

When school feels too hard

Understanding school avoidance in children and teenagers

School avoidance is not simply “bad behaviour”.

Some children feel overwhelmed by the idea of attending school, entering the classroom, separating from a parent, or coping with demands during the school day.

The aim is to understand what is making school difficult, restore safety and connection, and build a supported pathway back to learning.



What might you notice?

Emotional signs

Worry, panic, tears, irritability, shutdown, fear of embarrassment or separation.

Physical signs

Stomach aches, headaches, nausea, fatigue, rapid heartbeat or difficulty sleeping.

Behavioural signs

Delaying morning routines, refusing to leave home, repeated requests to go home, or missed classes.

School-related signs

Fear of peers, bullying, learning difficulties, sensory overload or pressure to perform.

Important: Physical symptoms and distress are real. Consider appropriate medical review when symptoms are new, significant or unexplained.

Why does school avoidance happen?

Looking beneath the behaviour helps identify the right support.

School avoidance may develop through several interacting factors:

Anxiety and emotions

Separation worries, social anxiety, panic, perfectionism, low mood or fear of being judged.

School environment

Bullying, peer conflict, academic pressure, school transitions, unsafe experiences or limited support.

Learning and development

Unrecognised learning needs, ADHD, autism, sensory differences or challenges with executive functioning.

Family and life events

Bereavement, illness, family stress, changes at home, trauma or worries about loved ones.

How the avoidance cycle can continue

1**School feels threatening****2****Anxiety or distress increases****3****Staying home brings immediate relief****4****Returning feels even harder next time**

Avoidance often reduces distress in the short term, but can make anxiety and disconnection stronger over time. The solution is not to force a child into an unsafe setting: identify barriers, address them, and rebuild attendance at a manageable pace.

What parents and schools can do

A coordinated, compassionate and practical response

For parents and carers

Listen and validate: “I can see this feels really hard.”

Keep predictable routines: plan sleep, mornings and the journey to school.

Stay connected: avoid blame, punishment or lengthy daily negotiations.

Notice small wins: praise effort and participation, not just full attendance.

For school staff

Nominate a trusted adult: provide one consistent contact person.

Address the barriers: bullying, sensory needs, learning demands or peer conflict.

Make adjustments: calm arrival, safe check-in, supportive peer, or flexible start.

Review together: involve the student and family in decisions.

A gradual return-to-school plan

Step 1

Reconnect

A phone check-in, meeting with a trusted adult or brief school visit.

Step 2

Attend briefly

A preferred activity, one class, or a short supported visit.

Step 3

Increase participation

Add lessons and time at school as coping and support improve.

Step 4

Review and adjust

Track attendance, distress, safety, and what is or is not helping.

The pace should reflect the child’s needs and safety, with clear shared goals and regular reviews.

A small-step plan you can use

A simple conversation starter for families, schools and clinicians

1. What is the hardest part of school right now?

Examples: leaving home, a particular lesson, breaks, noise, friendships or schoolwork.

2. What could make that part feel safer or more manageable?

Identify one helpful adjustment and one trusted adult at school.

3. What is one achievable next step?

Choose a small action, decide when it will happen, and agree how progress will be reviewed.

When to seek additional help

Seek professional assessment if avoidance persists, worsens or significantly affects wellbeing, learning or family life. Urgent assessment is appropriate when there are concerns about safety, self-harm, severe depression, bullying or trauma.

Flourish Horizon Psychology & Counselling

Child and adolescent psychological assessment, therapy and parent support.

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Educational information only; not a diagnosis or personalised treatment plan.

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