



## **NOT FINE IN SCHOOL - School refusal and problems affecting school attendance.**

Parents are responsible for ensuring that their children get a full-time education that meets their needs, either through Home Education or by sending them to school. Those who choose the school option are then legally required to ensure they attend regularly, which has recently been interpreted as on-time and every day. Many parents do not agree with this definition as they value their family time and believe they have a right to decide what is best for their children and whole family, which might occasionally include taking term-time holidays, or other school days off for personal and family events.

Currently the government policy document on attendance explains:

Central to raising standards in education and ensuring all pupils can fulfil their potential is an assumption so widely understood that it is insufficiently stated – pupils need to attend school regularly to benefit from their education. Missing out on lessons leaves children vulnerable to falling behind. Children with poor attendance tend to achieve less in both primary and secondary school.

The Department for Education (2016) states their expectations are that:

Schools and local authorities should promote good attendance and reduce absence, including persistent absence. They should also ensure every pupil has access to full-time education to which they are entitled and act early to address patterns of absence.

Parents are expected to perform their legal duty by ensuring their children of compulsory school age who are registered at school attend regularly.

All pupils are expected to be punctual to their lessons.

That sounds reasonable, doesn't it? It seems fair that parents who have chosen to send their children to school to be educated must ensure their children actually attend regularly. Indeed, this is the case for the majority of children on roll at schools across the UK. Clearly, there is some disagreement over the definition of 'regularly', but

generally most pupils attend school and follow their school curriculum. - These children seem to be 'fine in school'.

However, an increasing number of children are not 'fine in school'. Some struggle to attend regularly, some struggle to attend at all. These children and young people are often referred to as 'school refusers', or 'school phobic'. They want to attend school, but for a variety of reasons they just can't. It doesn't help that many schools regularly insist upon describing these children as 'fine in school', but some may hide their difficulties, hold their emotions in until they get home, or simply refuse to go unless they feel well enough to cope.

It is difficult to count exactly how many children are affected as official records are not kept about attendance difficulties. However, a growing number of children and their families appear to be affected by this problem. Many parents feel they have no choice but to remove their children from the school roll; either for their child's welfare or to overcome legal issues surrounding attendance, meaning families are now having to home educate their children instead. There are 4000+ members of one Facebook group that supports 'school refusal families'. Home education groups are bursting at the seams with parents who have fought for their children to get the support they need, but eventually realised it just wasn't going to work out.

So, with the government promoting the importance of educating children, and parents and children wanting to attend school, what help is there for these children? Surprisingly there is not much help on offer. Currently, help ranges from a flat denial that the problem exists, to mental health service referrals or Local Authority medical needs tuition or a variety of legal or social service interventions, the most serious of which can result in attendance prosecution or child protection plans. In short, there is no national policy, guidance or standard approach to supporting these children and their families and therefore, the support and levels of successful return to education varies from school to school, and across counties and countries. One thing is certain though, there is a growing number of children who are not able to access an education and are therefore at risk of not achieving their full-potential.

In addition, recent reports have acknowledged the growing rates of mental health difficulties in children and young people; children who struggle to attend school must be counted within these figures as they become very distressed, to the point of being very mentally and/or physically unwell. Their families are also greatly affected in one way or another, often their experiences lead to other family members suffering with stress, depression and anxiety.

## **What causes children to be “not fine in school”?**

There are many reasons for not being able to attend school. These children are not refusing school as a result of poor parenting, or bad behaviour. It is not that they don't want to attend, instead, for a variety of reasons they cannot attend. A common theme does seem to be emerging through parents who use social media groups to discuss their experiences and support one another. It appears that the majority of these children have underlying health or emotional conditions and/or special educational needs which are not being acknowledged or adequately supported by schools. For example, it is estimated that at least half of all high-functioning autistic children and adolescents worldwide experience anxiety and school refusal.

Unfortunately, the children who are not 'fine in school' and their parents receive conflicting advice, which often does more harm than good, and adds to their difficulties at the time when they are in need of support. To try to resolve this, I am helping to set up a new organisation - 'Not Fine in School' [<http://notfineinschool.org.uk>] to bring together parents and professionals with personal experience of school refusal. We are dedicated to working in partnership to ensure that all children and their families are supported more effectively, to allow them to access suitable education and help.

