

# Worried about school refusal? How to use the holidays to help your child

January 8 2024, by Corey Bloomfield

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These long summer holidays may seem like an extra blessing to families who are dealing with a child who does not like school or who refuses to go.

But even as January stretches out in front of us, parents will no doubt be thinking about the challenge of getting their child back to [school](#) again once terms starts.

I do research on young people's engagement with school and have previously worked as a guidance officer, supporting families dealing with school refusal.

How can families use the holidays to lay the groundwork for a more positive school year ahead?

## **What is school refusal?**

[School refusal](#) is not "wagging." A recent [Senate inquiry](#) noted there is no commonly agreed definition but described it as: "the inability of a young person to attend school due to a severe negative emotional reaction to school."

It is often rooted in complex issues that can be include anxiety, depression, neurodiversity and school bullying. Anecdotally, it has been on the rise since COVID.

## **Start by talking**

If you have a child who has been refusing to go or talking about refusing to go, try to be supportive at home by encouraging them to express their concerns and thoughts about school.

Actively listen to the reasons why your child is reluctant to attend school. You can do this by calmly asking, "If we could make one thing different at school this coming year, what would it be?"

This will help you understand why your child is reluctant and how you can best support them.

## **Keep a routine going**

Schools are built on routine. So, try to maintain some sense of routine during the holidays to make for a smoother transition for your child at the end of January.

You could try and schedule time for outdoor play, [screen time](#), fun games as well as household chores. Maintaining set times for meals and sleep are also essential.

Maintaining positive connections with friends from school can also help. Having a positive social connection with a schoolmate over the break can help to ease worries about heading back to school.

Being able to talk with peers on the first day back about what you did together on the holidays can also be a powerful way to start to build a sense of belonging at school.

## **Keep in touch with your school**

While teachers are on (well-earned) holidays, schools will be contactable before the start of term 1.

If your child has a history of school refusal, maintaining a positive line of communication with the school is important.

See if you can find out their new teacher and talk to school support staff like school counselors before school returns so you can work together to explore support options.

Don't be afraid to make that initial contact in the week leading up to the new school year.

Most school staff will appreciate the gesture. They will be keen to work proactively with you and your child rather than trying to react to the challenges that come with school refusal once term has begun.

## **What else can you do?**

If school refusal is an ongoing issue for your child, spending the time now to seek professional help can also be a great idea.

Use this time to do some of your own research and connect with qualified health professionals, therapists or specialists who can provide the necessary support.

A good starting point would be a visit to your GP who may refer you to a [child psychologist](#) or pediatrician (although be aware, there may be long waiting lists for some specialists).

Try and build a network of support for your child that intersects the home, school and therapeutic environments. By working together with your child, a successful transition back to school is much more likely.

## **Why it's worth trying to make school work**

I'm sure any parent with a child who is school refusing has at some time wondered if it's worth the struggle of getting kids to school.

As someone who has worked in mainstream schools and [distance education](#), along with being a parent during COVID, I can see why school avoidance is a [growing phenomenon](#).

Many of us found our kids learning more and learning faster at home. Without the classroom distractions and added stress of being crammed into an institutional setting, some found learning easier and more enjoyable.

While academic learning may have been easier at home, we need to think about the [purpose of education](#). It is not just about academic learning and qualification.

Socialization is a key purpose also. Schools are designed to teach our children how to interact positively with other outside of the home as part of their social development.

So it is worth hanging in there, if you can (while of course acknowledging mainstream school does not end up working for all students and there is a growing number of alternatives).

## **Trying to get on the front foot**

These long summer holidays are a good opportunity to get on the front foot in terms of your child's feeling about school. Try and use this time to seek allies in [school staff](#), [mental health professionals](#) and encourage continued friendships for your child.

Remember your friends too. Reach out for help from your support network as you walk with your [child](#) into the new school year.

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