ABOUT
SCHOOL REFUSAL

School refusal is where a learner refuses to attend school or preschool for a specific reason (usually driven by anxiety) or becomes anxious about attending school or preschool. School refusal doesn't have an official diagnosis and is different from truancy because the learner is not trying to hide the absence from their parents, caregivers or school.

Not attending school affects learning and achievement, social and emotional development, mental health and future careers. If a pattern of regular non-attendance is not addressed early, it will often become consistent throughout the learner's life.

What school refusal looks like

The learner may:

- complain of headaches or stomach aches
- have arguments on the way to school and attempt to stay with parents at drop off
- feel stressed regularly throughout the day and experience dysregulation
- constantly contact parents or carers throughout the day
- not contribute to class learning and activities, and attempt to be invisible
- dread school so requests to stay home, or complains on Sunday evening or in the mornings of school
- want their work to be perfect and stress about evaluation
- avoid attending class, school excursions or events.

These early signs can increase to school refusal and may be observed in learners who:

- have poor attendance
- leave class to stay out of school and not attend
- refuse to leave the classroom at break times or have periodic or repeated absences or skip classes
- have a complete absence of school during a certain period of time
- have a complete absence of school for an extended period of time.

Risk factors and triggers

Presence of an anxiety disorder, school transitions and increased expectations such as:

- increase in homework or lessons
- classroom changes, bullying and threats
- upcoming exam or verbal presentation
- prolonged absence from illness
- death or illness in parent or caregiver
- family conflict
- family transitions
- traumatic personal or family experiences
- traumatic community experiences portrayed in the media which may include COVID-19.

Government of South Australia

Department for Education

SCHOOL REFUSAL
ADJUSTMENTS

EXAMPLES OF ADJUSTMENTS

Work with parents or carers

- You can negotiate a structured morning routine at home that includes getting the learner ready for school using consistent language and timetables. Always use a calm, respectful tone during interactions.
- Guide parents in giving short encouraging feedback and not engaging in a back-and-forth conversation.
- Encourage parents to be outcome focussed with their instructions and not to use emotive language.
- Collaborate with parents to use the same language to help with transferring skills at home.
- Make contact with the learner personally (over the phone or in person) to support re-engagement and a sense of belonging in the learning area.
- Deliver engaging curriculum that is based on the learner's interests and delivered in multiple modes.

If the learner is refusing school to avoid assessment or social situations

- The current level of attendance is the starting point, and the aim is to gradually increase attendance by gradually increasing the time expected at school.
- Allow the learner to help set goals and expectations where possible.
- The learner will need self-regulation skills and strategies to support their return to school.
- Get the learner to use other ways to communicate that are easier than speaking directly, such as indicating breaks or asking for support with a hand signal.

If the learner is refusing school to seek connection from an adult or reinforcement when they avoid school

- Try to address what they are seeking, and then have the learner return to full attendance as soon as possible.
- Work with parents or carers and encourage them to set an appropriate time aside to have that connection in a positive and constructive manner.
- If the school refusal is related to positive reinforcement away from school, work with parents or carers to restrict access to that particular reinforcement. This could mean restricting access to a gaming console, internet or reducing interactions with others.
- Use positive reinforcement for motivation of desired effort such as star charts with reinforcements and milestones that are agreed before starting.
- By giving the learner attention, you could be reinforcing the behaviour.