



Understanding and supporting Children and Young people with School Refusal

What is School Refusal?

School phobia is common childhood behaviour problem that refers to a child's refusal to attend school.

Often accompanied by:

- Irrational fears
- Physical complaints
- Temper tantrums
- Panic or anxiety related school attendance.

It is essential that school phobia is not confused with Truancy

(No Panic, 2019)

School Refusal has been referenced as "the reaction of children who experience severe anxiety and distress in relation to attending school, often resulting in prolonged absences"

(Notfineinschool, 2017)

Statistics

School refusal can be seen to:

- Affects **2-5%** of children and young people during their education (Kawsar et al., 2021)
- Equally prevalent between boys and girls
- Occurs at times of school transition i.e. 5 years old when getting into primary school, 11 years olds when transitioning into secondary school and 14-15 year old when they are engaging in GCSEs (Taylor, 2017)



- Severe cases suffer with depression, self-harm and sometimes attempt suicide.
(Notfineinschool, 2017)
- School refusal is different from Truancy and can be referred to as Emotional Distress.
(NoPanic, 2019)

It important to note:

Not all anxious children may display obvious characteristics. Often we see children and young people masking their symptoms:

- Fear of being told off
- Containing their feelings of anxiety
- Can display signs of aggression
- Can be seen to be trying to control the situation

Within the school environment, child may hide or avoid their emotions but when they return home they feel safe and are able to release their emotions. This can lead to families having to experiencing high levels of stress.

Blending: copying others to try and blend in but not really understanding the context or expectations.

Masking: feeling anxious but hiding inner feelings and acting as if you are ok to protect yourself

(notfineinschool, 2017)

Signs/Symptoms

Behaviours	Emotions/ Feelings	Physical symptoms
Running away from school	Irritable/snappy	Headaches
Frequent calls home	Sadness	Stomach aches
Avoidance	Anger	Increased heart rate
Difficulty leaving the home	Anxious	Dizziness
Lack of willingness to complete work	Tearfulness	Fatigue
Refusal to engage in social activities	Dysregulation	Muscle pain/tension

Triggers

The list of possible reasons for why children and young people may engage in school refusal is not extensive. However, research shows that the list below has been reasons for why children and young people may engage in school refusing.

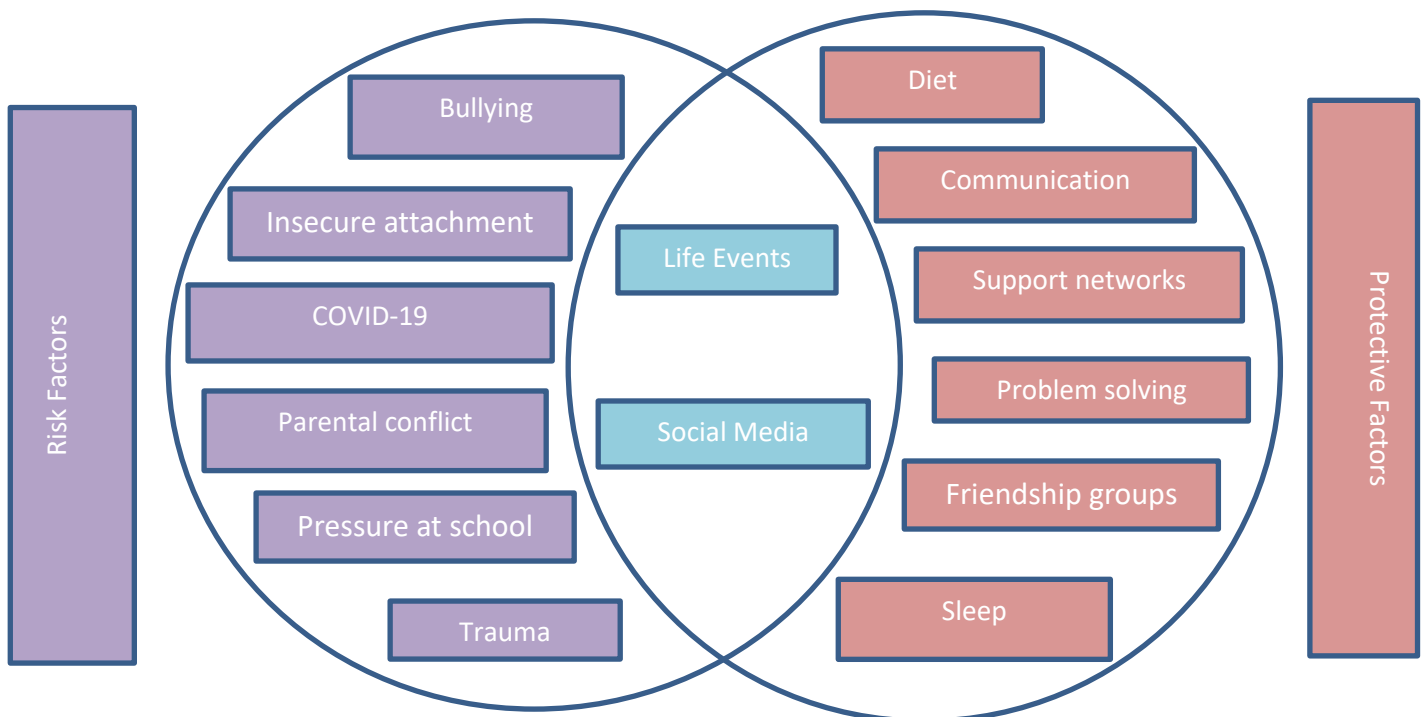
- School pressure
- Tests/exams
- Bullying
- Friendship difficulties
- Social anxiety
- Learning difficulties
- Home difficulties
- Mobility difficulties
- Classroom disruption



