

Overcoming School Avoidance

TIPS AND STRATEGIES FOR FAMILIES

Our Presenters

Mona Tahsini, LMFT

MOBILE MENTAL HEALTH DIRECTOR

Gurneet Pannu, LPCC

MOBILE MENTAL HEALTH THERAPIST

Lauren Garcia, LCSW

MOBILE MENTAL HEALTH THERAPIST

Philip Ye, APCC

MOBILE MENTAL HEALTH THERAPIST

What words or feelings
come to mind when you hear
school avoidance?

Presentation Objectives

- **Educate:** Learn what school avoidance is, why it happens, and the factors that contribute to it in high school students
- **Normalize:** Understand that school refusal is common and that many teens and families experience similar challenges.
- **Tools & Resources:** Explore practical strategies, tips, and supports you can use at home and with the school to help your teen
- **Discussion:** Share your biggest concerns, questions, or experiences related to school refusal so we can address them together

What is school avoidance?

Definition:

School avoidance (also called *school refusal*) is when a teen has difficulty attending school regularly due to **emotional distress**—such as anxiety, fear, or worry about going to or being at school.

Key Points:

- It's **not defiance or skipping**—the distress is real and emotional, not oppositional.
 - Teens often stay home **with a parent's awareness**, not in secret.
 - It's frequently linked to **anxiety, depression, or other mental health challenges**.
(Medscape, 2024)
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What is school avoidance?

How Common Is It?

- Affects **1–5%** of school-aged youth overall. (*American Academy of Family Physicians, 2003*)
- Up to **5–28%** of students experience some form of school avoidance during their school years. (*HealthCentral, 2023*)
- Nearly **5% of teens (ages 12–18)** avoid parts of school due to fear or anxiety. (*National Center for Education Statistics, 2023*)

Why It Matters:

If not addressed, school avoidance can lead to:

- Falling behind academically
 - Social isolation and lower confidence
 - Worsening anxiety or depression
 - Long-term school disengagement
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Myths vs. Realities

Myths	Realities
“They’re just being defiant or lazy.”	School avoidance is usually a sign of anxiety, stress, or emotional distress , not defiance. Teens often <i>want</i> to attend but feel unable to.
“If I let them stay home, I’m reinforcing the behavior.”	Allowing short breaks or gradual returns can actually be part of a supportive and structured plan —not “giving in.” It’s about pacing and rebuilding tolerance.
“They’ll grow out of it.”	Avoidance tends to worsen over time without intervention. Early support leads to better outcomes and less long-term disruption.
“Once we fix the school problem, it’ll go away.”	School avoidance often reflects underlying emotional or family stressors that need to be addressed alongside school support.
“It only happens in kids with anxiety disorders.”	School avoidance can occur in any teen , especially during periods of change, academic pressure, or social stress.

Signs & Symptoms

Emotional Signs

- Frequent worry or fear about going to school
- Irritability, mood swings, or tearfulness when school is mentioned
- Expressing feelings of being overwhelmed, hopeless, or unsafe
- Difficulty concentrating or describing what feels “wrong”

Physical Signs

- Stomachaches, headaches, nausea (especially in the morning)
- Fatigue or difficulty sleeping before school days
- Changes in appetite
- Physical symptoms that fade once allowed to stay home

Behavioral Signs

- Slow or prolonged morning routines, arguing, or refusing to get ready
- “Forgetting” items needed for school
- Spending excessive time on phone or distractions instead of preparing
- Avoiding friends or school-related activities

School-Related Patterns

- Frequent tardiness or absences, especially on certain days or classes
 - Declining grades or incomplete work
 - Frequent visits to the nurse or requests to come home early
 - Preferring to stay near parents during the day
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Understanding What's Beneath School Avoidance

School avoidance is rarely “just behavior” — it’s usually a **response to stress, anxiety, or overwhelm.**

Common underlying factors include:

Anxiety: fear of judgment, failure, or social situations

Neurodivergence: ADHD, autism, learning differences, sensory or executive functioning challenges

Burnout/Academic Pressure: high-achieving teens experiencing chronic stress

Recognizing the root cause helps parents respond with **empathy, structure, and effective strategies.**

Addressing only attendance without understanding the underlying causes may **reinforce avoidance.**

Anxiety

- Anxiety is one of the **most common underlying causes** of school avoidance.
 - Teens may experience panic, intense worry, or fear of judgment, failure, or embarrassment.
 - Anxiety can center around **academic performance, social situations, or safety** at school.
 - Physical symptoms (stomachaches, headaches, nausea) often mask emotional distress.
 - Avoidance provides short-term relief — which unintentionally reinforces the anxiety cycle.
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Neurodivergence

