

When Your Teen Refuses School

A checklist for identifying patterns, responding calmly, and choosing the next step.

School refusal is often driven by distress rather than simple laziness. Understanding the pattern can help parents respond with both compassion and structure.

What Are You Noticing?

- ☐ Frequent stomachaches, headaches, nausea, panic, or exhaustion on school mornings
- ☐ Repeated lateness, missed classes, visits to the nurse, or requests to come home
- ☐ Distress that improves quickly when staying home is allowed
- ☐ Fear of tests, presentations, peers, bullying, teachers, or being separated from home
- ☐ Falling grades, missing assignments, learning difficulties, or feeling overwhelmed
- ☐ Sleep reversal, late-night gaming or phone use, or difficulty waking
- ☐ Depression, anxiety, trauma symptoms, substance use, or other emotional concerns
- ☐ Recent family changes, illness, loss, conflict, or transition

Map the Pattern

When did the avoidance begin?

Which days, classes, people, or situations are hardest?

What usually happens immediately before the refusal?

What does your teen gain or escape by staying home?

What has already been tried, and what happened?

Helpful First Responses

- ☐ Stay calm and avoid debating for long periods during the morning crisis.
- ☐ Validate the distress without automatically removing the expectation to attend.
- ☐ Ask specific questions about what part of school feels hardest.
- ☐ Contact the school early and request a coordinated plan.
- ☐ Maintain a predictable wake, sleep, and morning routine.
- ☐ Make staying home safe and supervised, but not more rewarding than attending school.
- ☐ Seek professional support when avoidance is persistent, severe, or worsening.

What to Avoid

- Calling the teen lazy, manipulative, or dramatic
- Allowing repeated absences without understanding the cause
- Using only punishment when anxiety, depression, bullying, or learning needs may be involved
- Creating a new plan every morning
- Waiting until grades or attendance have collapsed before involving the school
- Forcing an overwhelming return without support when symptoms are severe

Conversation starter

"I believe that school feels very hard right now. Staying home every day is not a long-term solution, so we are going to understand what is making it hard and build a plan with you."

Who May Need to Be Involved?

- ☐ Parent or caregiver
- ☐ Teacher or school counselor
- ☐ Attendance or student-support team
- ☐ Pediatrician or medical provider
- ☐ Therapist or mental-health professional
- ☐ School psychologist or learning-support specialist

Our Next Step

The first person we will contact is:

The smallest realistic attendance goal is:

The support or accommodation we will request is:

The date we will review the plan is:
