

SCHOOL REFUSAL WEBINAR

WITH

DR KATE OWEN

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Clinical Psychologist & Clinical Family Therapist

SCHOOL REFUSAL

What Is School Refusal?

What Are The Signs:

- Frequent and unexplained absences from school.
- Frequent lateness to school.
- Non-attendance on significant days (e.g., exam days).
- Frequent visits to sickbay and the office.
- Frequent requests to go home early.
- Attending school is associated with emotional distress.
- Parents and carers are aware that the child is not attending school - it is not hidden or secretive.

How Common Is It?

- School refusal occurs in 1-5% of all school children.
- Can peak at ages 5-7 years, then 11 years and 14 years.
- It occurs across all socioeconomic groups.
- Equally presents among boys and girls.
- School refusal emerges more often in childhood.
- More established school refusal is more common for adolescents.

Important To Know

- School refusal is not a mental health diagnosis.
- School refusal is a clue, sign, symptom, or red flag, that something is impacting your child.
- Often a sign that the fight or flight response (anxiety) has been activated.

Two Mechanisms Most Commonly At Play:

- Wanting to avoid school for whatever reason – real or imagined.
- Wanting to stay home and be close to a loved one to feel safe and secure.

What Does It Look Like:

- Meltdowns and tantrums.
- Tears.
- Defiance.
- Frequently feeling ill – stomachache, headache, dizziness, fatigue.
- Not wanting to attend school after time away – weekends, school holidays, etc.
- Feeling “better” when they do stay home.

What It Is Not?

- School refusal is NOT about your child being “bad” or that you are a bad parent.

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What Drives School Refusal Behaviour?

Contributing Factors

- Anxiety:
 - General anxiety.
 - About social situations.
 - About performance and tests.
- Anxiety about being away from a loved one.
- Mental health challenges – e.g., Depression, ODD, PTSD, etc
- Family dynamics:
 - Need for closeness between parent and child.
 - High conflict at home.
- Family events – illness, grief, separation, etc.
- Peer issues and conflict with friends.
- Social skills difficulties.
- Bullying.
- Conflict with teachers.
- Learning challenges.
- Speech and language difficulties.
- Difficult transitions – new school, starting high school, new grade, returning after holidays, etc.

Adolescence in Context

- Physical changes:
 - The greatest period of physical growth since birth.
 - Hormonal changes through puberty – increased emotional intensity.
 - Sleep cycles change.
- Cognitive changes:
 - Structural changes in the brain.
 - Thinking brain goes “under construction” for 3 consecutive years anywhere between the ages of 11 and 18 years.
 - Novelty seeking increases and creative exploration.
- Social changes:
 - Enhanced peer connection and seeking friendships.

Could some of your child’s school avoidance relate to adolescent development?

Reflection

Q: What might be contributing to your child not wanting to attend school?

Q: Reflect on your child, family, their peers, school context, and more...

Q: Reflect on the past, recent past, current circumstances, and possible worries about the future or upcoming events.

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Why Do We Need To Take The Signs of School Refusal Seriously?

Entrenches Avoidance

- If the school refusal is anxiety-based, supporting the avoidance is not helpful.
- It might relieve anxiety and tensions in the short term but will contribute to avoidance patterns in the longer term.
- If your child learns that going to school feels overwhelming and the only way to relieve that feeling is to avoid it, this could start to drive further avoidance.
- Even just supporting avoidance for one day will make tomorrow that bit harder.
- What are you protecting them from – a real threat? Or a feeling of anxiety?
- How is this shaping them for managing challenges in life?

Increases Anxiety About Learning

- Your child might fall behind in their learning which then can be a source of anxiety and make attending school even harder.
 - A vicious cycle begins.
- If they fall behind this can impact learning and longer-term goals outside of school.
- They might miss out on important social activities and impact their friendships.
- Can contribute to conflict in the family.



Legal Considerations

- All Australian school-age children are legally required to be “learning or earning”.
- Parents can be fined.
- <https://yla.org.au/qld/topics/school/age-to-leave-school/>

Early Intervention

- Early intervention makes a difference.
- The longer the issue persists the more challenging it can be to re-engage the child with their learning.
- Research shows that young people who exhibit school refusal often experience mental health challenges, emotional and social issues, and employment challenges in later life.
- Keep in mind that sometimes the school refusal might feel like it is getting “worse” before it gets better.

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What To Do As The Adult

Stay Calm

- Anxiety is contagious.

Parents need to “steer the ship”

- Let your child see and experience your leadership.

Make Decisions For Your Child

- If your child is very overwhelmed, you will need to do the thinking for them and make the important decisions.