## **School Refusal**

School refusal is linked to the following factors, either on their own or in combination:

- Health conditions - physical and mental health symptoms
- Social phobia, separation anxiety, or fear of leaving the security of the family and/or home
- Long NHS waiting times for mental and physical health appointments (for diagnoses and treatment)
- Unrecognised or unmet Special Educational Needs such as Autistic Spectrum Conditions and/or ADHD; with school staff not aware of diagnoses, or not trained to provide adequate support
- Sensory processing difficulties or sensory overload
- Difficulty with transitions either to a new class, new school, or primary to secondary transfers

- Trauma, illness or death of family member
- Parental relationship break down, difficult family relationships or living conditions
- Bullying by other pupils or even teachers
- Bad experiences at previous schools
- The school environment - noise levels, light levels, size of school, navigation around the school, interaction with older pupils
- Insufficient pastoral care and support
- Not feeling safe at school
- Stress and a resulting reduced immunity to childhood illnesses

- So, it is clear that school refusal is a complex issue, with links to health, educational, social and family factors.

Unfortunately, there are diminishing health and educational resources available. Add to that a climate where schools are measured by performance targets as they struggle to deliver a narrowing exam based curriculum. Most of these children don't immediately fit the criteria for Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP) and many schools are unwilling or unable to provide the support they need.

So, what is offered to support these children and their families - who are often unprepared for the disruption to family life, work and other family commitments, and the sheer exhaustion of supporting children unable to attend school? Remember these are not children who are choosing their responses. These are desperate children who are often in a very distressed state, and many demonstrate their distress in ways that would have to be experienced to be believed.

Obviously, the majority of these children and families need help. Most ask for help, but unfortunately help is a long-time coming, if it ever comes, and by then these children have been out of school for so long their education has been severely disrupted and their health and wellbeing has deteriorated even further. If they finally do get to meet any professionals, it becomes apparent that they are just as puzzled about how to offer support and treatment, and eventually they choose to discharge the child stating there is nothing they can offer.

Some children are offered short term support at school with reduced timetables and integration plans. Most children are referred to CAMHS for counselling, but unfortunately, they have up to 24 months waiting time for any form of intervention of treatment, and that is if they meet the criteria for support.

There is currently no national guidance or policy to acknowledge and support our children. A small number are accepted as being too ill to attend school and are allowed to access tuition for core subjects at home through the LA medical needs team. The very lucky few are offered places at therapeutic schools, usually following a long battle for funding. For many the help comes too late to be effective, but thankfully with support, time for healing and perseverance, some manage to pick up a more suitable education later, and overcome many of their difficulties.

What if we focused on what our children need rather than the 'sticking plaster' approach of patching them up then sending them back to the front line? What if schools could forget their attendance targets and were supported, and even measured by their ability to provide for children's wellbeing? Many schools are not healthy places for anyone. Attendance rewards add to this culture of going to school while ill, of not being allowed to take time to recover and be well.

Schools need preventative measures in place, and early intervention such as peer support for families. Families need help from the professionals they turn to, rather than criticism and unreasonable targets, and definitely not threats of prosecution and child protection orders. Would the majority of parents be reaching out for help and willing to try anything, if they didn't love and care for their children and want the best for them? Kindness and common sense seems to have disappeared from most organisational and professional practices. Yes, resources have dwindled, but surely if we all work together - health, education and parents and their children, we can use the resources we have and help all children to not only be 'fine in school', but to thrive in school, and be prepared for a happier, healthier adulthood.

