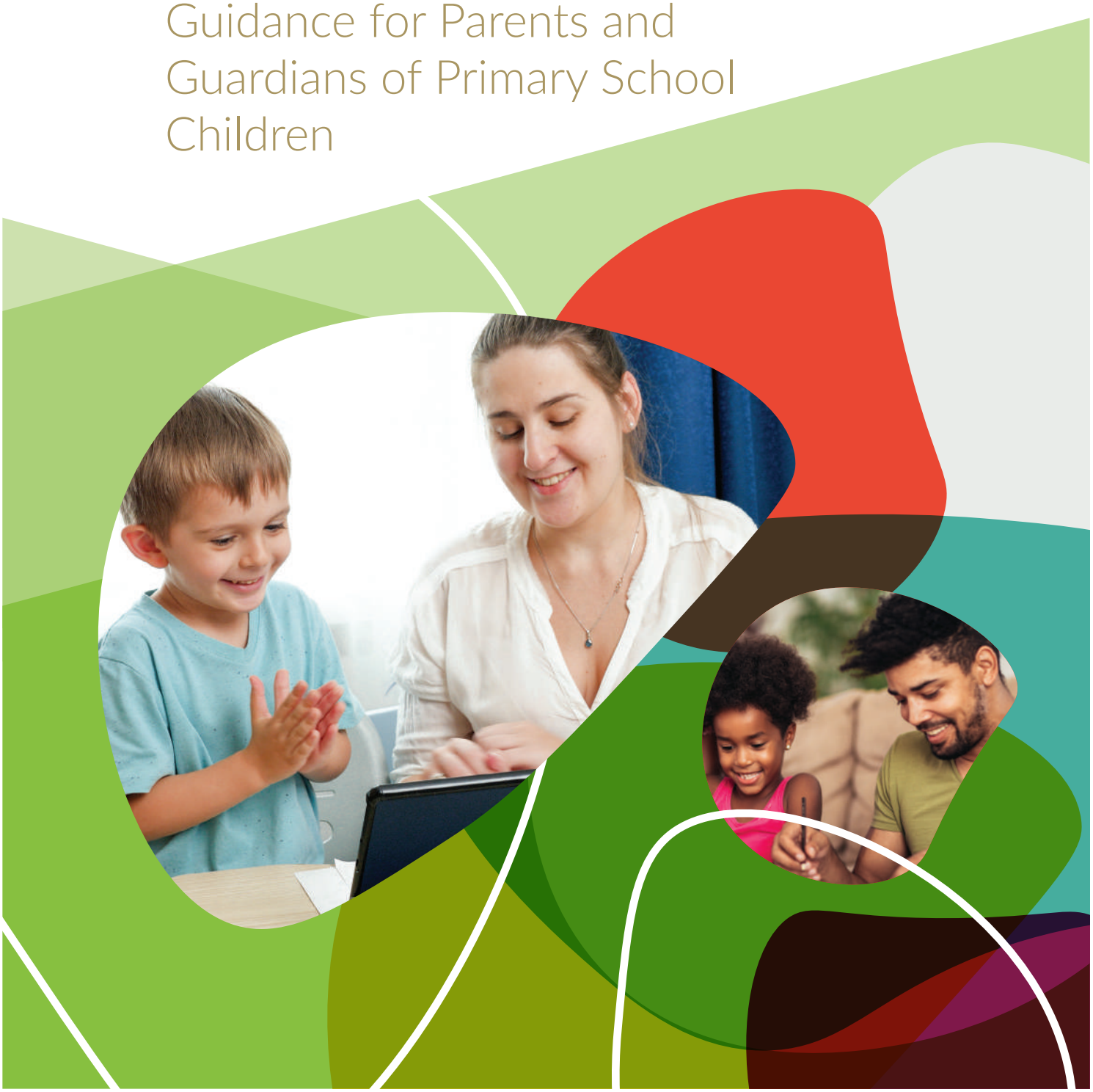
An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education
An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Síceolaíochta Oideachais
National Educational Psychological Service

wellbeing in education

Supporting your Child when they are Reluctant to Attend School:

Guidance for Parents and Guardians of Primary School Children



Purpose of this Guidance

School should be a happy, safe place for children, but it is not unusual for children to feel uneasy about going to school now and again. However, if your child begins to regularly experience strong feelings such as reluctance about going to school or have difficulty staying in school, it is important to notice this and respond quickly. Working with your child's school from the beginning, is essential in supporting them while they feel like this. It is important to give a strong message to your child that even though they are experiencing strong feelings about school attendance they need to go to school.