Problem Solve Stressors

- Problem solve to reduce stressors where possible.

Normalise and Educate

- Teach them and yourself about anxiety.

Be A Good Role Model

- How do you manage stress and anxiety?

Your Experience With School

- Do you need to adjust the narrative that you share?

Reflect On Family Life

- Is your child reacting or responding to tensions around them?

Ride The Anxiety Wave

- Sometimes all you can do is ride the wave.

Get Support If Needed

- Gather information and resources, and gain support.

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How You Can Support Your Child

Good Communication

- Simple statements - tell them what will happen or what to do.
- Make a list of the plan/steps that will happen – write them down.
- Avoid asking questions as they might feel too overwhelmed to respond.
- Be a great model for communication!
- Having good communication during the younger years is proven to be a protective factor for well-being later in life.

Non-Verbal Behaviour

- Tone of voice
 - Melody, pace, volume.
 - Speak with confidence and certainty.
 - More of a “I’ve got this” tone vs “Do this or else”.
- Body posture
 - Open and relaxed.
 - Eye level and alongside vs towering over.
- Facial expression:
 - Eye contact (if culturally appropriate).
 - Smiling eyes – especially important for teenagers.

What To Say

- Be careful how you phrase questions.
- For example, searching for negatives such as “Is something happening?”, “Are you worried?”
- Direct attention to positives – see your friends, learning, tuckshop day, then the weekend.
- Focus on what the reconnection will look like – tell me all about your day, a hug, etc.

Name Big Feelings – Build Emotional Literacy

- “Name it to tame it” Dan Siegel
 - By putting a name to an intense feeling the thinking part of the brain switches on.
 - Calms the intense emotion and gets the young person thinking.
 - “I can see that your worried”
 - “I can see that your stressed”
 - “You look disappointed”

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How You Can Support Your Child

Connect with the right brain (emotional brain) and then redirect with the left brain (logical brain)

- When anxiety is high logical conversation is not effective as a first step
- **Connect** with the right-brain by:
 - Acknowledging feelings
 - Name the feeling (“I can see that you are worried”, “You look nervous”)
 - Eye contact
 - Positive touch
 - Tone of voice
- **Redirect** with helpful strategies: problem solving, boundary setting, and more

Routines and Predictability

- Establish a daily routine – write it down and make it visible.
- Morning and night routine.
- Help with homework.
- Get good sleep – wellbeing is hugely affected by lack of quality sleep.
- Model and promote school attendance by scheduling appointments outside of school hours (when possible) and only taking holidays in designated school holiday time.

Other Ideas

- Keep a diary of the non-attendance to see if there is a pattern.
 - E.g., sports days, test, etc.
 - Can these be problem solved or targeted in some way?
- Transitional objects to take to school and return again.
 - E.g., something that belongs to a parent.
- Rule out any medical concerns by visiting your GP for a check-up.

What Not To Do

- Do not use physical force or emotional blackmail. This will only add to the problem.
- Do not ask your child to make promises about going to school.
 - They will feel shame and guilt and feel they have let you down if they do not succeed.

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Connecting With School Is Encouraged

Connect with School

- Early intervention is recommended – act quickly.
- Create a strong and healthy partnership between home, your child, and school.
- Let your child see how you connect in helpful and healthy ways with the school.
- Good communication.
- Read the school's attendance policy with your child. Let them know what is expected.
 - but not to increase pressure.
- The school will help develop a school plan that best supports your child.
- Set up the goodbye process to be loving and supportive but quick.
- Consider a transition over to another adult if needed.
- Plan for activities to look forward to before school with friends, extra-curricula activities, etc.
- Learning is best when your child feel safe and secure at school and has a good relationship with the adults
- Discuss this with your child – who supports them at school?
- Discuss this with the school – who would be a good staff member to build that connection with your child?



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SCHOOL REFUSAL Strategies To Teach Your Child

Soothe Their Anxiety

- School refusal is most commonly associated with anxiety.
- Anxiety is an ancient survival mechanism – everybody gets anxious!
- Specifically, we all have an **amygdala** in our brain that is always on the lookout for danger - that's its job.
- Amygdala activates our fight-flight-freeze response.
- When high anxiety is triggered, the thinking part of the brain shuts down.

Keep Calm Cards by Dr Kate Owen



Why Calm The Body?

- Stress reduction often requires less cognitive and more visceral experiences as a first step.
- Calming the Central Nervous System.
- Activating the Parasympathetic Nervous System.
- Dialing down the Sympathetic Nervous System.
- Decreasing cortisol.