### **School refusal or being 'not fine in school' signs and symptoms:**

- Complaints of feeling ill
- Panic attacks
- Selective mutism, silence
- Extreme distress, extreme crying, or wailing

- Uncontrollable shouting or swearing
- Extreme violence and destroying property
- Behaviour problems at school
- Self-harming
- Suicide attempts
- Disturbed sleep patterns
- Chronic fatigue, feeling burnt out
- Making themselves sick or involuntary sickness.
- Loss of appetite or comfort eating
- Fainting/dizziness
- Holding it all in at school, then meltdowns at home
- Depression
- Jumping out in front of moving vehicles on the way to school
- Hiding or running away
- Climbing onto roofs at home or school
- Refusal to leave their room or house
- Drug or alcohol abuse
- Refusal or inability to engage with professionals
- Withdrawal from family life or friendships

**Bearing in mind all of the above, here is a list of some professional advice actually given to school refusal families**

- 'S/he is fine in school'
- 'Just get her/him in'
- 'Have you tried a sticker/reward chart?'

- 'Tell them to pull themselves together or get on with it'
- 'Just tell them to go to school'
- 'If it was my child I wouldn't give them a choice'
- 'S/he will outgrow it'
- 'It's just a phase'
- 'Restrain them and force them into school'
- 'This is bad behaviour'
- 'There is nothing wrong with your child'
- 'Don't take him to specialists, that can cause childhood trauma'
- 'Take them in their pyjamas if they refuse to get dressed'
- 'Take away everything they enjoy'
- 'Remove their computer and devices'
- 'It's your parenting, you need to set firmer boundaries'
- 'It's just teenage behaviour'
- 'Don't let them be in charge'
- 'Punish them'
- 'Be firmer'
- 'My Children don't like getting up in the mornings either'
- 'Have you tried getting up 5 minutes earlier?'
- 'If you don't sort this out now s/he will still be living with you when s/he is 40!'
- 'Earn points for a big reward'
- 'Make things at home as miserable as you can so they want to go to school'
- 'Trust the school that they are fine when they get there'
- 'Shall I come and collect him and show you how to get him in?'

- 'They have learned this from you'
- 'You are projecting your own worries'
- 'Wait for CAMHS to help'
- 'Why haven't you medicated him/her?'
- 'Everyone else attends school all day every day so s/he should be able to'
- 'They need to face their phobias and fears, not run away from them'
- 'Don't believe them, they are just pushing your buttons to get what they want'
- 'They won't be able to pick and choose their hours and tasks when they have a job'
- 'All subjects are important so they can't drop any'
- 'Call the police'
- 'Threaten the child with social workers taking them away!'
- 'Tell the child their parents will be fined, prosecuted or even go to prison'
- 'We cannot authorise this absence as illness'
- 'We cannot authorise anxiety as a reason for absence'
- Lectures on the effects of missing education on exam results
- 'They can have a part-time timetable for a limited time'
- 'They are not allowed to have a part-time timetable'
- 'They can go to hospital school, or have home tuition'
- 'How about moving schools or home educating?'
- 'We insist you attend a parenting course'

Most of these suggestions are ridiculous if we consider the gravity of the problems. Who would tell a person who was physically ill and desperate for help that a sticker chart, or pulling themselves together would heal them? or that their parents will go to prison if they didn't get well?

It's unlikely that anything on the list would help with such a complex problem. Many parents have tried to follow much of the advice. Sadly, most of these opinions and suggestions have actually made their problems worse. Who would want to risk causing further harm? Ultimately who would risk adding to their child's problems? And ultimately who would risk being that parent who finds their child really couldn't cope and decided that suicide was the only way to make it all stop?

### **But what has worked, or is working for school refusal families?**

Some parents report having a good relationship with school, and their child's school understands the need to be flexible and supportive. Some have strategies and safe places, and people trained and willing to overcome the barriers that many children face at school. It is important to try to maintain good relationships between family and school. If a family asks for help, the school needs to assure them that they want to work in partnership to support the child.

Parents need to keep a record of all meetings, conversations, maybe even a diary to show what they have tried to do, and what did and didn't work. It is very common for schools to refuse to acknowledge their part in a child's decline into school refusal, to do so would be to admit failings. It is so much easier to blame the parents, or more often the mother (usually the person asking for help, and the person living day-to-day with the distress and disruption to their lives). Schools have fewer and fewer resources to support their most needy children, but instead of blaming each other, the greatest success will come with everyone working together.

