



## School refusal, anxiety and attendance: Information for parents

### WHAT IS IT?

#### Anxiety

At some stage, every individual will feel anxious when faced with a difficult situation. During difficult times, you can support your child to cope with anxiety in effective ways, and in doing so, enhance their resilience. Anxiety can become a problem when it is persistent and prevents your child from enjoying normal life experiences for a long time.

#### School refusal

School refusal is when a child regularly displays high levels of distress and reluctance about going to school, leading to prolonged absences. Your child may say that they feel sick, either prior to leaving for school or during the day through repeated visits to the school nurse or sick bay. They may complain of a headache, sore stomach, nausea or tiredness. Behavioural symptoms may include tantrums, crying, avoidance or defiance.

It is important to understand the concerns your child may have about school in order to work towards resolving the situation. As such, the school may advise making a referral to a psychologist to help.

### WHAT CAN CAUSE IT?

- Change of school
- Separation anxiety – where the child experiences overwhelming feelings of distress when parting from their parents or family home
- Anxiety about a parent leaving, or losing a parent. The child may be fearful that something bad will happen to their parents while they are at school such as:
  - parents divorcing or running away
  - having friends whose parents have separated and fearing that it may happen to theirs
  - fear of a parent becoming ill again after recovering from prior illness.
- Family stress
- Academic pressure or problems
- Not getting along with teachers
- Fear of not having friends
- Bullying
- Moving house
- A change in a parent's job or a change in home life.

### SCHOOL REFUSAL: STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS

Instead, acknowledge that school refusal is not a disorder, but your child's way of responding to an underlying fear or anxiety.

It is essential for you to be able to recognise early warning signs. There are several steps you can take to help:

- See a doctor
- Form a partnership with your child's teacher
- Don't allow your child to stay at home
- It is better to arrive late to school than not at all
- Give clear and firm messages about school
- Minimise any 'benefits' for staying at home
- Talk and listen
- Ignore crying and tantrums
- Avoid a battle or negotiation
- Lead by example
- Focus on the good things about school
- Have a stable morning routine
- Make sure your child gets a good night's sleep
- Keep your goodbyes at school short and reassure your child you will see them at the end of the day.

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