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Children who do not go to School

Factsheet for parents and teachers

Quite a few children will, at some point, refuse to go to school. This can cause serious problems. If your child misses a lot of school, their education may be badly affected. This may undermine their confidence and reduce the opportunities available to them as they grow up. Legally, parents are responsible for making sure that their child is educated.

Why does it happen?

There are three main categories for describing why children don't attend school:

school refusal,
truancy and
condoned absence.

<http://www.trippin.co.nz>

School refusal

Your child may be too anxious to go to school. Worrying about going to school can make them feel vaguely unwell, with sickness, headaches, tummy aches, poor appetite and frequent visits to the toilet, although usually, no physical cause can be found for these symptoms. The symptoms are usually worse on weekday mornings and tend to disappear later in the day. This is sometimes called 'school phobia'.

However, the problem does not always lie with school. A child may seem to be worried about going to school, when actually, they are fearful about leaving the safety of their home and parents. They can be rather clingy and lacking in confidence. Once they get involved in lessons and seeing their friends, they may find that they enjoy school.

What causes school refusal?

Bullying at school and problems with school work are common reasons. Family problems may play a part. In young children a change in the family, even the birth of a younger brother or sister, may be enough to upset them. There may be other reasons – the illness of a parent, arguments or a death in

the family. Children who are anxious or depressed seem to be particularly vulnerable

Where can I get help?

If your child is not going to school, they need to be able to talk to you and their teachers about any worries they might have. Make sure that they know you are there to talk to them and support them. This will help them to know that their problems are being taken seriously. Children themselves need to be involved in planning how best to overcome these problems.

You and your child's teachers should encourage your child to go back to school as quickly as possible. Keeping your child off school will make the problem worse. If you sort out any underlying problems, like bullying or school work, many of the symptoms will improve.

The school's educational psychologist or welfare officer may be able to help. For more specialist help, your child may need to be referred to the local child and adolescent mental health service.

Truancy and absence from school

When a child stays off school without the knowledge and agreement of parents, it is called 'truancy'. Sometimes, parents don't seem to mind that their child is not going to school, and even approve or encourage them (e.g. by taking them shopping).

What causes truancy?

Many children who truant also have behavioural problems such as stealing, lying, fighting and destructiveness. There may be problems at home, or not enough supervision.

A child may have a difficult personality, learning difficulties or behaviour problems. They will often have friends who truant and are involved in antisocial behaviour. There may be problems at school, difficulties with school work, not getting on with their teachers or not getting on with other children. Others have no real behavioural problems and they may just drift into truanting. They may be fed up with school, be encouraged to truant by their friends or want to show they are 'cool'.

Why do parents let their children stay off school?

A parent may worry that their child is ill, when the real problem is school refusal. They may know that a child has been truanting, but will allow them to stay home rather than have them wandering the streets. A parent may believe that school is harming the child in some way. Sometimes they may want their child to be at home to help with housework or looking after other children, or just for company.

What can be done to help?

As with school refusal, missing a lot of school can have a damaging effect on a young person's education and opportunities in later life. The first step in tackling truancy is for the school and the parents to agree that there is a problem that needs to be dealt with. They then need to discuss with the child why they are truanting.

Absence from school will require a discussion with the family to understand their viewpoint. Parents and teachers need to work with the child to get them back into school as quickly as possible. Underlying problems, such as reading difficulties, may need special help. Parents and teachers will need to keep an eye on whether the child is actually attending school. They should make sure that they reward the child for any improvements in their attendance.

The school Resource Teacher Learning and Behaviour, School Guidance Counsellor or GSE may be able to help. Your general practitioner (GP) will be able to offer help and advice. Where there are continuing difficulties with the child's feelings or behaviour, or where there are family problems, your GP may recommend a referral to the local child and adolescent mental health service. Here, the specialist team includes child psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, psychotherapists and nurses.

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