

# Supporting your Child's Attendance

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# What are we talking about?

Why is this important?

What's behind the absenteeism?

How to help

Resources

# Why is this important?

- Missing 2 days a month is 10% of the year
  - 260 days from Kindy-gr 12
  - 180 days in a school year
- Short-term & long-term impact
  - Declining grades
  - Alienation from friends
  - Family disruption
  - Anxiety/Depression
  - Occupational problems

**Don't wait  
to act!**

The sooner, we intervene, the better!!

Reach out to the school as soon as you notice that your child is struggling.

The longer they miss, the more difficult it is to get them to return.

# There's a spectrum



Attends school regularly with distress	Misses full school days or partial school days frequently	Regularly misses full or partial school days	Misses multiple full days or weeks of school at a time	Hasn't been at school for months or more
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# What's Behind the Struggle?

## Anxiety

- Social anxiety
- Separation anxiety
- OCD
- General anxiety
- Panic disorder

## Learning Difficulties

- Processing speed
- Dyscalculia/Dyslexia
- Executive Functioning deficits
- Working memory deficits

## Other causes

- Trauma
- ADHD
- Peer challenges
- Feeling unsafe
- Injury/illness
- Parent injury/illness (witnessing DV)
- Death of a loved one

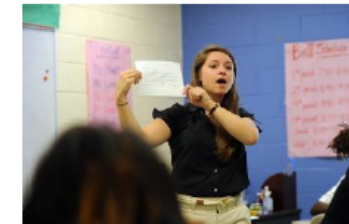
# The 4 Functional Conditions of School Refusal

These two functions serve as **negative reinforcement** (*to get away from something negative at school*) and are typically associated with underlying anxieties in a child. Children often refuse school for both reasons:

## 1. Avoidance of school-based stimuli (objects or people) that provoke negative emotions

### *Examples:*

- *A specific teacher*
- *A specific setting (hallway, classroom)*
- *Peers/class*



## 2. Avoidance of social or evaluative situations

### *Examples:*

- *Challenging peer interactions*
- *Tests*
- *Presentations*



# The 4 Functional Conditions of School Refusal

These two functions serve as **positive reinforcement**:

## 3. Gaining parent/caregiver attention

### *Examples:*

- *A child who wants to stay close to parent*
- *Wanting extra attention*



## 4. Gaining access to tangible rewards at home

### *Examples:*

- *Hanging out with friends*
- *Video games*





# What is anxiety?

- Makes us have worried thoughts?
- Makes us have distressing emotions
- Gives us uncomfortable physical symptoms
- Makes us want to AVOID

It's normal & necessary human experiences  
Uncomfortable but not harmful

## The more obvious symptoms look like....

### **Elementary-aged children:**

- Refusal to physically go into school
- Running away from school/home
- Verbalized worries about school
- Tantrums
- Homework avoidance
- Trouble separating

### **Older children:**

- Refusal to complete morning routine
- Negative talk about school
- Procrastination and/or avoidance of homework
- Leaving school early
- Skipping class

## The less obvious symptoms look like....

### Elementary-aged children:

- Sleep struggles
- Physiological symptoms at night or morning (*headaches, stomach aches, nausea, vomiting*)
- Teacher reports of behavior changes in school
- Sad overall mood
- Increased general worries

### Older children:

- Sleep struggles
- School defiance
- Anger/irritability towards family
- Frequent calls home
- Frequent complaints of physical ailments
- Panic attacks
- Increase in self-consciousness of appearance/performance

# Step 1: Take Stock of Your Child's Life

What areas is my child doing well in? (sleep, physical activity, friendships, academics). Is my child struggling in any of these areas?

How often is my child getting to school?

What is/was going on around the time that it was harder for them to get to school?

How distressed am I/is my child when it's time to go to school?

What am I/my child doing when they are not at school?

Who is on my and my child's team (school staff, friends/family, mental health professional, doctor)

# Your Team

- Family, friends, neighbours, other parents
- Parent support groups
- After school care staff
- Teachers, coaches, tutors
- Healthcare professionals
- Spiritual leaders



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## Step 2: Setting the Stage

- What areas can I address in advance to set my child up for success?
  - Sleep
  - Physical activity
  - Screen use
  - Anxiety-management tips





# Sleep

- When is your child starting their bedtime routine, falling asleep, waking up?
- Are they sleeping through the night?
- Strategies to support healthy sleep:
  - Cool, dark, and quiet space
  - Bed only for sleeping (not play time or homework)
  - Avoid stimulation before bed (intense physical activity, screen time)
  - Consistent sleep and wake times (within 30-60 minutes) on weekends

# Physical Activity

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Elevates mood

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Decreases anxiety

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Elevates energy

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Helps kids to regulate their bodies

