

✦ SCHOOL REFUSAL ✦

When getting to school is an everyday battle

crying | screaming | physical complaints | mood changes | uncooperative

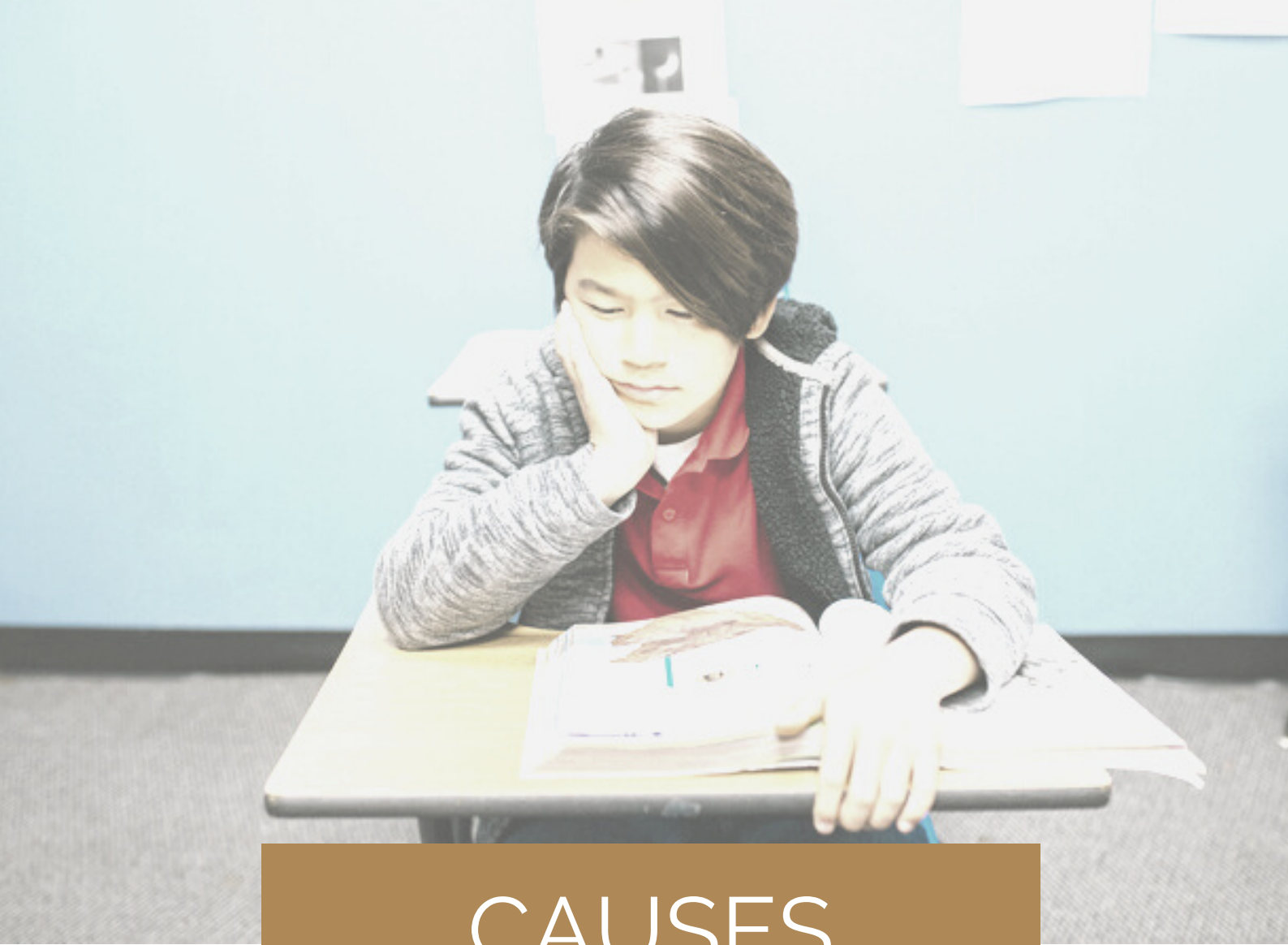


DEFINING IT

WHAT IS SCHOOL REFUSAL?

School refusal is a term that is used to refer to ongoing high levels of distress and reluctance about going to school leading to attendance issues and prolonged absences. Children may say that they feel sick and complain of symptoms such as headache, sore stomach, nausea or tiredness. Parents often also note behavioural symptoms including tantrums, crying, avoidance or defiance.

School refusal is challenging and distressing for the whole family, and it quickly becomes a power struggle fuelled by frustration and intense emotions. It is important to understand the needs of your child and the challenges that they are experiencing at school to work towards resolving the situation. It is often beneficial to seek support from a psychologist to identify the factors that are triggering and maintaining school refusal behaviour and appropriate coping strategies.



CAUSES

WHAT IS CAUSING THE BEHAVIOUR?

The most important thing to do if your child refuses to go to school is to identify the underlying problem and consider what is the function of the behaviour? There are many reasons that children may engage in school refusal and avoidance behaviours. Here are some of the common causes for school refusal:

- **Anxiety:** Children who have trouble coping with anxiety. This includes separation anxiety (usually in younger children) and anxiety about tests, peers, and even about what's happening at home.
- **Bullying:** Children who experience bullying or who have difficulty managing social interactions.
- **Academics:** Children who struggle academically, who are bored, who find the workload overbearing, who don't see value in their lesson content or for whom schoolwork has become a very negative experience.
- **Behaviour:** Children who have difficulty regulating their behaviour or who have difficulty following the structure of school or school-based rules and directives.





ANXIETY

AVOIDANCE INCREASES ANXIETY

School refusal is an avoidance behaviour and avoidance is a way of coping. When children actively avoid school by refusing to go it increases their apprehension and anxiety about school and strengthens their inner dialogue that they can't cope with school or something bad will happen. When we consider what need is being met by avoiding school, it is usually the need to feel safe as they perceive the school environment to be threatening.

Anxiety is more than just feeling stressed or worried. While stress and anxious feelings are a common response to a situation where we feel under pressure, they usually pass once the stressful situation has passed, or 'stressor' is removed.

Everyone feels anxious from time to time. When children's anxious feelings don't go away, or make it hard to cope with daily life it may be the sign of an anxiety condition. There are many ways to help manage anxiety and the sooner parents get support for their child with anxiety the faster children will re-engage in school.



STRATEGIES

HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILD?

Children who are engaging in school refusal behaviours desperately need the understanding and support of their parents. It is important to understand that school refusal behaviour is a child's way of responding to an underlying fear. It is their way of communicating that they perceive the school environment as threatening. Having this understanding adjusts our response to our children and facilitates a more empathetic and compassionate approach.

Helpful strategies for parents include:

- Identifying early warning signs (look for changes in behaviour and mood fluctuations)
- Maintain regular and open communication with your child's teacher
- Make talking about school experiences a normal daily practice
- Actively listen when your child shares with you
- Ensure your child understands the routines and rules of school
- Check in with your child about their perception of their relationship with their teacher
- Develop a morning routine and uphold expectations about going to school
- Review with a psychologist for professional guidance