With the right support, many children will manage to attend school again, once the major triggers and causal factors of the refusal are addressed and the necessary support plan is in place.

### **The following interventions have been found to help:**

- A key person the child trusts such as an experienced pastoral manager to coordinate their return and gradual reintroduction
- A reintroduction plan agreed by parents, child, school staff and other professionals involved, which is communicated to all members of staff, not just those who teach the child
- Someone the child can go to if they need support, and someone else as a back-

up if that person is unavailable

- Somewhere safe and comfortable to go when school feels too difficult
- A card to show to staff indicating the need to be allowed to leave a class with the least fuss
- Adjustments of the timings of the day, depending on the needs of the child - Arriving and leaving before the rush or leaving a lesson 5 minutes early to avoid crowded corridors
- A quiet place to eat lunch and have break times, with some friends if possible
- An acceptance of some lateness, due to morning struggles, but being allowed to begin the day on a positive note
- A reduced timetable with very gradual increases, perhaps with reduced subjects or flexibility, and allowing reductions again when necessary
- Removing the pressure of SATS, mocks and exams
- An alternative or adapted curriculum
- Support to catch up with subjects missed through absences
- Patience, kindness, empathy and mutual trust
- Mentors at home to support and praise with getting ready, having lessons at home, in a library, then at school
- Children need to know they can trust school to keep them safe, as many school refusers are vulnerable to bullying
- Willingness of school to allow a child to go home if they really need to, and not force them to remain
- Recognition of a child's strengths, and attempts to build on them by encouraging them to participate in the parts of school they enjoy

Schools that are willing to offer these interventions are less likely to have cases of school refusal in the first place. The culture of a school can make a huge difference, but sometimes because of the nature of these struggles and despite a school's best intentions, interventions are not offered because schools can only operate within the

existing system, with existing budgets and with existing skills. Therefore, further training and awareness, and changes to the system, or more access to alternative more suitable educational provision must be a priority to enable affected children to actually become and remain 'fine in school'.

Sadly, not enough children get the support they need, when they need it, and specialist help, therapy or provision is not available in every location. The longer it takes to receive help and treatment the harder it will be to return to school. Some children are able to access alternative provision via their school or a therapeutic setting. Some will be reintegrated into their mainstream school however, it is estimated that 1/3 to 1/2 of all school refusers will not be able to return to mainstream school.

It's important to remember that these school years are only a fragment of children's whole life and it is not worth seriously damaging their mental health for. There are other opportunities for learning, at different times and in different ways that might work out better. Parents should attempt to keep their child on roll if they can, as that should help them to access support, but they should be prepared to consider other options if a child needs them. Part-time timetables can work, with only very slow, child led increases. There are supportive online learning opportunities but these can be expensive, although there could be funding available to those unable to attend school. Many parents have taken the decision to home educate, and it has worked well. Others find that the problems don't instantly resolve by doing that, but with removal of the pressure to conform to full-time school education, children do access other education later on, with many going on to further and higher education. Ironically there seems to be more relevant support for children to access education in these settings.

Many children are able to follow a chosen career, a career that fits their needs and is successful. Interestingly most successful entrepreneurs have not followed the typical educational route to success, and many children have dreams of careers not requiring so many formal qualifications in so many subjects. Sometimes parents have to do whatever it takes to get their child through these years so that they can come out 'on the other side' ready for whatever the rest of their lives hold for them.

### **What more can parents do?**

School refusal parents supporting one another report the importance of understanding children, of listening to them and helping them. They unanimously agree that physically forcing or blackmailing children into school is a completely inappropriate approach. Of those who have tried it, most regret it, and have not found it helpful, but that it caused

more harm.

Instead of forcing children into school, parents emphasise the need to build trust between themselves and their child. Children need to feel safe, to feel secure, and they need to know someone is on their side as this builds resilience and healing. Parents need to trust their instincts and those of their child.

It is useful to consider what is it that feels wrong? Has there been a gradual build-up of a number of issues, or did something specific trigger the problem?