By reading this document you will find information on:

- Why your child may feel reluctant about going to school.
- Managing your own thoughts and feelings.
- What you can do to support your child in going to school when they are reluctant.
- What you as a parent can expect your child's school to do to support your child at this time.

What is Reluctant School Attendance?

Reluctant school attendance describes children's reluctance to attend school, feeling they are not able to go to school, being late for school due to delaying going, finding it difficult to stay in school, or being absent from school regularly or for long periods of time.

Reluctant School Attendance - Early Signs and What to do?

Reluctant school attendance can start slowly. It often begins with a child complaining more often about going to school or being regularly late for school. It is important to know these early signs and act quickly if you spot them. Figure 1 has questions you can ask yourself:

Figure 1: Early Signs of Reluctant School Attendance - Questions for Parents / Guardians

- Is your child frequently complaining about going to school?
- Is your child very upset on school mornings?
- Is your child having difficulty attending school after weekends or holidays?
- Is your child reluctant to separate from you at the school gate?
- Is your child frequently late to school due to pleading to stay at home?
- Is your child frequently complaining about illness that fades if they are allowed to stay at home?
- Is this causing you to feel upset and anxious?

If the answer to any of these questions is 'yes', the difficulty needs to be addressed straight away.

Here is advice for what to do at the early stage of reluctant school attendance.

- Remain calm.
- Check with your child to see if they can identify something in particular that is bothering them, while also being clear and firm that they need to go to school.
- Help your child to name the feelings they may be having, acknowledge that these feelings can be uncomfortable, but also let them know that you believe in their ability to cope with them.
- Ask for support from your child's school. Let the school know about your child's feelings and work with them to support your child together. School staff should be available to help you when a pattern or reluctance starts but before a cycle of avoidance begins. For example school staff might support you to leave quickly after saying goodbye in the morning if your child is feeling upset, so you don't get into a pattern of being the one to settle them in. They will also be available to discuss any issues that may be contributing to the recent reluctance.
- You will find more information on how to support your child later in the section 'Actions You Can Take to Support your Child'.