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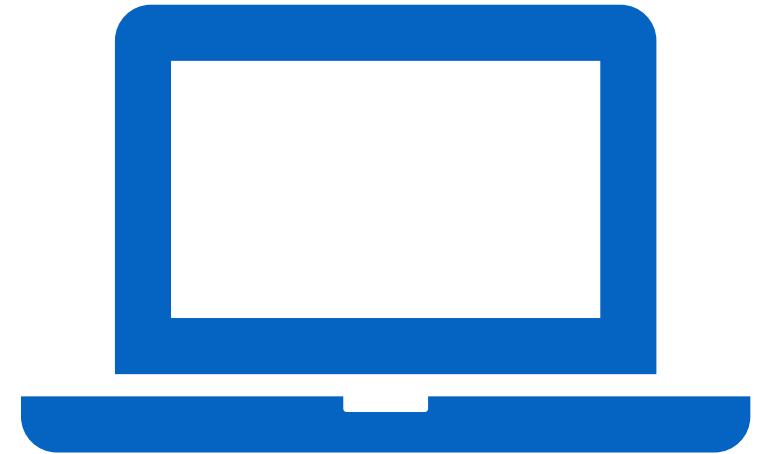
Recommended: 1 hour/day of running, biking, playing etc.





# Screen Use

- **First, understand your child's usage:**
  - How much time is your child on screens (TV, computer, phone, ipad, gaming device) each day?
  - How are they using screens (school, play, social media)
  - Do you have family guidelines about screen use (amount and type)
- **If usage is problematic, develop a plan to help**
  - Setting limits
  - Set 'no tech' times
  - Develop a tech contract
  - Model healthy usage



# Anxiety-Management Tips

Gentle encouragement for facing fears in small steps. Practice!



Rewards for following the plan (stickers, special activity etc)



Praise and positive reinforcement for “successes”



“Ignore” mild anxious behaviours



Regular and predictable routines, structure, and consistent responses.

# Step 3: Talk to your Child's School

- Reach out as soon as you identify a problem
  - Personnel involved could include teachers, support staff, FSLC, admin
  - Information is helpful to the school to provide appropriate context and supports
  - the SBT will consider learning complexities, social, emotional and behaviour supports and challenges that might be impacting their school experience
  - Complete the School Refusal Scale with support from FSLC to determine the function. (avoiding things at school or being reinforced at home)
  - Recommendations might include assessments, counselling, or outside referrals
    - Counselling
    - Pediatrician
    - Agencies that offer family supports (Mcman etc)

## Step 4: Make a Plan

- Coordinate with the school on a plan to slowly increase your child's time at school
- Tailor the plan to the child's specific strengths and stretches. Collaborate!!
- Identify areas of school that your child is motivated to attend (gym, art, their peers)
- Initial goals could include:
  - Visit outside of the school
  - See a friend during recess
  - Connect with a trusted staff member
  - Join class for 30 minutes

# What if I Can't Get my Child to Attend?

Home environment should not be fun during school hours

- No access to electronics, treats, special privileges, extra attention
- They should be expected to complete school-work (Google classroom)

Do not get caught reinforcing:

- Work from home
- Share a hot lunch
- Watch TV
- Playing with toys

Bring them even if they are late

Try again tomorrow!

# What to say:

## Validate and Communicate Confidence

- I know how difficult this is for you, AND I know that you can do it. Let's walk to the car together.
- I can see you're really trying – I'm so proud of you for getting your backpack ready

# Attention-Seeking Behaviours

In many cases, what the parent is saying doesn't matter, because at least the child is getting attention.

Avoid getting into any debates/discussions/pleadings

Make simple, repetitive, direct, short demands

Ignore inappropriate behaviour (avert eye contact, don't respond, attend to other activities)

"If you are not throwing up, have a fever, or broke a bone, you're going to school"

# Additional Tips: Get Involved

1

Let your child know that attending school is important

2

Help them develop a positive view of school

3

Become involved with their school activities

- Read the newsletter and attend fun events
- Attend parent/teacher conferences
- Volunteer

4

Take interest in their school-work/assignments



# Additional Tips: Establish a Routine

- Give your child enough time in the morning to get ready. Wake up earlier if needed.
- Plan ahead the night before:
  - Pick out clothes
  - Pack lunch (one they are excited about)
  - Have homework in backpack
- Shower/bath at night
- Follow a bedtime routine



# Self-Care!

- You can't pour from an empty cup!
- Engage in self-care regularly
- This helps model mental health for your child



# Videos for Parents/Educators

- [Part 1: Challenges with School Attendance: Introduction for Parents and Caregivers](#)
- [Part 2A: Strategies to Support Elementary School-aged Children with School Attendance: For Parents & Caregivers](#)
- [Part 2B: Practical Strategies to Support High School-aged Youth with School Attendance: For Parents & Caregivers](#)

# Resources/References

- <https://www.attendanceworks.org/>
- <https://schoolphobia.ymhc.ngo/>
- <https://www.anxietycanada.com/articles/school-refusal/>
- Alberta Health Services
- ADDitude
- Professional Development Resources: School Refusal Behaviour: Children who Can't or Won't go to School
- <https://schoolavoidance.org/>