Between Families Newsletter 2023

School Refusal: How to help kids cope

By Amanda Morin

[How to Manage School Refusal (understood.org)](https://www.understood.org/articles/school-refusal-how-to-help-child)

When kids flat-out refuse to go to school, it can be stressful for parents and teachers alike. You may wonder: Why are they acting out like this? What if they’re never willing to go back to school?

Different kids resist or refuse school in different ways. Here are tips for parents, caregivers, and educators to manage school refusal, based on what you’re seeing.

**Has crying episodes or tantrums about school**

Acknowledge that the feelings behind the tantrum are real. Suggest that you talk about ways to make things better — when they’re calmer.

Be clear that even though you’re supportive and will help problem-solve, not going to school isn’t an option.

**What you can say:** “I know there’s something about school that worries you. When you’re able to speak calmly, then we can talk about what that is. I’d like to try to help you find a way to make it easier to go to school.”

**Has meltdowns about school**

Be patient and make it clear that the child is safe and you’re there to help. Kids aren’t in control of meltdowns, so there’s nothing more you can do when they’re happening. When the meltdown lets up, use short and concrete sentences to manage the moment.

**What you can say:** “That was a big reaction. Let’s figure out if you need a break before we talk about school.” Have that conversation at a quiet time when everyone is calm.

Moving forward, you can help the child build coping skills and find more appropriate ways to communicate being overwhelmed.

**Gets stuck on “what if” scenarios**

Respond with as much empathy as you can. Getting stuck on negative thoughts can be a response to feeling overwhelmed, anxious, and powerless. It’s important to try to reduce the anxiety enough to talk about what the child is stuck on.

Then, talk about the difference between “what *if*” and “what*is*.” For example, a child might say, “What if the kids who are mean to me are in my class?” You can respond with, “What we do know is that your friend Jonathan is in your class.”

**Won’t get dressed in the morning**

For families, school refusal usually starts first thing in the morning. Some kids may refuse to get dressed for school.

Going to school isn’t optional. But going in pajamas might be. If this is your child’s form of refusal, decide whether it’s more important for your child to participate in school or to get dressed. You may need to send your child to school in pajamas.

Drop the teacher a quick email or phone call to explain why your child isn’t dressed for school. And explain to your child that you can’t control what classmates will say about what your child is wearing.

**Won’t get on the bus or in the car**

At this point, a child’s refusal might be getting in the way of a parent or caregiver’s own schedule and ability to start work. Try not to engage at that very moment.

**What you can say:**“I see you’re really struggling today. Let’s plan on talking later, but I’m not going to spend time arguing with you about it now while you’re so upset.”

Later, ask your child to try to explain what the concern is. If you can’t come up with a quick fix, work on finding a longer-term strategy. (Your child’s teacher may be able to help with that.) You can even make a behavior contract that lists rewards for getting to school calmly and consequences for making it an issue.

**Says “You can’t make me”**

If kids refuse to do schoolwork or go to school and say, “You can’t make me,” acknowledge that it’s true.

**What parents can say:** “You’re right. I can’t force you. I also can’t control how your teacher chooses to deal with makeup work or grades.”

Then, offer to have an honest and calm conversation about why they’re refusing to do the work or go to school. Make it clear you want to understand what’s going on and help fix the problem.

**Begs to go home**

After kids are dropped off at school, they may beg to go home. This can be tough on teachers.

Try to figure out what they're worried about. Some kids are afraid bad things will happen to their families while they’re at school. If this is the case, talk with your child before drop-off. Let them know you’re safe, and share your plans for the day.

You can also consider letting kids text or call home at certain times of the day to check in. For younger kids, having a picture of their family or a small comfort object on hand can help, too.

When kids do make it through, even if it’s just part of the class, praise the effort. Use words that show you know how big an accomplishment this is.

**What you can say:** “I know how hard this was for you. You must be proud of yourself for trying!”

**Skips class**

Skipping school is the tipping point for kids. They’re not involving the adults in their lives — their anxiety is so overwhelming that they’ve decided to just not go. Take both the behavior and the child’s fears and worries seriously.

Families, teachers, and the school counselor can talk about developing a 504 plan with accommodations for anxiety. The child may need to work on going to school a little at a time.

School refusal isn’t something families should have to handle on their own. Parents or caregivers can explain what they’re seeing at home. Educators can share what they’ve noticed at school. Together the group can create a plan to get the child back to school.

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How to Manage School Refusal

PLEASE COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONNAIRE FOR ½ CREDIT

1. What are 3 ways that a child shows that they are refusing school?
   1. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
   2. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
   3. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
2. Getting stuck on \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ can be a response to feeling overwhelmed, anxious, and powerless.
3. If the child will not get on the bus or in the car, you should:
   1. Force them to get in your car
   2. Respond quickly with a consequence if they do not get in the car
   3. Try not to engage
   4. Walk them to the bus and make sure they get on
4. If kids refuse to do schoolwork or go to school and say, “You can’t make me,” acknowledge that it’s true.
   1. True
   2. False
5. If a child is skipping school, families, teachers, and the school counselor can talk about developing a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ with accommodations for anxiety.
6. Children are in control of their meltdowns.
   1. True
   2. False
7. If a child begs to go home when being dropped off at school, which of these is NOT a solution?
   1. Allow them to go home and stay with you
   2. Try to talk with them and figure out what they are concerned about
   3. Let them know your plans for the day
   4. Praise them when they do make it through the school day
8. Be clear that even though you’re supportive and will help problem-solve, not going to school isn’t an option.
   1. True
   2. False
9. If a child is refusing to get dressed in the morning you should:
   1. Send them to school in their pajamas
   2. Allow them to stay in bed all day
   3. Force them to get dressed
   4. Have them get dressed on the way to school
10. A child might say, “What if the kids who are mean to me are in my class?” You can respond with, “What we do know is that your \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ is in your class.”

Answers are in Red

1. What are 3 ways that a child shows that they are refusing school?
   1. Gets stuck on “what if” scenarios
   2. Has a temper tantrum about school
   3. Refuses to get in the car
2. Getting stuck on “what if” scenarios can be a response to feeling overwhelmed, anxious, and powerless.
3. If the child will not get on the bus or in the car, you should:
   1. Force them to get in your car
   2. Respond quickly with a consequence if they do not get in the car
   3. Try not to engage
   4. Walk them to the bus and make sure they get on
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   1. True
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