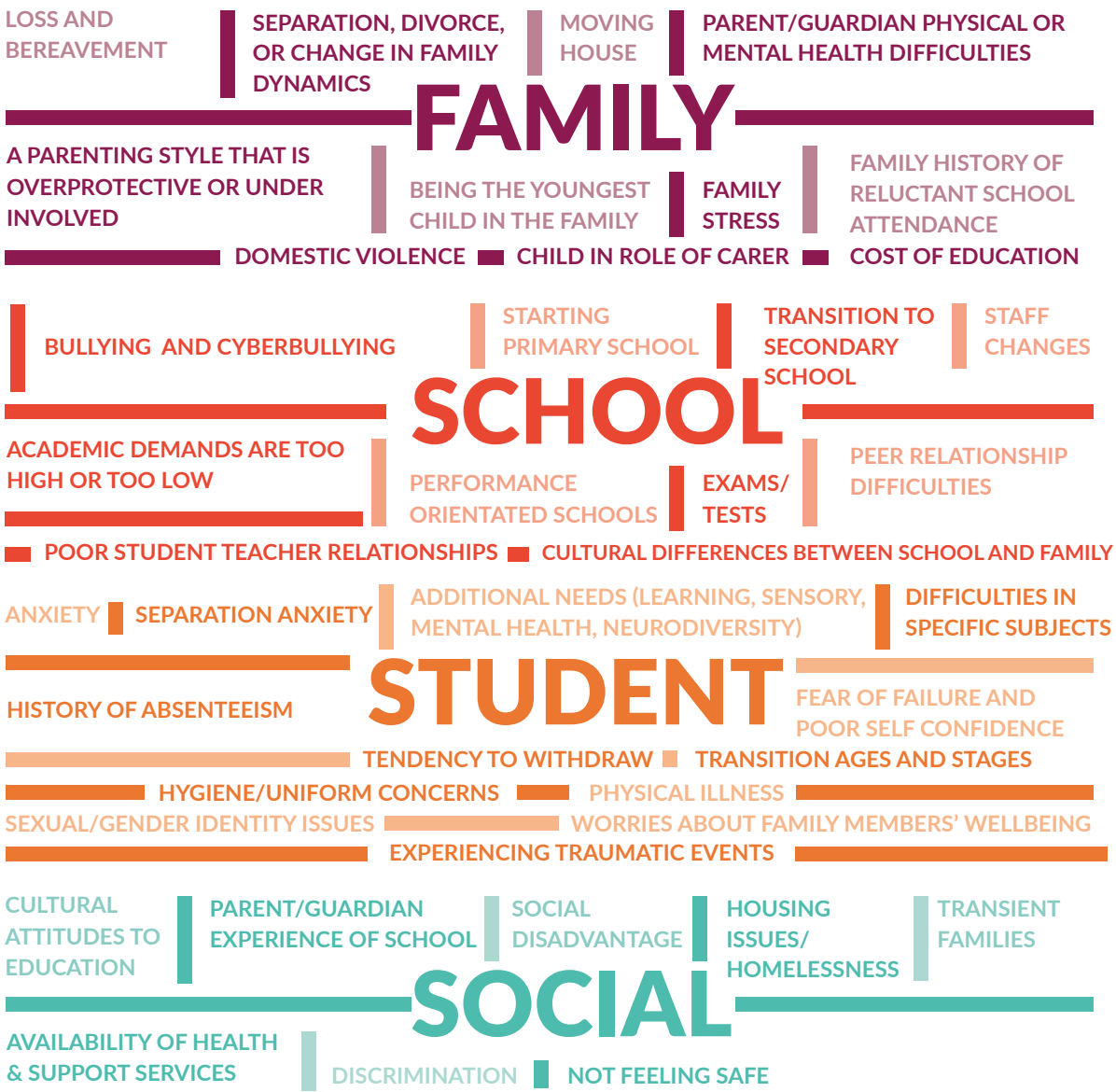
Key points to remember at the early stage are:

- Most children want to go to school and can be successfully supported to do so.
- If your child is not at school they miss out on building relationships with their friends and teachers and other important parts of school life, which can affect their learning and their social/emotional development.
- Being absent from school regularly can create new situations that may be stressful for your child, such as gaps in their learning or unwanted attention from classmates and teachers about why they have not been at school.
- Remember, it is easier if you intervene at this early stage rather than when your child is absent from school regularly or for long periods of time.

What Causes Reluctant School Attendance?

There is no one cause of reluctant school attendance. There are family, school, student and social factors that can all play a part. Figure 2 below lists examples of what are called 'risk factors' that make a child more vulnerable to reluctant attendance.

Figure 2: Risk Factors for Reluctant School Attendance



It is often the case that the child experiences stress and feelings of anxiety.

- Children may worry about the wellbeing of their parent/guardian when they are in school for example due to a recent separation or a health difficulty.
- They may have been bullied in school, have poor peer/teacher relationships or experience academic demands as being too high.

- There may be social circumstances that make school attendance more difficult, e.g, financial, health or housing issues.
- The student may have special educational needs, have experienced trauma, have difficulty with a particular subject, or want to avoid the feeling of anxiety they experience about going to school, even though they cannot name exactly what is causing it.

However, there is much that can be done by parents/guardians and school working together to support your child to attend. Working together, schools and parents can offer supportive relationships that provide emotional support and help children to mediate stress, support them to develop positive coping skills and ensure they feel that they are safe and that they belong.

Understanding Children's Feelings of Stress and Anxiety Around School Attendance

The Stress Response

A certain amount of stress or feeling anxious is a normal part of life. Children can feel a little uneasy about going to school after a weekend, mid-term or summer holidays. This is all normal.

