



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.

A Child is Struggling to Come to School - What can we do?

Increasingly children and young people are reporting school-based anxiety in addition to other mental health and SEND difficulties. School refusal should not be viewed as simply a behavioural problem - research acknowledges that it is a highly complex, multi-dimensional difficulty, requiring an individualised approach which assesses the triggers, difficulties and needs of each child. Early intervention, with professionals and parents working together, is vital to minimise any impact on education and wellbeing. They need support with the complex factors which have led to their school anxiety and refusal.

Unfortunately, many parents currently report being blamed and pressured to improve attendance, without due regard to the severity of their child's difficulties. Many children are being described as 'fine in school', when in reality they are not fine, as they often mask or internalise their distress while in school.

We recognise that there are limited resources in schools, but many helpful actions including understanding, are cost free! The longer anxious children are unsupported the harder it will be for them to return to school. Continuing to describe anxious children as being 'fine in school' means they are less likely to be able to access the help they need to recover in order to attend regularly and achieve their potential.

Support Mental Health Issues in Children & Young People

Children suffer with mental health difficulties for a range of complex reasons. The Government recommends that schools develop a mental health policy that creates an environment where young people with anxiety feel supported, understood, and able to seek help, making it more likely they will feel safe and able to attend school.

Assess for SEND, Particularly if Anxiety is the Reason for Absence

Many children have an underlying Special Educational Need or Disability that contributes to their anxiety; this can include Autistic Spectrum Conditions, ADHD, Sensory Processing Disorder or Dyslexia. SEND also include Social, Emotional or Mental Health Difficulties, which could affect a child's ability to establish friendships, cope with a variety of strong emotions, and increase a child's vulnerability to bullying.

High levels of anxiety can be classed as a disability and are a barrier to learning requiring the use of assess-plan-do- review cycles. Children and young people will need a consistent, individual support plan which is shared with all staff. If children struggle to engage, they need patience and an experienced professional to help them access the right support.

Make a Referral for Assessment by an Educational Psychologist

In addition to the support put in place by the SENDCO, an Educational Psychologist can assess an anxious child and recommend appropriate interventions. This input can be useful as inability to attend school is often a symptom of a significant need or problem that requires more specialist knowledge and understanding.

Make or Support a Referral to CAMHS

Where severe problems occur, which are beyond the range of in-school mental health provision, schools should facilitate the child's access to more specialist support. The school nurse, or school directly can support or provide further evidence to expedite a referral. Parents can also ask for referrals through their GP or Paediatrician. Unfortunately long wait times for referrals can compound the problem, but support from schools goes a long way to ensuring the young people gain access to necessary treatment.

Explore your Local Authority's Local Offer

Schools can collaborate with other local services and providers to explore how individual needs can be met most effectively. The Local Offer can be an invaluable source of resources, information, advice and relevant support.

Let's work together to resolve school refusal

This information is based upon current legislation & statutory guidance:

Children & Families Act, 2014

Equality Act, 2010

Supporting pupils at school with medical conditions (DfE)

Education for children with health needs who cannot attend school (DfE)

Mental health and behaviour in schools: Departmental advice for school staff: March 2015 (DfE)

Special educational needs and disability: A guide for schools and alternative provision settings

SEND Code of Practice, 2015;

The Education Act, 1996

Technical Guidance for Schools in England (Equality & Human Rights Commission, 2013)

Anxiety UK - Young People and Anxiety

Royal College of Psychiatrists - Mental Health & Growing Up

Measuring and monitoring children and young people's mental wellbeing: A toolkit for schools and colleges (PHE, 2016)

Child Law Advice.

Collaborate to Create a Child-Led Support Plan

It is important that all professionals ensure that children and their parents participate as fully as possible in decisions leading to a 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, and combined with development of relevant staff training and whole-school awareness. Although this may be harder to achieve in a large secondary school than a small local primary, it is fundamental to success.

Apply for an EHCP Assessment

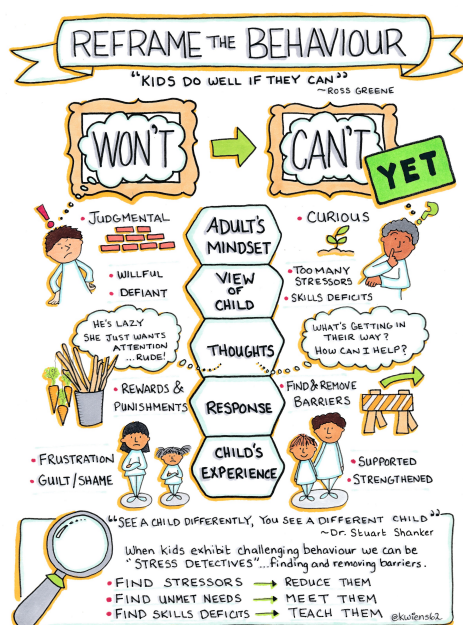
An EHCP application is crucial if a school does not have the expertise or funding to fully identify a child's needs, or to offer the provision or support a child requires to access an effective education. Parents can also apply to the LA for an EHCP assessment, but a joint approach will be the most beneficial way forward. There have been delays in processing EHCP applications nationally, so support during this process is invaluable.

Authorise Absence Due to Illness

Absence due to both physical and mental illness should be accurately recorded. The potential legal implications of unauthorised absences rarely help improve attendance, can add to the child's anxiety and substantially increase the difficulties families face. Attendance cannot take priority over health needs and families need your support rather than fines and prosecution.

Provide Homework & Connections While the Child or Young Person is Unable to Attend

Not supplying learning opportunities during absence means the student gets further behind, adding to anxieties around returning to school. A school's duty to educate does not stop because a student is absent due to experiencing traits of SEN (diagnosed or not). You should notify the LA if absence due to illness lasts for over 15 days (consecutive or cumulative). The LA have a duty to ensure that a child receives alternative educational provision whilst absent.



There can be many different reasons why a child may start to show signs of school refusal. It can happen gradually, or it can happen overnight. The reason can be obvious, or it can baffle both caregivers and school staff, but when a child is frightened adults must pay attention as their reactions can help or make things a whole lot worse.

The combination of guilt for the child, pressure from schools and heavy-handed threats of fines and prosecution does nothing to ease the strain on these families and is not evidence based practice. Relationships between caregivers and schools can start to break down as their priorities diverge at this point, when instead the focus needs to be on working together in the best interests of the child.

**The number one rule of getting a child to go back to school is:
DO NOT FORCE THEM**

Recovery can be a very slow process for many children and young people despite everyone's best efforts. Helping them feel connected, significant and welcomed may encourage that big step back into school.