- Emotional development delay
- Changes to routine/staffing
- Trauma



Risk and Protective Factors



What can you do to help?

Develop an action plan to support your young persons return to school.

Action plan:

- Questioning/ Communication
- Problem solving
- Anxiety ladder
- Anxiety Management Strategies
 - o Breathing exercises
 - o Progressive Muscle Relaxation
 - o Visualization/ Distraction
- Liaise with school and other relevant parties



Action plan – Questioning/ Communication

Questions to consider:

- What is making the young person nervous/ anxious/ frightened?
- What do they think is going to happen if they go to school?

Acknowledge the young person difficulties

Be curious with your responses to your young person

Try not to overload your young person with a lot of questions at one time

Make suggestions of what might help

(Creswell et al, 2019)

Don't shout, tell them off or physically force them to go to school. This is likely to increase the worry

(YoungMinds, 2021)

Action Plan – Problem solving

Step 1: Identify the problem – be as specific as possible

Step 2: Brainstorm every possible solution – every solution is valid there are no “silly” solutions

Step 3: Consider the positive and negatives of each solution

Step 4: Rate each solution – 0 not the best solution, 10 the best solution

Step 5: Make an action plan – how, what and when can I put this solution into practice

Step 6: implement the plan and review

(Creswell et al., 2019)

Action Plan – Anxiety Ladder

Also known as **Graded Exposure** (Fremont, 2003)

Using an anxiety ladder can make larger worries more manageable by breaking down into smaller more manageable steps



Steps should be realistic, pre-planned and ranked from least anxiety provoking to most anxiety provoking

Every step on the ladder is a milestone towards reaching their goal and should be celebrated i.e., praise or reward



Relaxation – Breathing exercises

Help reduce symptoms of anxiety

Regulates the heart rate

Reduces hyperventilation

Reminds us that we are safe

Examples of breathing techniques

(YoungMinds, 2020)

- Hand Breathing
- Star Breathing
- Candle Breathing
- Bubble Breathing

YouTube Videos:

Hand Breathing: www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BmcV--lpNY

Candle Breathing: www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-4oQEfvSeU

Bubble/box Breathing: www.youtube.com/watch?v=9tOJZQhO_Uw

Relaxation – Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Helps reduce stress

Alter tension and relaxation in all of the body's major muscle groups

Provides a greater sense of control of the body's anxiety response

Promotes a healthier sleep routine

(VeryWellMind, 2021)



YouTube videos:

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (Longer): www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihO02wUzgkc

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (Shorter): www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_diV-uqV9w

Relaxation – Visualization/ Grounding technique

Allow you to visualize a place that makes you feel safe

Allows for your senses to be taken into account

Allows you to be able to distract from your thoughts.

Recognize the senses around you. Help you to identify what you can:

- See
- Touch
- Hear
- Smell
- Taste

YouTube video

54321 Grounding Technique: www.youtube.com/watch?v=30VMIEmA114

Distraction

Helps the reduction of any anxious thoughts

Helps the reduction of anxious symptoms

Reminds us that we are safe.

(Getselfhelp, 2021)

Examples of distraction:

- Reading
- Listening to music
- Going out for walk
- Engaging in a hobby



- Colouring
- Talking to family or friends



Collaborative approach

For a plan to be successful, it is always better to involve the young person in the planning process and any other relevant agencies.