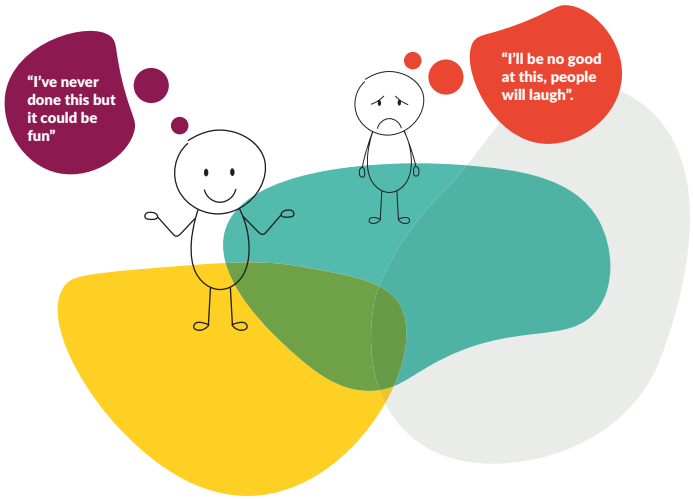
Feelings of stress and anxiety can often be useful, keeping people alert, motivated and helping them to avoid a threat. However, sometimes we believe situations are threatening even when they are not, and if we feel we are in danger, our body produces a hormone called adrenaline. This is the body's natural reaction to events believed to be threatening. This is known as 'The Stress Response'. Our brain thinks there is a threat and sends signals to the body to prepare to take action such as stay and fight (fight), run away (flight) or shut down (freeze). We feel physical reactions in our body like our breathing getting faster, our heart racing, palms sweating and knees shaking. When the stressful event has passed, our body returns to normal and we are calm again.

Figure 3: The Stress Response

When the stress response is activated in a situation in which we are not in any danger, this can affect our ability to do what we need or want to do. Rather than helping us, it can actually make doing things more difficult. As the stress response can bring uncomfortable physical sensations, we sometimes leave or avoid the situation that feels threatening to us, in an effort to try to reduce these sensations. Unfortunately, when we avoid situations we are worried about, it is actually unhelpful as it reinforces our belief that we need to avoid the situation to make ourselves feel better. When we do this, we do not get the chance to learn that we are able to cope or that the situation is not as bad as we think it will be.

Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviours

Our thoughts, feelings and behaviours are all connected. Our thoughts can affect the way we feel, and the way we react or behave in a situation. 'Self-talk' is the name for what we say to ourselves inside our heads that no one else can hear. Some self-talk can be helpful and make us feel good, e.g., thinking: "I've never done this but it could be fun". However, some self-talk can be unhelpful making us feel worried, e.g., thinking: "I'll be no good at this, people will laugh."



It is ok to have unhelpful thoughts, everybody does, but it is important to notice when we have them and not let them take over. If we choose to believe our unhelpful thoughts, we may continue to feel sad or worried and may avoid situations in order to feel better. It is useful to help your child to become aware of their thoughts and self-talk, to decide if they are helpful or unhelpful, and to help them challenge their unhelpful thoughts. Becoming aware of our helpful and unhelpful thoughts is an important starting point to changing the way we feel and behave.

Figure 4 shows how your child's thoughts, feelings and behaviour are linked and gives examples of what they may think, feel and do. Your child might be thinking unhelpful thoughts like "I don't like school", "I don't want to go", "I hate leaving Mum" or "Everyone will laugh at me." These thoughts may make your child feel worried or stressed. Because of these feelings your child might feel physical sensations such as their heart beating faster, sweaty palms or pains in their stomach. These feelings are real and feel uncomfortable for your child and they will want to do something to make the uncomfortable feelings stop. Behaviours can include crying, complaining and protesting. Avoiding school is another behavioural response that children may use to make uncomfortable feelings stop.

Figure 4: Sample Thought Feeling Behaviour Cycle in Children

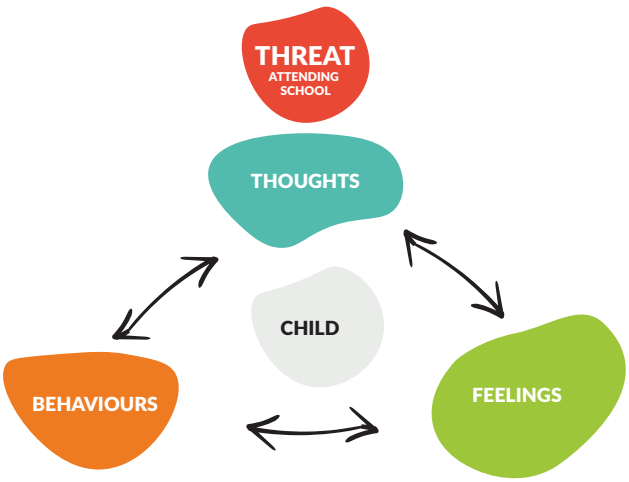
THOUGHTS

I don't like school | I don't want to go | I hate leaving Mum | Everyone will laugh

