



Reluctant Attenders Information for Parents and Guardians

This handout is about understanding and supporting children **who are reluctant to attend or refuse to go to school**. It explains some of the reasons it occurs and offers suggestions to parents/guardians on what they can do to help.

What is reluctant school attendance and refusal behaviour?

This is when a child or young person refuses to go to school or has difficulties staying in school for the full school day. The child or young person may show very challenging behaviours in the mornings as they try to miss going to school. They may end up going to school distressed and upset.

What does it look like?

They may shout, swear, refuse to do what they are asked, run away, hide, and cling to someone or something.

They might look sad, worried, and afraid. They might cry or complain that they are too tired because they didn't sleep the night before, or they might say they have a tummy ache, headache, a sore throat, 'feel sick' etc. These behaviours might get worse again after a weekend or holiday.

How does it start?

There are many reasons for reluctant attendance and school refusal behaviour- sometimes we don't know why it starts but it is more likely to happen after times of stress in the family, if someone has been ill or died or if there has been a separation. It can also happen if a child has seen others in their family not go to school. Given the summer holidays and the time children have been at home it may be particularly difficult for some to get back into a school routine and leave their family and home environment.

If your child is reluctant to attend school or refusing to go to school, it means they are stressed about something. That may be because of any of the following reasons:

- During the summer holidays your child may have had little contact with teachers and peers and may feel disconnected from the school community
- They may want to stay with people they love because they are afraid something will happen to them while they are at school
- They may want attention from someone at home
- They may be worried about leaving a family member alone at home for the day
- They may enjoy and want to do things at home or outside of school more than they want to go to school



- They might be afraid that they are going to be judged, rejected, shamed, humiliated or criticised by someone in school. If they are being bullied this must be reported to and dealt with by the school
- They may be anxious about a particular subject or teacher.

What can you do?

- Make sure there is nothing medically wrong with your child and that they are not being bullied or hurt. **Make sure they are safe.**
- Understand that refusing to go to school is because they feel stressed about something that is real and important to them. **Listen and understand the reasons** they have for not wanting to go to school.
- Help them **to problem solve about their worries**, what they can do, what might help but **only do this when you and the child or young person are calm**. No one can think and have helpful conversations when they are highly stressed.
- **Reassure** them. Remind them that they can cope and that **you and their teachers will help them sort out any problems.**
- **Talk positively about school and encourage them to think about things they like about school.**
- Remember the way you talk about the school, the teachers, their friends etc. is really important.
- **Stay positive**- don't feel guilty about insisting they go to school! You are doing this because you love them. If you feel upset try not to show it. **Believe they can cope and that you can cope.** Remind them of other times when they have done something difficult and it turned out ok in the end.
- **Model how to cope** - they are looking to you to show them how to do it. Tell them about times when you felt worried and coped with something difficult. Know that they can learn to cope with and manage this stress but this takes time and needs patience, understanding and support from you - **stay hopeful**. There may be set-backs but many pupils have successfully returned to attending school regularly with **support to develop their skills and supportive relationships** at home and in school.
- Have a **regular bedtime and morning routine** before school.
- Get school bag and uniform ready the night before - **help them be organised.**
- **Ignore behaviour that is safe to ignore** e.g. shouting, swearing, pleading.
- **Tell them you understand** it is difficult and that they feel worried but do not get into long discussions about their feelings just before school.
- **Be clear, firm and kind** "I know this is difficult. I need you to go to school and you need to go to school. We can talk about it later and you'll tell me



how it went. I know you can do this; you are strong and I am here for you.”
Repeat if needed.

- If it helps suggest they **go to school with another person** e.g. a friend and their parent or carer or another adult.
- Try changing who drops your child to school.
- Try and **distract them** by talking about something they are interested in or about nice things you can do together.
- **Don't give up. Keep going** and get them to school.
- When you get to school- **say goodbye**, smile, say that you look forward to seeing them later then **leave quickly**.
- At the end of the day **tell them how proud you are that they went to school** and stayed there and they did it **even though it was really difficult** to do. This shows they can cope and are strong and it will get easier.
- **Do something enjoyable together** after school or at the weekend.
- If they stay at home when they should be in school try not to make it rewarding. **Try and keep to the routine**; get up, get dressed and expect them to get their school books out and attempt some work. Do not let them watch T.V, stay on their phone or gaming all day. Make sure that they don't get lots of attention for staying at home.
- Contact the school for daily schedule of work, which can be completed at home. This can be reassuring for the student, that they're not missing part of the curriculum.
- **Encourage contact** with other children and activities **outside of school** if the child or young person wants it.
- **Talk to a member of staff** in the school regularly to share your successes and difficulties. Be honest and let them help and support you. There are likely to be set-backs, especially after weekends or holidays. This does not wipe out the successes.
- Even though this is very stressful for parents or carers **be very calm – stay strong – do not give in – you are the adult**. Children need an education and need experiences with other children to help them grow and learn for their adult life.
- If the problem continues following much time and effort by you and the teachers consider asking for a **consultation with the school's NEPS psychologist** or whether a **referral** is needed to **HSE services**.