a caregiver	Separation worries, wanting to be home with a parent
Getting rewards outside school	Screens, sleep, or fun at home

What the research says

Kearney and Albano's model identifies four functions of school refusal behaviour and guides treatment matched to each function (Kearney & Albano, 2007).

CBT approaches that combine gradual exposure, coping skills, and parent and school involvement are effective for school refusal.

Tool: My Observation Log and Gentle Return Plan

Day	Morning signs (body, mood, words)	What my child said worried them	What happened (attended, partial, home)
Mon			
Tue			
Wed			
Thu			
Fri			

Gentle return ladder

Work with your child and the school to plan small steps, starting with what feels manageable.

Step	Example	Our plan
1	Drive past school or visit after hours	
2	Attend for one favourite class or activity	
3	Attend half a day	
4	Attend most of the day with a check-in person	
5	Full days with support as needed	

Strategies to try

- **Partner with the school.** Meet with the teacher, principal, or school support staff to plan together.
- **Keep mornings predictable.** Same routine, calm tone, minimal negotiation.
- **Make home "boring" during school hours.** Limit screens and fun activities on missed days.

- **Validate and expect.** "I know this feels scary, and I know you can do hard things."
- **Rule out medical causes.** Check with your doctor about physical symptoms.

Strategies you may not have heard of

These less common, evidence-informed techniques go beyond the usual advice. Try one at a time and notice what works for you.

- **Arrange a "landing spot."** Ask the school for a safe person or place your child can go first on arrival, such as a counsellor's office or library.
- **Give a morning job.** A small responsibility at school, like helping set up a classroom, can make arrival feel purposeful.
- **Use a brave ladder chart.** Celebrate each step up the return plan with a sticker or small reward.
- **Try a worry box.** Your child writes worries on paper and "posts" them in a box at home before school, to be talked about after school.

Journal prompts

Take your time with these. Write freely; there are no right answers.

When did I first notice my child struggling to go to school?

What do I think my child is most afraid of?

How do I feel on hard mornings, and how might that affect my child?

What support do I need as a parent right now?

When to reach out for support

School refusal usually improves with early support. If your child has missed several days or the pattern is growing, a therapist who works with children and teens can help your family and coordinate with the school.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.

This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.

References

Kearney, C. A., & Albano, A. M. (2007). When children refuse school: A cognitive-behavioral therapy approach: Parent workbook (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

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