FEELINGS

Worry | Stress | Heart beating | Sweaty | Pain in stomach

BEHAVIOURS



When children avoid going to school so that uncomfortable feelings go away, it may bring them short term relief, but this does not make the feelings of stress or anxiety any better in the long term. It actually makes it worse. Children learn that staying at home stops the uncomfortable feelings, but they miss an important opportunity to experience coping. However, by doing what they are being asked to do and what is expected of them, and going to school even when they feel stressed or uncomfortable, they learn that these feelings do in fact lessen as the day goes on. This is why it is important to be kind but firm that your child must attend school.

Parents/guardians may also go through a similar thoughts, feelings and behaviour cycle, when their child is reluctant to attend school. Figure 5 shows a sample of the thoughts, feelings and behaviours a parent may have.

When your child is reluctant about going to school, your thoughts could be:

"Why won't they stop crying?"
"I want them to feel better"
"I won't be able to make them go"
"It's only one day"

These thoughts may make you feel worried, stressed, angry or embarrassed. You may also experience physical sensations such as shortness of breath, a sick feeling in your tummy or your heart racing.

Figure 5: Sample Thought Feeling Behaviour Cycle in Parents/Guardians

THOUGHTS

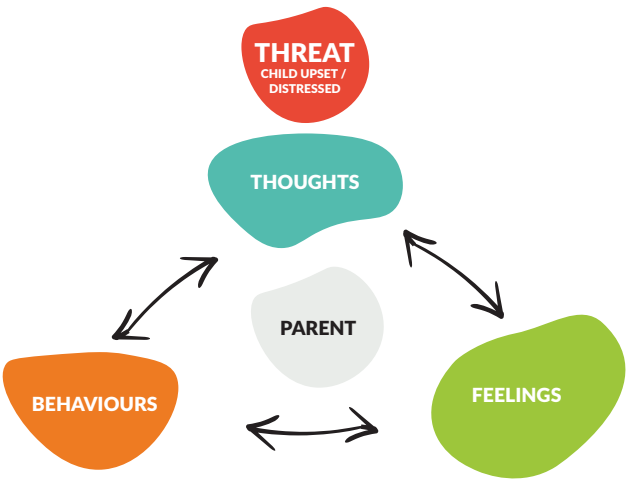
What can I do | They won't stop crying | I need this to stop | I want them to feel better | Tomorrow might be easier | It's only one day

FEELINGS

Worry | Stress | Guilty | Angry | Embarrassed | Heart beating | Headache | Sweating | Breathless