For example;

- Education
- Early Help
- RISE services

Communication with school

Communicate with the class teacher

- Have they noticed any changes in their behaviour?
- Tackling the problem early can be helpful as the longer they are out of the environment the harder it is to get back into school.

Keep in regular communication with key staff at school

- Work with them to make changes

Ask school whether a reduced timetable can be put in place

- Aims to build the young person back up when it feels more manageable

Request a home visit from school

- Teachers (if school has the facility to) check in with the young person and discuss possible strategies going forward

(YoungMinds, 2021)

Expectations

Increased exposure to school with result in increased attendance

But it may lead to increased anxiety in the short term as your child or young person faces their fears

By supporting them to better manage their anxiety and worries, their school refusal behaviours will eventually reduce.



REMEMBER: Be patient!! Things cannot change overnight but the right strategies and support things can change.

Support for your children and young people

Everyone who makes regular contact with your child has an important role in their lives.

Support network:

- General Practitioner (GP)
- School Teachers
- Sports coaches
- School Nurse
- Youth worker
- Friends
- Family

Dimensions Tool



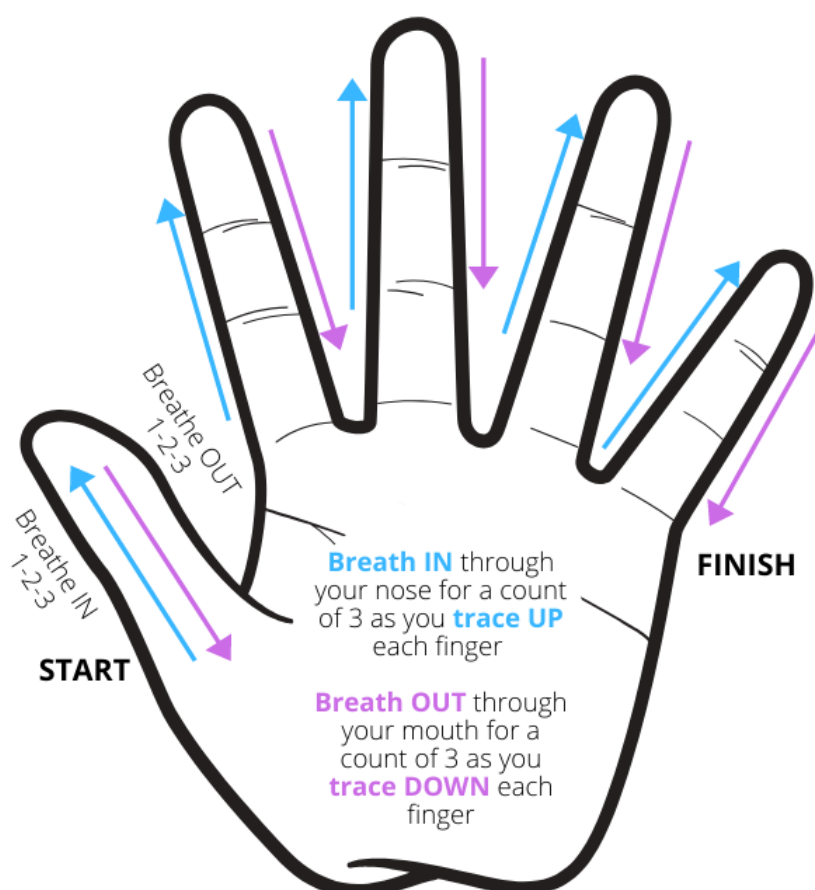
<https://dimensions.covwarkpt.nhs.uk/Quiz.aspx>

Appendix

Relaxation – hand breathing



Focusing on our breath is important for calming our minds and bodies. Try tracing each finger on the hand below with your finger as you breathe in with your nose and out with your mouth. Do you feel more relaxed? Try using Hand Breathing with your own hand before a big test or when you're feeling anxious!



Relaxation – Star breathing

Star Breathing

Start at any "Breathe in" side, hold your breath at the point, then breathe out.
Keep going until you've gone around the whole star.



Relaxation – Square breathing



Inhale ...2 ...3 ...4



Hold ...2 ...3 ...4

Rest ...2 ...3 ...4

Breathe.



Exhale ...2 ...3 ...4



Relaxation – Grounding technique – 54321

54321 Grounding Exercise



Relaxation – grounding technique – 54321



