

How to Help a Child Who Refuses to Go to School

Practical guidance for understanding what may be happening underneath behavior and helping families move forward.

School refusal can create tremendous stress for an entire family. Morning routines become battles. Parents worry about attendance. Children become increasingly distressed. Everyone can feel stuck.

The first question should not simply be, “How do we make this child go?” We also need to understand, “What is making school feel impossible right now?”

Look Underneath the Refusal

Possible contributors include anxiety, separation concerns, bullying or peer conflict, academic struggles, ADHD or executive-function challenges, learning differences, sensory overload, social difficulties, depression or other emotional concerns, fear of failure, or a difficult school experience.

School refusal is a behavior. Understanding its function helps determine the response.

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Keep Home Calm and Predictable

A child who remains home should not be punished for experiencing distress. At the same time, staying home should not become significantly more rewarding than attending school. Maintain a calm, predictable structure.

Build a Re-Entry Ladder

For some children, successful return may require gradual steps: drive to school, walk to the entrance, meet a trusted staff member, attend one class, attend half a day, and gradually increase participation.

The specific plan should be individualized and coordinated with the child’s school and appropriate professionals.

Seek Additional Support

Persistent school refusal deserves attention, particularly when anxiety, depression, bullying, safety concerns, trauma, or significant impairment may be involved. Collaboration among caregivers, school personnel, and qualified healthcare or mental-health professionals can help identify what is driving the avoidance and determine an appropriate plan.

ETHOS SHORELINE REFLECTION



What part of the school day feels most difficult to my child, and what is the smallest realistic step toward re-engagement?

Related Ethos Shoreline pathway: [Finding Our Way Back™](#)

A Note for Parents

Behavior makes more sense when we understand what is happening underneath it. Ethos Shoreline resources are designed to help families build practical structure while protecting connection, responsibility, and belonging.

Educational Disclaimer: This resource is for general educational purposes and is not a substitute for individualized mental-health, medical, educational, or emergency services. Consider consulting an appropriately qualified professional when concerns are persistent, worsening, affecting daily functioning, or creating safety concerns.