BEHAVIOURS

Give in | Agree | Remove demand | Give child control | Make excuses

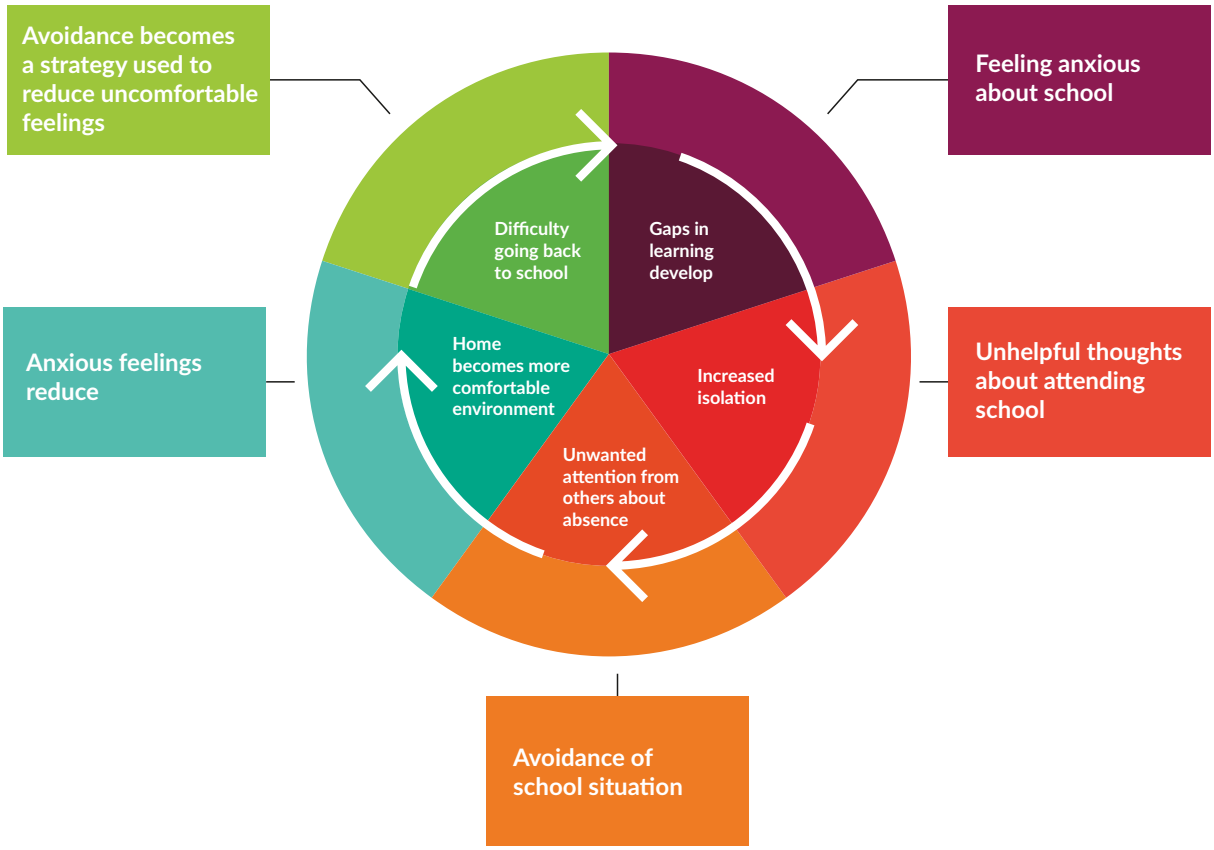


Your behaviour may include giving in and letting your child stay at home, as this will make your child feel better and end the uncomfortable feelings for you and them, at least in the short term.

Parents/guardians can begin with good intentions of encouraging their child to go to school but can fall into the trap of trying to help their children feel better and relieving their uncomfortable feelings, by giving in to them about school attendance when they display strong emotions, protest behaviours and say they can't go. Avoiding going to school becomes an established response because it results in a child feeling less stressed or anxious. Before long it gives them the message that the way to cope is to stay at home and not go to school.

If this avoidance cycle is not broken, the child may start to feel worse about their situation. Being absent from school on an ongoing basis can create new situations that may cause feelings of anxiety for the child, such as gaps in their learning, feeling separated from friends, or unwanted attention about why they have not been at school. Home may become a more comfortable place and they may find it difficult to go back to school. Figure 6 shows how school avoidance starts and continues.

Figure 6: The Cycle That Reinforces Reluctant Attendance
(Adapted from West Sussex Educational Psychology Service: Emotionally Based School Avoidance Good practice guidance for schools and support agencies)



When children feel stressed or anxious, they will need support to manage these feelings. By learning to manage their unhelpful thoughts, they can then replace them with more helpful, powerful thoughts that make them feel better. They can choose actions that help them remain calm in a situation rather than avoid it. This will teach them that they can cope with uncomfortable feelings which usually lessen over time.

It is important that you as parents/guardians manage your own unhelpful thoughts and feelings of stress and model to your child how to cope. This will help your child to think more positively about going to school, and will show them that they can overcome their difficulties.

Actions You Can Take to Support your Child

The following actions will be useful to you to support your child through their reluctance to go to school.

1: Recognise the signs of reluctant attendance and talk to your child's school.
2: Remain positive and manage your own feelings first.
3: Acknowledge your child's feelings, but calmly explain that they will pass.
4: Have supportive conversations with your child.
5: Implement routines that support attendance.

