



Most school-anxious/school refusing children do WANT to attend school however their difficulties and anxiety are overwhelming. They care about their education and want to succeed, however they need understanding and support at home and at school. They may need adjustments to their daily routines, timetables, or even their school environment. Pressures to focus on attendance rather than the child's needs can make things even harder to fix.

## My Child is Struggling to Go to School - What can I do?

Unfortunately there are many children and young people struggling with school-based anxiety and other mental health and SEND difficulties that can lead to school attendance difficulties.

Such difficulties shouldn't be viewed as a behavioural or parenting problem as they are much more complicated than that. There are many different things that can trigger anxiety and attendance difficulties including bullying, academic pressure and sensorial issues in the school environment.

### Fine or Not Fine?

Sometimes schools are aware of the difficulties children face, but unfortunately many parents report their child is described as 'fine in school', even if they are not in reality.

It is common for children to mask or hold in their distress until they get home from school. This leads to misunderstandings and differences in opinion between home and school.

Government good practice guidance acknowledges the importance of professionals working in partnership with parents and listening to the voices of children & young people.

### Relevant Government Documents:

- ✦ Children & Families Act, 2014
- ✦ The Equality Act, (2010)
- ✦ Supporting pupils at school with medical conditions (DfE)
- ✦ Education for children with health needs who cannot attend school (DfE)
- ✦ SEND Code of Practice (2015)

**Believe your child's distress is real, listen to what they say and trust your instincts as a parent**

### Request Help

Schools should offer mental health support, counselling, and access to a School Nurse, they can also ask an Educational Psychologist to make an assessment of your child's difficulties. You should also speak to your child's GP and ask for a referral to a Paediatrician or CAMHS.

### Ask the School to Assess Your Child for any Relevant SEND

An underlying Special Educational Need or Disability often contributes to anxiety levels; this can include Autistic Spectrum Conditions, ADHD, Sensory Processing Disorder or Dyslexia. Undiagnosed or unsupported these can make school a difficult place to be and can contribute to mental and physical health deterioration.

### SEND includes Social, Emotional or Mental Health Difficulties

which can affect a child's ability to establish friendships, cope with strong emotions, and increase vulnerability to bullying. These are all barriers to learning requiring the use of SEND assess-plan-do-review cycles and possibly an EHCP. Severe anxiety is also classed as a disability and therefore protected by the Equality Act 2010.

### Apply for an EHCP Assessment

Some children will need an Education and Health Care Plan if a school does not have the expertise or funding to fully meet their needs, or offer the provision they require to access an education. SENCOs or parents can apply to the LA for an EHCP assessment.

**Contact SENDIASS, IPSEA or SOS SEN** or other sources of advice about SEND and educational provision. Some offer local advice and support, and can often attend meetings with you at school.

### If Bullying or Sexual Assault (by peers) are Factors Preventing

**Attendance** There are legal duties on schools and LAs to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, including preventing bullying and assault.

**Read your school's policies and government statutory guidance for SEN, Disability, Mental Health, Bullying, & Attendance**

**- Are they being followed?**

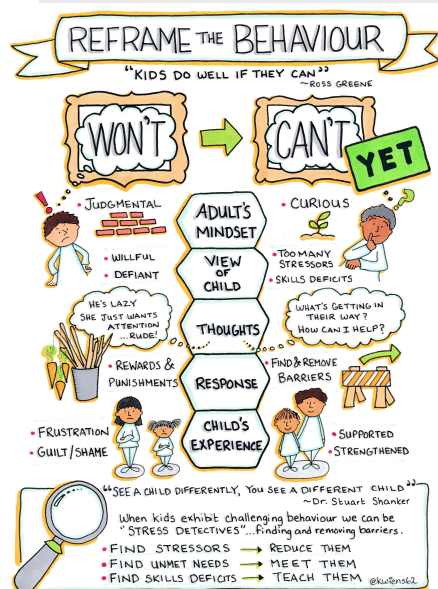
**If necessary follow the school's complaints policy**

## Record Keeping

- ✦ It is important to keep a diary of what happens day by day to build a picture of the problem and the steps that have been taken.
- ✦ Keep a file of notes you take at meetings, during phone calls etc. and copies of ALL emails and letters.
- ✦ Check that minutes of meetings are accurate. Take someone with you to meetings, to take notes while you listen and you can discuss the meeting afterwards.
- ✦ If you're concerned about school records, make a full Subject Access Request (SAR) for a copy of all records held. Check through them carefully for accuracy and ask for errors to be corrected. (see the ICO website).
- ✦ When reporting absences use the phrase 'too unwell to come to school' not 'refusing to attend'.
- ✦ Check attendance records are accurate and challenge any errors.
- ✦ This evidence will be crucial if any legal proceedings occur and/or if you apply for an EHCP.

## Self-care and Support

- ✦ School attendance difficulties, can be very stressful for parents, and can affect the whole family. Remember to seek medical advice & support for your own health.
- ✦ Employment commitments can be problematic - please seek advice regarding Work and Benefits.



## Mental & physical illness related absence should be authorised by schools

Extended absence requires medical evidence, so see a GP and request a referral to CAMHS or a Paediatrician. Schools should notify the Local Authority if children are absent due to illness for more than 15 days. Local Authorities have a duty to ensure that a child receives alternative educational provision whilst absent, however you will usually be asked to provide medical evidence to arrange this support.

## Ask the School to Provide Work While Your Child is Absent

Ask for work if you feel your child can manage homework or online learning. Many schools will be reluctant to provide this, so explain that in not providing learning opportunities a student will get further behind, which adds to anxieties around returning to school. Look for resources related to their interests to inspire them.

**Alternative Educational Provision** Some children and young people will benefit from alternative provision through home tutors, online education, hospital school, or specialist units. When statutory guidance is followed and children are supported, they may eventually return to mainstream school, but they may need long-term specialist provision.

**Elective Home Education** It may be that the current school is the wrong school environment for your child. Some parents decide to deregister their child from school to home educate. This is a big decision and you should not be under pressure from your school or LA to deregister, as you could find it harder to arrange the support your child is entitled to. Some children benefit from time at home to recover, and some will return to school and even university later on.

## Work with Professionals to Create a Child-led Support Plan

- ✦ Try to maintain good relationships between your family and school so that you can work together to create an effective support plan
- ✦ Health professionals can advise schools on developing support plans that are flexible, child-led and sympathetic to the features of anxiety disorders or other health conditions.
- ✦ Any plans must be communicated to all staff. Schools may also need to arrange further relevant staff awareness and training.
- ✦ Remind professionals in schools about the duty to use best endeavours and reasonable adjustments (SEND Code of Practice and the Equality Act 2010).
- ✦ Your Local Authority's Local Offer can also be an invaluable source of resources, information, advice and relevant support.
- ✦ Some families may benefit from early help support, although school attendance difficulties should not normally be treated as safeguarding or parenting problems.
- ✦ Please look at our website [www.notfineinschool.co.uk](http://www.notfineinschool.co.uk) and share the NFIS resources with all professionals involved with your child/family.
- ✦ Look for online/social media support groups including the *Not Fine In School* family support group:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/NFISFamilySupport/>

Long term recovery needs a focus on support and encouragement for a child to enjoy other activities and friendships (not only those related to school). This will help rebuild their self-esteem, confidence and happiness, all of which are integral aspects of school refusal recovery.