- Many neurodivergent students (ADHD, autism, learning differences) experience school as **overwhelming, overstimulating, or discouraging**.
 - Struggles with executive functioning — organization, planning, transitions — make mornings and schoolwork especially hard.
 - Sensory overload (noise, crowds, lights) or social fatigue can trigger withdrawal and shutdowns.
 - Repeated experiences of misunderstanding or failure can lead to **school-based trauma** and avoidance.
 - Supportive environments, predictable routines, and teachers who “get it” are crucial to re-engagement.
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Burnout, Perfectionism & Academic Pressure

- High-achieving teens are at increasing risk of school burnout and emotional exhaustion.
- Pressure to maintain grades, college readiness, and extracurriculars can lead to chronic stress and loss of motivation.
- Teens may appear “fine” until they hit a breaking point — sudden avoidance, fatigue, or withdrawal.
- Perfectionism and fear of failure make it hard to ask for help or take breaks.
- Recovery involves restoring balance, realistic expectations, and emphasizing well-being over performance.

Impact of School Avoidance

On Teens:

Falling behind academically and difficulty catching up
Social isolation or withdrawal from peers
Increased anxiety, low mood, or irritability
Reduced self-esteem and confidence
Risk of long-term disengagement from school or extracurricular activities

On Families:

Stress, worry, and conflict around school mornings
Strained parent-teen relationships due to arguments or frustration
Challenges coordinating with schools, teachers, or support services
Emotional exhaustion from trying multiple strategies without success

Overall:

School avoidance affects the **whole family system** — not just the teen
Early recognition and support can reduce long-term negative outcomes

What Parents Can Do At Home

Supportive Approaches

- Validate emotions: *“I can see this is really hard for you.”*
 - Balance empathy with structure — show understanding while keeping expectations clear.
 - Break mornings into smaller, achievable steps.
 - Keep routines and consistency — predictability lowers anxiety.
 - Encourage small wins — even partial attendance or short stays count.
 - Avoid reinforcing avoidance — don’t let staying home feel easier than attending school.
 - Use screen-time boundaries as part of the plan (no all-day gaming on missed school days).
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Finding Balance

Manage Your Own Emotions

- Your calm presence helps regulate your teen's nervous system.
- When you feel anxious or frustrated, try coping first:
 - Deep or paced breathing
 - Temperature shifts (cold water, ice, or stepping outside briefly)
 - Meditation or grounding techniques

When Your Teen Isn't Ready

- Meet them where they are. If they're refusing, avoid pushing.
- Offer comfort-based activities:
 - Warm drink, favorite snack, soothing music, time with a pet
- A safe space can be more effective than confrontation.

Validating Statements You Can Use:

"I can see how overwhelming this is, and I'm here for you no matter what."

"I understand it's hard to talk about how you're feeling."

"I can tell this is really tough, and I don't want to make it harder."

"There's nothing wrong with you, and you're not alone in feeling this way."

Working with the School

- **Reach out early.** Communicate concerns with your teen's **counselor, teacher, principal, or school psychologist** as soon as attendance issues start.
- **Collaborate on a plan.** Partner with the school team to **identify individualized supports or accommodations** that meet your teen's needs.
- **Explore available resources.** Ask about **check-ins, modified schedules, safe spaces, or mental health supports** on campus.
- **Keep communication open.** Stay in regular contact with the school to **track progress and adjust strategies** as needed.
- **Stay collaborative, not adversarial.** Approach the school as a **partner** working toward the same goal—your teen's wellbeing and success.

When and Where to Seek Support

- **Know when to reach out.** If school refusal lasts **more than 1–2 weeks**, or your teen shows signs of **anxiety, depression, or self-harm**, it's time to seek professional help.
- **Start with your teen's support network.**
 - **School resources:** counselor, psychologist, or wellness center.
 - **Healthcare providers:** pediatrician or therapist specializing in teens.
- **Collaborate for continuity.** Share updates between **home, school, and providers** to create a coordinated plan.
- **Access community and online resources:**
 - Local mental health agencies or crisis lines.
 - Parent support groups or workshops.

You don't have to do this alone. Early intervention and connection to support make a real difference.

Parents Self-Care and Resilience

- Supporting a struggling teen can be **emotionally draining** — it's okay to acknowledge the stress.
- **Model calm and regulation.** Your teen takes cues from your energy. Try deep breathing, grounding techniques, or short breaks before tough conversations.
- **Seek your own support.**
 - Connect with **friends, family, or parent support groups.**
 - Consider your own **therapy or counseling** if needed.
- **Give yourself grace.** Progress takes time; even small steps forward matter.

Remember: caring for yourself **isn't selfish** — it's **strategic**. A calm, regulated parent helps a teen feel safe and supported.

Key Takeaways

School avoidance is a symptom, not defiance. It's rooted in emotional distress, anxiety, or overwhelm.

Empathy + structure = progress. Validate your teen's feelings while maintaining consistent expectations and routines.

Small wins add up. Partial attendance or short exposures build confidence and trust.

Collaboration is essential. Partner with the school and professionals early — you are on the same team.

You're not alone. Many families experience this, and recovery is possible with patience, teamwork, and support.