1: Recognise the signs of reluctant attendance and talk to your child's school about it.

If you have answered "yes" to the questions in figure 1 below, it is important to support your child with this difficulty and prevent it from getting worse and your child avoiding school. Talk to your child's school about what has been happening and how your child has been feeling. They will meet with you and discuss actions you can take together to support your child.

Figure 1: Early Signs of Reluctant School Attendance – Questions for Parents / Guardians

- Is your child frequently complaining about going to school?
- Is your child very upset on school mornings?
- Is your child having difficulty attending school after weekends or holidays?
- Is your child reluctant to separate from you at the school gate?
- Is your child frequently late to school due to pleading to stay at home?
- Is your child frequently complaining about illness that fades if they are allowed to stay at home?
- Is this causing you to feel upset and anxious?

See the section on 'Working Together With Your Child's School' for further information.

2: Remain positive and manage your own feelings first

Children look to their parents/guardians to confirm that what they are thinking is true and what they feel is real. It is important that you manage your own feelings first and model a sense of calm. They will also look to you to guide them on how to cope with things that they are finding worrying/stressful. Reflect on what you are thinking, how you are feeling and what messages you are giving your child by the way you are responding to them and behaving. Showing you are worried can give your child the message that they are right to be worried.

- In managing your own feelings, you are modelling good coping skills.
- It is natural that you want your child to feel better but remember that their feelings will pass.
- If you model calm, this will show your child that you are coping and can help their anxious feelings to reduce.
- Try not to feel guilty about insisting your child goes to school. You are doing the right thing even though it can feel like you are being tough.
- Ignore behaviour that is safe to ignore e.g., shouting, swearing, pleading.
- It is important that you look after your own wellbeing and take steps to manage your own self-care. See **Resources and Supports available from the HSE.**

3: Acknowledge your child's thoughts and feelings but explain they will pass

- Acknowledge your child's thoughts and feelings and offer support, e.g. "I know that you think/feel ____. This often happens to children your age. You will feel _____ once you are in school with your friends and settled".
- It is possible to be caring while also being clear and firm. Using your own version of the scripts below using a calm and comforting voice may help.

"I know it's hard to go back to school after the weekend/mid-term/summer"
"I know you can do this, you are strong and I am here for you"
"You have the (photo/keyring/teddy....), you can think of me when you see it and know I am thinking of you"
"I will collect you at 2, like I always do, and you can tell me all about your day"
"We can look forward to going to the park together after school"

- Let your child know that although stomach aches, headaches and sweaty palms are unpleasant, they are not dangerous and they will lessen in time. Explain to your child that just because they feel anxious, it does not mean they are unsafe.
- Explain to your child that just because they think something, e.g., "I can't do this" or "I'm better off at home", it doesn't mean that it is true.
- Teach them to take some slow deep breaths while they go to school. There are some examples of breathing exercises for children in the publication: ***Breathe - Self-regulation and Relaxation Techniques for Children***
- The handouts ***How to Calm and Support your Child: Advice for Parents and Guardians*** and ***Managing Stress and Anxiety: A Guide for Parents and Guardians*** are available at **Wellbeing in Education** and will also be helpful to you.

4: Have supportive conversations with your child

Avoid getting into long discussions about your child's feelings just before school. These kind of conversations are better to have in the evenings or at weekends or at a time when you and your child are both calm and able to think clearly. Make sure that both parent/guardians give the same message.

- Speak positively about school and help your child to think and talk about what they like about school life, e.g., friends, PE, art, lunchtime.
- Encourage your child to talk to you about how they feel about school. Listen to their reasons for being reluctant to go to school. Let them know you understand. Speak calmly and ask open questions, rather than questions with Yes/No answers, e.g.,
  - ✓ "Tell me about your day?"
  - ✓ "How was your week overall?"
  - ✓ "What were your favourite / least favourite parts?"
- Tell them about times when you felt worried but still managed to cope with something difficult without avoiding it.
- Give your child some positive statements to repeat to themselves in their own head, such as "I can do this" and "I went to school yesterday, and it was fine."
- Help them to remember other times when they did not want to do something but did it anyway and how they felt afterwards when it turned out okay.
- Help them to understand that thoughts are just thoughts and can be unhelpful. Support them to think of a more helpful thought that could help them feel better such as "I can try my best", "I have managed before, I know I can do it again" or "I felt sick going yesterday but then I was fine by breaktime".

