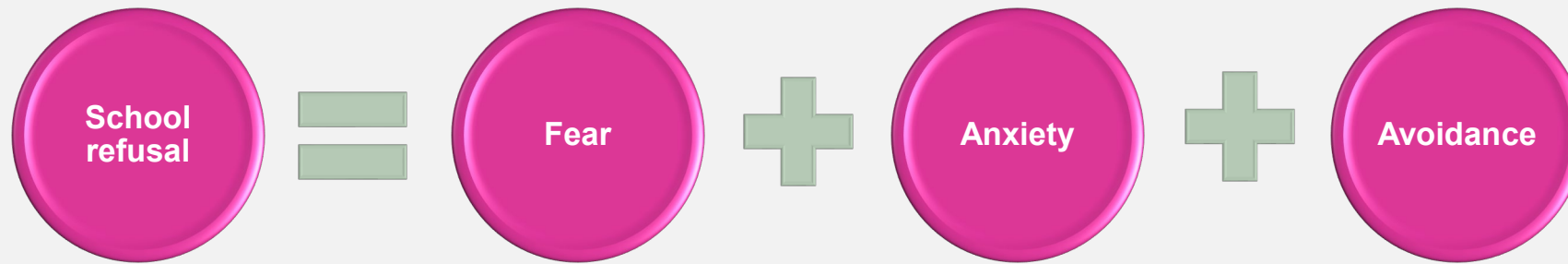


What is School Refusal?

The difficulty attending school due to emotional distress. Unlike truancy, the child makes no attempt to hide their non-attendance.

- School Refusal is characterised by overt anxiety symptoms – mental health support is required.
- The child may even *want* to go to school but they just *can't*.
- Its severity can range from mild (where a student can still attend school) through to severe (where the student is challenged to leave their home).





Fear: is the emotional response to a real or perceived imminent threat with surges of automatic arousal necessary to trigger the flight/flight response.

Anxiety: is the anticipation of future threat, and associated with muscle tension & vigilance

Avoidance: is the body and minds way of minimising the impact of the fear and anxiety.

What drives School Refusal?

- Avoiding situations that provoke negative emotions – “if I don’t go to school, I don’t have to explain my absence or feel stupid because I’ve missed so much work”
- Escape from negative social situations – receiving exam results or having to face a bully, or friendship issues.

Determining what drives (what’s going on for the child) school refusal is an essential element in establishing individual return to school programs & plans.

How common is School Refusal?

- Occurs across all socio-economic groups
- Equally prevalent among boys and girls.
- Covid has contributed – with an increase nationally in other schooling options such as homeschool.
- Risk of School Refusal in students diagnosed with ASD 42.6%* (and often displayed School Refusing behaviour for longer periods than their typical counterparts).
- Risk of School Refusal in typical students 7.1%*

Impacts of School Refusal

| Physical symptoms | Social consequences | Emotional impact | Short –term consequences | Long-term consequences |
|-------------------|----------------------------------|--|---------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Headaches | Loss of friendships | Increase in emotional lability | Decline in academic performance | Academic underachievement |
| Abdominal pain | Failure to establish friendships | Increased self-doubt | Worsening peer relationships | Employment difficulties |
| Nausea | Social isolation | Decline in self-esteem | Increased family disharmony | Low self-esteem |
| Racing heart | Social anxiety | Emergency or escalation of generalised worry | Reduced self- esteem | Poor peer relationships |
| Disturbed sleep | Diminished social resilience | Need to control the environment | Reduced self-confidence | Social immaturity |

Every School Refuser needs an individually tailored plan.

- Get on it fast. Days, not weeks. The anxiety avoidance cycle is gradual.
- Look for early warning signs. Is there a pattern of illness, requests to come home from school early? Are these becoming more frequent. Some our best work can be done in these early stages. Stay curious during these times.
- Create plan for staying connected to school building up slowly if needed. Teachers can support student connection. Some ideas include letters from the class (warm fuzzies), small amounts of homework, Facetime with the class or pre-recorded videos from friends.
- Let the child know that everyone believes they will return to school. Success = more success. Validate the child's feeling, don't minimise.
- Regular check in meetings with school, carers, child – Care Team approach.
- School support is essential. It could mean negotiating changes to class, support with difficult subjects, exit cards for managing increased times of anxiety or access to chill – out zones.



Example return to school plan

| Date | Goal Week 1 | Goal Week 2 |
|--------------|--|--|
| Mon | Arrive at school at 9.30am, spend 30 minutes in library | Arrive at school at 9.00 am, spend 30 minutes in the art room. |
| Tues | Home day engaging in some work set by the school. | Arrive at school at 9.00am, spend 30 minutes in the library before helping to prepare a task with teacher etc. |
| Wed | Arrive at school at 9.30am, spend 30 minutes in the art room. Try attending homeroom | Home day engaging in some work set by the school. |
| Thurs | Home day engaging in some work set by the school. | Arrive at school at 11am, spend 30 minutes in the music room, before trying 30 minutes in music class |
| Fri | Arrive at school at 9.00am, spend time in the library before trying 30 mins in art class | Arrive at school at 9.00am, spend time in the library before trying 30 mins in art class |

Aim to build re-engagement slow, changing the steps frequently and scaling up.



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Links

Webinar: Understanding School Refusal with
Associate Professor Glenn Melvin
Wednesday 8th May, 12pm (AEST)
Link to [ZOOM](#)

[School refusal: children & teenagers | Raising
Children Network](#)

Contact

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