

# What is School Refusal?

School refusal is when a student refuses to attend school or struggles to remain at school for the whole day, for an ongoing period of time. School refusal can have significant impacts on a student's learning, development, social skills and mental health.

## School refusal and truancy - what's the difference?

Truancy is when a student "skips" school without permission, and for no particular reason - the student may lie about their whereabouts, and the parents will not be aware/permissive of their absenteeism. Students who skip school will often brag about their non-attendance to other peers.

In contrast, a student who is expressing school refusal behaviours will often show signs of anxiety, fear or distress, and will often be embarrassed about their inability to attend school. The student will stay home or leave school with the parent's knowledge, despite their efforts to enforce the child/teenager's attendance.

## How can I tell if a student is experiencing school refusal?

If the student is displaying a combination of signs from the "Attendance" and "Mood" symptoms overleaf, for more than a period of one week, it is likely that the student is either experiencing school refusal or may be at risk of school refusal. The student may also be displaying signs from the "Social" and "Avoidance" checklist items, but these symptoms alone are not clear signs that school refusal may be an issue.

## What causes school refusal?

School refusal can be caused by a variety of issues, such as a stressful life event or period of transition, or issues/concerns about something that has happened at school or home. Some examples are:

- Anxiety
- Bullying
- Family breakdown
- Family violence
- Fear of an event
- Illness (student or family member)
- Moving house
- Moving school
- Parental conflict
- Transitioning to secondary school

## What do I do if I think a child or teenager is experiencing school refusal?

For parents or guardians, it is recommended that you talk about your concerns with your child's school. For teachers we recommend speaking with the student wellbeing leader and the child's parents. Together you may be able to form a better understanding of why the student is reluctant or refusing to attend school.

The student can then be approached to by a trusted person, to gain an understanding of how they're feeling and what their worries or stresses are. From here, the parents, teachers and student can work together to develop supports to get them back to school without distress, but sometimes the student may be too embarrassed to admit their feelings and thoughts.

If the issue isn't clear or the student is still showing school refusal symptoms, it is time to seek professional help. CatholicCare's school refusal counsellors can work with the student, the family and if necessary the school, to identify issues, reassure the student and coach the parents with helpful tips and methods of support.

# Have you noticed a child who is reluctant to attend school?

## The best solution is prevention.

Below is a checklist of symptoms to assist you in recognising early signs and causes for school refusal. If a student is displaying a combination of the "Attendance" and "Mood" symptoms below, for more than a period of one week, this may be a sign that they are in need of support.

We recommend talking to the student's parents/guardians and their school about any issues you have identified.

If together you determine the need for professional School Refusal counselling support, call CatholicCare Victoria on 03 8710 9600 (Dandenong) or 1800 522 076 (Gippsland)

### Attendance

- Late to school
- Difficulty separating from parents in morning
- Asking to go home/sick bay because of feeling sick
  - Does this occur at particular times of day?
  - Or during particular subjects/tasks?
  - Do they show symptoms of being sick (eg: complaints of stomach aches, headaches, lack of sleep, etc)?
- Frequent absence from school
- Unwillingness to return to school after weekend, holidays or illness
- Not attending school

### Mood

- Sad or unhappy
- Low energy
- Nervous/anxious/fearful
- Upset/annoyed/acting up to gain attention
- Asking to see/speak to a family member during the school day
- Worried about parents

### Social

- No friends
- Appears to be bullied
- Conflict with friends/peers
- Difficulty meeting up or finding friends at play time
- Difficulty working with other children during class time

### Avoidance

- Class participation – afraid of/reluctance to participate in particular subjects, classes or activities
- Afraid of something in the school building (eg: fire alarm, particular room, toilets, etc)
- Afraid of a Teacher or other staff at school