Explore the possibility that there are undiagnosed conditions such as Autism, High-functioning Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, ADHD or Dyslexia. Criteria for diagnoses are often updated, and a condition may be on a spectrum, but can still affect daily life, and especially school life.

Are there medical conditions that have previously been missed but could be affecting a child's ability to cope in school?

If a child already has a diagnosis are they getting the support they need? Are all staff aware of their needs? Do they need an EHCP? Will school apply, or does a parent need to request an EHCP assessment? Can a family wait for school to assess any difficulties? Could they arrange some private assessments or support from specialist charities? Waiting for NHS appointments especially CAMHS can take years and then not necessarily offer relevant treatment and support. The absence of any diagnoses however doesn't mean that a child is well enough to attend school.

Don't take away things that comfort and lift children. Limiting computer time works for some, but for many this is their safe place, where they can succeed and communicate with others. Categorically argue for children to continue with the parts of school they actually enjoy and feel they can succeed with, even if that is lunch time, PE, or other extra-curricular activities. Taking these away from anxious children is taking away a life line.

Actively encourage children to develop interests that will give them feelings of hope and happiness. Any moments spent out in the fresh air, moments of enjoyment, any opportunity to forget about their difficulties are part of a healing process. Some parents report that having pets at home can help some children, especially dogs and cats.

Remember that parents know their child better than any professional and their agenda for recovery is not target, policy, or budget led. Parents should trust themselves and not allow professionals to ignore their opinions. You often need to be 'your child's voice'.

Write down what they say, record what they say and share it with their permission. Yes, children need to learn skills to overcome their difficulties, but until there is adequate support in place, they often cannot cope with school. It isn't their fault and it isn't parents fault. Sometimes when you have tried and tried you need a break, and you have to keep as well as you can, and keep family life going. Parents should never underestimate the effects on the rest of the family, and they need to try to find ways to support everyone. Sometimes we have to do some surviving in the short term, whilst waiting for the long-term improvement. Often parents and other family members become very distressed, and also report a decline in their mental health, so it is important they seek help themselves too, as they need to be as well as they can be, to not get sucked into a cycle of stressed responses that perpetuate the difficulties.

Parents do need to research the relevant laws, read the government guidance documents on SEND, on attendance, on 'Children too ill to attend school' and on 'Supporting pupils with medical conditions'. Take copies of these documents to meetings to remind schools of their statutory duties and to remind them that they are allowed, even expected to make reasonable adjustments.

Keep records of all appointments, meetings, medical and professional advice, of each request for help to build a chronology of the difficulties and the attempts to resolve them, to demonstrate what works and what doesn't work. Take notes in meetings and email school with agreed points if they do not provide you with minutes. Ask for someone to attend with you for support. Ask for support and advice from SENDIASS, and if necessary legal advice from IPSEA or SOS SEN!

Don't be afraid of threats, and maybe even pre-empt consequences by contacting LA attendance or SEND departments and ask for their help.

Join support groups and reach out to others who are in a similar situation. It is important to share helpful information with professionals involved in your child's care. Support groups often have information you can download, there are bloggers who share experiences, anecdotal evidence and advice.

Ultimately, parents and families need to bring this problem to the attention of decision makers - the politicians, the heads of departments, those with responsibility for education and children's services, nationally and locally, and join with others who also share these difficulties so that we can campaign for, and actively promote the changes that our children need.

Meanwhile, recovery is a process - often with two steps forward, three steps back.

Sometimes there will be relapses, or blips, maybe as a response to something, perhaps illness, or a specific stress. Some strategies that have been known to help, might not continue to work. Whatever the stage, whatever the outcome, we have to do all we can to survive, to not let this define our children and hurt them more than they already hurt. Perhaps all we can do at times is hang on in there, with patience and a hope that things will be better, that somewhere there is a workable solution, one that can offer the support and skills to enable our children to engage in a suitable education.

In the meantime, be grateful to have a child who was strong enough to express that something was wrong, and who felt strong enough and safe enough to say 'no' to whatever it is they just couldn't cope with, and be proud of every success, no matter how small. Quite often the seemingly small achievements are in fact huge successes and pave the way to others and better times ahead.

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