5: Implement routines that will help support attendance

- Encourage and support your child to have a regular night-time routine, e.g. laying out their clothes, getting their school bag ready and being organised for the next day.
- Encourage them to go to bed at a regular time.
- Stick to a morning routine before school, e.g., getting up at the same time and having breakfast.
- Try to give your child a sense of control of their day. Provide choice about what they will eat, or how they will get to school etc.
- Talk about 'normal' things on the journey to school showing no upset or anxiety.
- If they find it hard to separate from you at school, encourage them to bring something that they find comforting with them, e.g., have a photo of you or an object belonging to you in their pencil case to comfort them.
- If it helps, suggest they go to school with another person e.g., a friend and their parent/guardian or another adult. For an older child, a friend meeting them on their school journey can help ease them into school.
- At the end of the day let them know how proud you are that they went to school and stayed there even though they felt uncomfortable. Tell them that this shows that they can cope and are strong and it will get easier.
- Do something enjoyable together afterschool or at the weekend.

Working Together With Your Child's School

We know from research that early intervention, clear planning and good communication between parents/guardians, school, and the child is crucial to successful outcomes. When your child's school becomes aware that your child is reluctant about school attendance, there should be a meeting between you and a key school contact person who can help and put a plan in place.

What Can You Expect Your Child's School to do?

- The school can identify a suitable teacher to act as a key school contact (e.g., Class Teacher, Support Teacher, Deputy Principal, Home School Liaison Teacher) between parents/guardians, school staff and the child. In the early stages of reluctance this contact may simply be your child's teacher. It is important that you know who to contact and how to do so.

- The key school contact should arrange a meeting with you to gather information about concerns and to try better understand your child's reluctant attendance behaviour and any barriers to their attendance. In the early stages of reluctance, this may simply be a short meeting with your child's class teacher.
- The key school contact should engage with your child to find out about their views, (e.g., about their thoughts about school, what helps them feel better or what they would like to improve).
- The key school contact should gather information from you, (eg., about your child's history, and your own observations), and from within school, (e.g., about strengths/difficulties, current supports and response to them).
- Using the information gathered, a support plan should be agreed between the school, you and your child using the **Student Support File** template and a date agreed for review.
- If your child is not currently attending school at all, the school may invite your child to school to meet with the key school contact in a one-to-one meeting to gather the information above.
- The school may advise you on strategies that may help your child to re-establish attendance.

When Reluctant School Attendance Continues

Even though this is very stressful for parent/guardians, try to remain calm, stay strong and keep going. This is a tough time for you and remember to be kind to yourself. Work closely with your child's school and review the student support file with teachers. Be honest and let the school help and support you. If your child does not go to school, continue with the following:

- Start each day with the expectation that your child will go to school, though there may be times that this will not happen.
- Make sure that your child gets up at the usual time and gets dressed. It is important that the day at home is less appealing than being in school.
- Ask the school to send school work, which your child should do at home during schools hours.
- If possible, there should be a quiet workplace available for doing this school work.
- Time spent on devices during school hours should be school related only.
- Attention from parents/guardians and others can be rewarding for your child, so limit any extra attention that they may get while they are at home, e.g., extra time with you, visits from neighbours etc.
- Help your child to stay connected to their friends outside of school hours. This is really important for their social and emotional development and their wellbeing
- Continue with good routines for getting up, going to bed, eating, schoolwork and fitting in some rest and relaxation time.
- Keeping up after school activities will help children to feel and stay connected with others and provide a sense of achievement. In addition, their strengths and interests in activities such as sports, dance, music etc. may be used by the school to support more regular school attendance.
- If the difficulty continues despite actions taken by you and school, the school may ask the school psychologist from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) or the Education Welfare Officer (EWO) to get involved.
- The school can advise you about services that may be helpful, e.g., Primary Care Psychology, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), or other relevant youth/counselling services. School can make referrals for some, and for others, you will need to attend your GP for a referral. The leaflet **Mental Health and Wellbeing Information for Children and Young People** may be useful to you. It is important to follow up on any referrals agreed with the school.

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