



# **School can't**

## **Part 1: Understanding and identifying the early signs**

**For parents and carers of Autistic children experiencing school can't.**

Navigating the challenges of school can't can be incredibly complex for children, their families and schools. When children struggle to attend school due to emotional or mental barriers, it impacts not only their educational progress but also their overall wellbeing. The difficulty in identifying and addressing the early signs of school can't often leaves parents and carers feeling uncertain and overwhelmed. Recognising and addressing these signs as soon as possible is crucial for providing timely support, reducing stress for the child, and maintaining their connection to their educational environment.

### **What is school can't?**

'School can't' occurs when a child is so overwhelmed and stressed by the demands of school that they find it difficult, or sometimes impossible, to attend. Autistic children and young people who experience school can't often experience extreme stress and/or anxiety about school. This may mean they:

- Miss days of school,
- Are frequently late,
- Or leave school early.

It may also mean they become overly stressed and anxious when they think of school. This worry may build up over the weekend or towards the end of the school holidays. Another name for school can't is school refusal. School refusal implies it is a choice, which is incorrect.

## **Is it wagging?**

School can't is different to truancy or wagging, where a child fails to attend school or leaves school early without their parents/carer's knowledge. By contrast, Autistic children experiencing school can't want to attend school, but they can't. Parents/carers of children experiencing school can't are aware that their child is unable to attend school.

## **Stress and Anxiety**

Stress and anxiety are both responses to perceived danger but are not the same. Stress is typically caused by an external trigger. This trigger can be short-term, such as a deadline, or long-term, such as ongoing bullying. Anxiety, on the other hand, is an emotion felt in anticipation of a future threat(1). Anxiety involves having persistent and excessive worries that don't go away, even in the absence of a stressor. While stress and anxiety are both normal feelings to have, when they exceed normal levels, they can become overwhelming and debilitating. A child's inability to go to school may be caused by intense stress and/or anxiety.

## **Autism and Anxiety**

Autistic children and young people are significantly more likely to experience anxiety or be formally diagnosed with an anxiety disorder than non-Autistic people(2). Autistic children need clear structures and predictability around what is happening in their environment. They also need sensory support strategies to participate successfully. Additionally, many Autistic children and young people mask when at school. Masking means that an Autistic person hides their Autistic traits to blend in. This takes a huge amount of mental and physical energy and can lead to poor mental health in the long term.

Autistic children can experience chronic and overwhelming stress in response to the daily demands of school. They can also experience anxiety due to their body alerting them to the many potential threats that may occur in the school environment. Experiencing intense stress or anxiety for extended periods of time can have serious impacts on physical and mental health outcomes. In some children, the anxiety does not go away and can even get worse over time. These children may be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder.

Some of the factors which may contribute to feelings of overwhelm in the school setting include:

- Sensory demands
- Feeling the need to mask (or hide) their Autistic traits in order to blend in
- Lack of structure or predictability regarding what is happening in their environment
- Social demands
- Difficulty managing academic or cognitive demands
- Executive functioning demands.

When the demands of school outstrip the child's skills or capacity, the child is likely to experience stress or anxiety to a level that is outside what they can tolerate. Over time, this can eventually lead to school can't as well as other adverse outcomes for the child.

# Early signs of school can't

There are a range of early signs that can help you spot the presence of school can't.

Autistic children and young people may show several signs of the early stages of school can't. It isn't always clear if these signs are related to anxiety about school.

## Parents and carers have reported the following early signs of school can't:

- Stress in the morning and taking longer to get ready or not being able to get out of bed
  - Physical signs of anxiety, such as tummy aches and headaches
  - Panic attacks
  - Separation anxiety, wanting more cuddles and increased clinginess
  - Loss of appetite, and/or not eating at school
  - Signs of depression, including exhaustion, lack of motivation, loss of interest in their favourite activities, or self-harm / suicidal ideation
  - Shutdowns and being more withdrawn
  - Sleep disturbances
  - Talk of hating school, being bored at school or wanting to change schools
  - Social difficulties and/or social withdrawal.
- Emotional reactivity / dysregulation, such as irritability
  - Skill loss, or less ability to do things at home that they used to be able to do, or taking longer to do them, such as personal hygiene or getting dressed
  - Reduced communication abilities and selective mutism
  - Low self-esteem
  - Meltdowns
  - Sensory issues increasing
  - School absences
  - Grades dropping and/or increased difficulties completing schoolwork
  - Autistic burnout
  - Running away or hiding
  - Less resilience to routine changes
  - Increase in co-occurring condition symptoms, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)

It's important to remember that these are only some of the early signs of school can't and it may show up differently in your child. Understanding why there has been a change in your child's behaviour is the best place to start. You can always seek professional help or speak to your child's school.

## **Getting support from your school**

Parents and carers may not know what is happening when school can't behaviours emerge. School can't may start with a few days off school, or a child telling their parent or carer about their anxiety. In these cases, it will be clear. However, in other cases, it will be less apparent and more difficult to identify what is distressing your child.

It's important to contact your school to discuss signs of school can't as early as possible. In primary school, the best contact would be your child's classroom teacher. In the case of secondary school, you can contact your child's homeroom coordinator, year level/grade coordinator, or wellbeing officer.

The Association for Children with a Disability have a helpful information sheet on raising concerns with the school: [Raising a concern with school](#).

Starting a conversation with the school makes it easier to identify what is happening and to act quickly. The school could be unaware of the level of distress your child is experiencing because they may mask at school. There may be situations at school where your child is unable to fully articulate what's happening. If this is the case, your child's teachers can help by providing more detail or noticing how your child is reacting. By understanding how your child is presenting across all environments and by working together, the family and school can create a full picture of what is causing your child stress or anxiety at school and look at a plan to support them.

## **Looking after yourself**

Parents and carers report many mixed feelings when their child shows signs of school can't. This can range from concern and guilt to frustration. It's important to remember that school can't isn't the fault of you or your child. There is usually a mismatch between the needs of the child and the demands of the school environment. Some parents and carers may also struggle with their child's inability to attend school and may find it helpful to connect with other families who share their experiences.

Changing your experience of these feelings can take some adjusting. It may be helpful to focus on the longer-term goals of your child's wellbeing and a positive school experience can assist you meet your child where they are at. It can also enable you to implement supports and strategies that have a more lasting and sustainable impact.

Reach out to other autism/Autistic parents through peer support groups. Many of these parents and carers are dealing with school can't in their family. They will have advice on school can't and tips on what has worked with their child.

Other parents and carers recommend self-care in order not to burn out but also to better support your child.

(1) American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.). <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596>

(2) Hossain, M. M., Khan, N., Sultana, A., Ma, P., McKyer, E. L. J., Ahmed, H. U., & Purohit, N. (2020). Prevalence of comorbid psychiatric disorders among people with autism spectrum disorder: An umbrella review of systematic reviews and meta-analyses. *Psychiatry Research*, 287, 112922. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.112922>





## Summary

- School can't is a response to stress and/or anxiety.
- There are several early signs of school can't, which can look different in every child.
- It's important to approach your child's school once you become aware of the signs.

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