Why Calm The Mind?

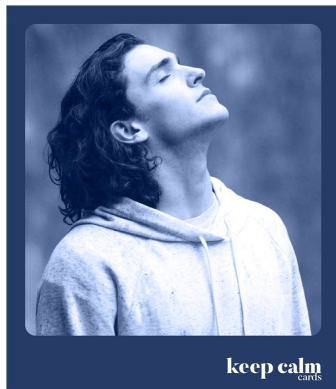
- When people are stressed and anxious they are prone to negative thoughts and beliefs.
- This negative way of thinking often fuels and maintains negative emotions.
- If you can influence the way you think, you can influence the way that you feel.

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Body Based Strategies To Teach Your Child



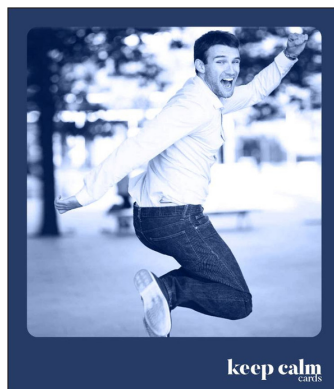
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deep breathing

1. Get comfortable.
2. Place your hands on your belly.
3. Breathe in through your nose.
4. Feel your belly rise.
5. Breathe out through your mouth.
6. Breathe out until you have no air left in your lungs.
7. Your exhalation should be 2 times longer than your inhalation.
8. Continue for 10 breaths.

WHY IT WORKS: Your breathing affects your Central Nervous System. Breathing in activates energy, and breathing out calms you down. By adjusting the ratio of your breathing (longer exhalation) you can directly influence your Parasympathetic Nervous System which is responsible for relaxation.

IDEA: Use a balloon to help you take deep breaths in and out.

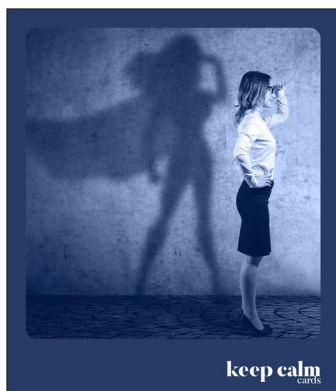


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move your body

1. Dynamically move your body.
2. Dance, or
3. Jump up and down, or
4. Bounce a ball, or
5. Kick a ball, or
6. Use a bat and ball, or
7. Ride a bike, or
8. Roll on the ground.

WHY IT WORKS: Aerobic activity uses the muscles, delivers oxygen to the muscles, increases blood flow, and releases endorphins that helps us feel good. After movement we feel more alert, calmer, and can think clearly.

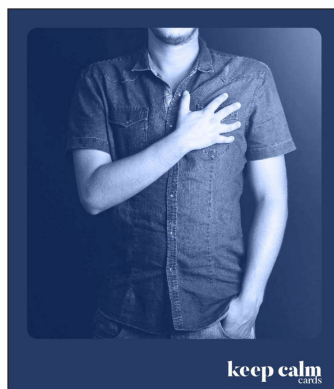


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stand like a superhero

1. Stand up straight.
2. Place your hands on your hips.
3. Place your feet shoulder width apart.
4. Relax your shoulders.
5. Keep your chest area open.
6. Tilt your chin up slightly.
7. Stand for 2 minutes.
8. Notice the effect on your mood.

WHY IT WORKS: Changing your body posture so that you "look" strong and powerful can have the effect of helping you "feel" strong and powerful.



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hand on your heart

1. Find a comfortable position.
2. Place your hand on your heart.
3. Breathe gently in and out.
4. Feel the warmth of your hand.
5. Hold for two minutes.
6. Notice the effect on your body.

WHY IT WORKS: This exercise connects you to the beat of your heart, the feeling of warm touch, and a sense of safety. These feelings calm the nervous system.

IDEA: Some people feel this exercise more strongly when they place one hand on their heart and one hand on their stomach.

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Cognitive Strategies To Teach Your Child



problem solve the situation

1. Get a pen and paper.
2. Write down the current problem or situation that is stressful.
3. List all the possible options for solving the problem.
4. List all the possible consequences that could occur for each listed option.
5. Evaluate which option is the best to trial.
6. Make a plan for how you will follow through with the option chosen.
7. Afterwards evaluate the effectiveness of that option.

WHY IT WORKS: Stress affects our ability to think clearly and problem solve. Using a structured problem solving exercise helps to clarify the situation and expand options of possible solutions.

