

Your Guide To *School Refusal*

It is the start of the new school semester, and you notice your child becomes angry, irritable, and sometimes nervous or fearful when you talk about school. He/she cries and fusses, complains he/she is unwell (e.g. headache, stomachache, nausea) and struggles to get out of bed. On the way to school, he/she screams, cries and clings to you tightly. You struggle to understand and manage your child's behaviour.

Alison Cheng and **Hafizah Wahianuar**, Psychologists at the Child Development Unit, National University Hospital share insights on what school refusal is and how to cope with it.



What is school refusal?

School refusal describes a child's refusal to attend school or difficulty staying in school for the full day, for a significant period of time. It is usually associated with a variety of anxiety-based reasons. This is not to be mistaken for truancy, where a child frequently engages in unexcused absenteeism without parental knowledge and permission.

What causes school refusal?

- Separation anxiety: Child misses caregivers and/or is afraid of being apart from them
- Fear of teacher
- Conflicts with peers (e.g. bullying)
- Performance-related anxiety: Child faces difficulties with presentations, tests, examinations or work tasks, which results in anxiety. It is worth noting that his/her struggle with school tasks could be due to developmental delays or learning difficulties.
- Highly preferred activities outside of school (e.g. watching TV at home)
- Changes in the family



Strategies

1

Focus on the positive

Have daily reflection exercises with your child. Ask him/her to recall a few good things that happened in school (e.g. "I had fun when...").

2

Reward system

Encourage your child to attend school by giving tangible (e.g. toy) and/or intangible (e.g. play time) rewards. Pair with generous praise.

3

Calming down

Teach your child calming exercises when they start to feel anxious. Try belly breathing, positive self-talk or taking breaks.

4

Manage conflicts

Teach your child what to do when he/she has conflicts with peers - e.g. disengage by ignoring or walking away, walk away, telling peer to stop or informing an adult (i.e. teacher).



5

Fulfil requests

Build up your child's confidence, feelings of security and sense of control by fulfilling some of his/her simple requests on a school day such as having a favourite breakfast.

6

Tune in - Find out your child's desires and fears

Get in touch with the child's teacher to learn more about his/her behaviour and progress in school.

Find out your child's desires and fears by chatting, drawing, or allowing them to use dolls to act out their responses. Be creative!

7

Preparing for school together

Help your child familiarise with school by visiting or walking past it before the actual start of school. Talk about things that your child may look forward to or previously enjoyed in school. Pack your child's school bag together. Allow him/her to choose the snack or stationery that he/she wants to bring.

8

Explore and label emotions

Normalise feelings (i.e., everyone feels that way sometimes). Provide examples of instances where you felt specific emotions. Ask your child to try to describe a particular time that he/she had felt those emotions too. Talk about how to overcome those emotions.

When should I seek professional help?



- 1) If your child continues to have difficulties or refuses to go to school despite trying strategies #1 to #8.
- 2) If your child experiences difficulty attending school for at least 2 weeks.
- 3) If your child has missed at least 25% of school for 2 weeks or more.
- 4) If your child's school refusal causes significant interference to either his/her own routines or other family members' routines.

For information on NUH Child Development Unit, visit: <https://www.nuh.com/nuhkids-cdu>

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Information is correct at time of printing (July 2020) and subject to revision without prior notice.