



Most school-anxious/school refusing children do WANT to attend school however their difficulties and anxiety become overwhelming. They care about their education and want to succeed, however they need understanding and support at home and at school. They may need adjustments to their daily routines, timetables, or even their school environment. Pressures to focus on attendance rather than the child's needs can make things even harder to fix.

My Child is Struggling to Go to School - What can I do?

Unfortunately there are many children and young people struggling with school-based anxiety and other mental health and SEND difficulties that can lead to school refusal.

School refusal shouldn't be seen as a behavioural or parenting problem as it is much more complicated than that, and there are many different things that can trigger anxiety and attendance difficulties including bullying, academic pressure and sensorial issues in the school environment.

Fine or Not Fine?

Sometimes schools are aware of the difficulties children face, but unfortunately many parents report that their children are described as 'fine in school', even if they are not in reality.

It is common for children to mask or hold in their distress until they get home from school, or avoid going because they feel distressed and unable to cope.

Government guidance and school policies acknowledge parents important role in working with professionals to help children & young people.

Government Guidance Pages:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-for-children-with-health-needs-who-cannot-attend-school>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-pupils-at-school-with-medical-conditions-3>

<https://www.gov.uk/children-with-special-educational-needs>

Believe your child's distress is real, listen to what they say and trust your instincts as a parent.

Ask for help

Most schools should offer mental health support, counselling, and access to a School Nurse, they can also ask an Educational Psychologist to make an assessment. You should also speak to your child's GP and ask for a referral to a Paediatrician or CAMHS.

Ask the school to assess your child for any relevant SEND

An underlying Special Educational Need or Disability often contributes to anxiety levels; this can include Autistic Spectrum Conditions, ADHD, Sensory Processing Disorder or Dyslexia. Undiagnosed or unsupported these can make school a difficult place to be and can contribute to mental and physical health deterioration.

SEND includes Social, Emotional or Mental Health Difficulties

which can affect a child's ability to establish friendships, cope with strong emotions, and increase vulnerability to bullying. These are all a barrier to learning requiring the use of SEND assess-plan-do-review cycles and possibly an EHCP. Severe anxiety is also classed as a disability and therefore protected by the Equality Act 2010.

Apply for an EHCP Assessment

Some children will need an Education and Health Care Plan if a school does not have the expertise or funding to fully meet a child's needs, or offer the provision a child requires to access an education. SENCOs or parents can apply to the LA for an ECHP assessment.

Contact SENDIASS / IPSEA / SOS SEN or other sources of advice about SEND and educational provision. Some offer local advice and support, and they can often attend meetings with you at school. Your Local Authority's Local Offer can also be an invaluable source of resources, information, advice and relevant support.

Read your school's policies and government statutory guidance for SEN, Disability, Mental Health, & Attendance - Are they being followed?
If necessary follow the school's complaints policy.

Record Keeping

It is important to keep a brief diary of what happens day to day to build a picture of the problem and the steps that have been taken. Keep a file of notes you take at meetings, during phone calls etc. and copies of ALL emails and letters. Check that minutes of meetings are accurate. It is often useful to take someone with you so that they can take notes while you listen and you have someone to discuss the meeting with afterwards.

If you're concerned about school records you can make a full Subject Access Request (SAR) for a copy of all records held. Check through them carefully for accuracy and for gaps in the paperwork, and ask for them to be corrected. When reporting absences use the phrase 'too unwell to come to school'. Check attendance records are accurate.

This evidence will be crucial if any legal proceedings occur and/or if you apply for an EHCP.

Self-care and Support

School refusal, and related conditions and difficulties, can be very stressful for parents, and can affect the whole family. Remember to seek medical advice & support for your own health.

It is likely that few people around you will have experienced what your child and your family are going through, but ask for help if you can.

Please remember that you are not alone. We hope you can find support through *Not Fine In School* and other online support groups, and you may find local support groups too.

Employment can be a problem - please seek advice regarding Work and Benefits from Citizens Advice Bureau.

Sources of Information:

<https://councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/information-advice-and-support-services-network/find-your-local-ias-service>

<https://www.ipsea.org.uk>

<http://www.sossen.org.uk>

<http://www.youngminds.org.uk>

<http://www.autism.org.uk/services/helplines/education-rights.aspx>

<https://ico.org.uk/for-the-public/schools/pupilsinfo/>

Mental & physical health related absence should be authorised as illness. Extended absence requires medical evidence, so see a GP and arrange to be referred to CAMHS. Schools should notify the Local Authority if children are absent due to illness for more than 15 days. Local Authorities have a duty to ensure that a child receives alternative educational provision whilst absent, however you will usually be asked to provide medical evidence to arrange this support.

Ask the school to provide homework while your child is absent

Ask for work if you feel your child can manage homework or online learning. Many schools will be reluctant to provide this, so explain that not continuing learning opportunities means that a pupil gets further behind which adds to anxieties around returning to school. Look for resources related to their interests to inspire them.

Alternative educational provision

Some children and young people will benefit from alternative provision through home tutors, online education, hospital school, or specialist units. When statutory guidance is followed and children are supported, they may eventually return to mainstream school, but they may need to continue long-term in specialist provision.

Elective Home Education

It may be that the current school is the wrong school environment for your child. Some parents decide to remove their children from school to home educate. This is a big decision and should be your choice. You should not be under pressure from school or your LEA to deregister, as you could find it harder to arrange the support your child is entitled to. Some children have found this helped them and some have returned to school and even university later on.

Work with professionals to create a child-led support plan

It's important to try to maintain good relationships between school, parents and children to help find out what is wrong and work together to find solutions. It is important that everyone works together as fully as possible to create an effective support plan.

Health professionals can advise schools on developing support plans that are flexible, child-led and sympathetic to the features of anxiety disorders. Plans must be communicated to all staff. Schools may need to arrange further relevant staff awareness and training.

Recovery can be a very slow process for many children and young people despite everyone's best efforts. Keeping any lines of communication open helps them feel they are still a part of the school community. If they are welcomed rather than criticised when they do attend the parts of school they can manage, they will feel more able to make small steps back into school.

Long term recovery needs a focus on support and encouragement for a child to enjoy other activities and friendships (not only those related to school). This will help rebuild their self-esteem, confidence and happiness, all of which are integral aspects of school refusal recovery.