IDEA: Ask someone to help you work through the problem solving exercise. They might be able to offer helpful suggestions.



what would your friend say

1. Imagine your best friend was with you right now.
2. Picture their calm and smiling face looking at you.
3. What calming words would they say?
4. Picture them holding your hand or giving you a hug.
5. What advice would they give you to help with this situation?

WHY IT WORKS: This activity also helps you to take a different perspective of the situation, which might give you some new ideas that will be helpful. Also, when we remember someone who has a positive influence on our lives, we can shift the way that our body feels, because our body remembers what it "feels" like to be around that person.

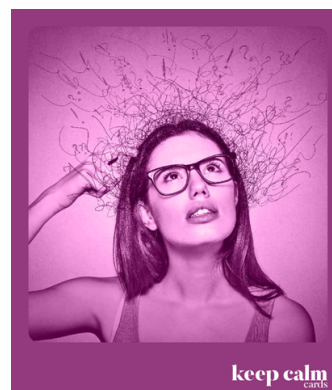


challenge your thinking

1. Identify your worrying thoughts - write them down if helpful.
2. Ask yourself each of these questions, or
3. Find the question that is most helpful to you right now.

- Q: What is the evidence that my worries are true?
Q: What is the evidence that my worries are not true?
Q: How will I feel about this situation in one week from now? One month? One year?
Q: What are the advantages of thinking this way?
Q: What are the disadvantages of thinking this way?
Q: Am I sure that this is really going to happen?
Q: How else can I look at this situation?
Q: Does it really matter what other people think?

WHY IT WORKS: Everyone has an "inner critic" that focuses on unhelpful, negative and often irrational thoughts. These negative and worrying thoughts will dominate your thinking unless you actively challenge them. Challenging your thinking is a proven technique as it requires you to be consciously aware of your thoughts, and trains your mind to develop more balanced, helpful and healthy thought patterns.



remembering resilience

1. Remember a time in the past when you coped with anxiety.
2. Take your time and find at least one example, even if it was for a short period of time.
3. Remember what you did to cope.
4. Remember how you managed to be in control.
5. Remember who supported you at that time.
6. What else do you remember that would be helpful?
7. What ideas can you use from that past experience right now?

WHY IT WORKS: Remembering times of resilience and recognising strengths, even in a small way, initiates positive feelings, hope and a belief that things can be better. When your brain remembers these moments and focuses on the details of how that was achieved, you are more likely to re-create behaviours, actions, and decisions congruent with past success.

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When to seek extra support

When to seek support:

- When school refusal becomes a problem.
- If you feel you and your child need support in coping and learning skills.
- If your child asks for help.
- If significant others express concern.
- When your child's quality of life is affected.

When To Be Concerned

- A sudden and dramatic change in mood, behaviour, presentation, interaction.
 - For teens, remember that emotions run high in the teen years
- Excessive worry and constantly in fight-flight mode
- Fatigued through constant worry
- Occurring more days than not
- Anxiety about multiple events or activities across different contexts
- Marked change in sleep, weight, appetite
 - Teens - remember sleep patterns change in the teen years
- Withdrawal from activities and interests
- Interferes with everyday functioning.
- Is experienced as distressing for the young person.
- If teachers, other adults, and friends are worried and concerned
- The anxiety, worry, or physical symptoms cause significant distress or impairment in social, academic, or other important areas of functioning.

With established, longer-term school refusal:

- Referral to a health professional may be required.
- In QLD you can access a Regional Youth Engagement Hub (an initiative of Education QLD). Check options for other States.
 - These Hubs help young people who have become disengaged to reconnect with education, training, or employment.
- In consultation with the school and your child, you might consider alternative schooling options.

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Where To Seek Extra Support

- Better Access to Mental Health Initiative
 - 10 Medicare Sessions in a calendar year
 - See your GP
- Kids Helpline - 1800 551 800
- Parent Line – 1300 30 1300
- Lifeline - 13 11 14
- Reach Out
 - <https://parents.au.reachout.com/one-on-one-support>
- The Brave Program (FREE online course)
 - <https://brave4you.psy.uq.edu.au/>
- Head to Health – Australian Government mental health portal
 - <https://www.headtohealth.gov.au/>

Find A Therapist

You can search for professionals in your area:

- [The Australian Psychological Society](#)
- [Australian Association of Social Workers](#)
- [Australian Counselling Association](#)
- [Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia](#)

Disclaimer

- A broad discussion.
- Aimed at early detection and response.
- Educational in nature.
- This webinar and handout do not constitute therapeutic advice.
- Each family and child is unique.
- Each school will have its unique resources, policies, and processes.
- Please seek professional support if required.