



MOUNT
KELLY

Boarding and Day School
Boys and Girls, Aged 4-18

Safeguarding Bulletin

ISSUE 25

Mount Kelly's Safeguarding Bulletin aims to provide parents and carers with the information needed to have informed and age-appropriate conversations with their children about potential risks and issues in the wider world and online. This week's bulletin is on the topic of school anxiety and avoidance.

It's normal for children and young people to feel worried about something that's happening at school from time to time – for example, when moving to a new class or during exams. Sometimes, however, school can become challenging or stressful for a child over a much longer period of time, and the factors that come together to make a child consciously avoid seeing their classmates and teachers at school can be much more complicated than is often assumed.

If a child is feeling anxious about school, or says they are not able to go, it can be exhausting for both parents and children. Mornings in particular can become really stressful for the whole family, as parents try to juggle their child's feelings alongside the need to get them to school and get on with other responsibilities such as work. Even if a parent manages to get their child to the school gate, they might know how difficult their child is going to find the day – or know that they'll be facing the same problem tomorrow morning.

Young people might show they're feeling anxious about school by:

- not wanting to get up and get ready
- saying they can't go
- worrying a lot about small issues, such as having the right equipment for a lesson
- feeling sick, or having stomach aches or headaches
- not sleeping well
- not doing schoolwork, or their grades dropping
- being angry or upset, or acting out – at school or at home
- withdrawing – seeming low or unusually quiet

Sometimes it can be hard to work out what's making your child feel anxious, and the first step is often helping them to identify exactly what's worrying them. Once you understand the problem, you'll be in a much better position to make changes that can help. Young people can find it hard to explain what's causing their feelings, and might not be able to answer direct questions like 'what's going on?' or 'what's wrong?'. Using an **anxiety iceberg** can help to open up the conversation – giving parents a more relaxed way of exploring together what's causing their anxiety. This **video from Young Minds** explains how to make an anxiety iceberg: [How to support your child if they're struggling with school anxiety \(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)

If you ever find that your child is anxious about school, a careful, mindful approach from parents, carers and school staff is required to help them. Please do **contact the pastoral team** at school if you have concerns.

This week's **#WakeUpWednesday guide** aims to help you understand further the issue of school avoidance – not only its potential roots and ramifications, but also what you can do to help your child navigate these obstacles and continue their education.

What Parents & Educators Need to Know about SCHOOL AVOIDANCE

School avoidance refers to reduced attendance or non-attendance at school by a child or young person. In 2022-23, more than one in five children in England were found to be absent from school over 10% of the time. This guide focuses on school avoidance with an emotional basis, offering expert mental health advice. However, it's important to remember that school avoidance is a hugely subjective experience which requires a tailored, individual approach.

UNDERSTANDING SCHOOL AVOIDANCE

IMPACT OF SCHOOL AVOIDANCE

REASONS FOR ABSENCE

School avoidance is sometimes underpinned by several factors rather than one single cause. This could include something going on for the child or young person within the family or at school. A child may have caring responsibilities at home, for instance, or a change in family dynamics; bullying and friendship difficulties at school; pressure to achieve in schoolwork and exams; or moving from primary school to secondary school.

LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

School refusal can negatively impact a young person's learning and development. Attending school on a regular basis not only supports academic attainment but is also important for the development of key life skills and the growth of children and young people as citizens.

PATTERNS OF ABSENCE

You may notice patterns in regular absences or children regularly expressing that they don't want to attend school (particularly being reluctant to leave home on school days). If a child or young person is neurodiverse, there is some evidence to suggest there are more aspects of school life which can cause distress – such as changes in the environment, changes of routine and sensory stimuli.

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

The difficulties associated with school non-attendance can be far reaching and may have a negative impact on long-term outcomes. It may, for example, lead to reduced future aspirations, poor emotional regulation, mental health difficulties, limited academic progress and restricted employment opportunities.

COMPLAINTS ABOUT PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

There may be an increase in a child or young person's complaints about physical symptoms, particularly on school days or the evening before school. These could include tummy aches, headaches, or saying they feel ill when there doesn't appear to be a medical cause. Always check with the GP first to rule out medical causes or illness.

CYCLE OF ABSENCE

Consistent absences may contribute to sustained school avoidance over time. Further to this, the longer a pupil is out of education, the more likely it is that there is a rise in their ongoing need to avoid the activity making them anxious – increasing their desire to stay at home.

Advice for Parents & Educators

WORK TOGETHER

If there's a concern about a child's absence and emotional wellbeing, it's important that there is clear communication and a consistent approach between the child's parents and the school, so you can take a child-centred approach together towards a plan of support or reintegration. This ensures a consistency of approach from both home and school, creating better outcomes for the child.

MANAGE OVERWHELMING FEELINGS

Acknowledge the child's worries, listen and discuss coping strategies together to help them manage difficulties. These could include mindfulness, deep breathing or going for a walk. This helps them understand that you are working together towards a common goal, and that these strategies can be used when bigger feelings arise.

FOLLOW REGULAR ROUTINES

Children can benefit from a regular and consistent routine. This could be a morning routine, from waking up and having breakfast through to getting dressed, packing their bag and leaving the house. A consistent evening routine which is calm and spent away from screens can also give children much needed predictability and familiarity. Schools can help create a timetabled routine for the child's school day, if required.

RECOGNISE POSITIVE STEPS

Drawing attention to a child's successes – be they big or small – can help to give them some much-needed confidence and motivation. Celebrate these daily victories – such as getting out of bed on time or completing school work – and don't hesitate to let the child know when you're impressed or proud of them. Such an approach can go a long way.

Meet Our Expert

With 30 years' experience as a teacher, trainer, consultant and interim executive board member, Anna Bateman has a superb understanding of what works in pedagogy, school improvement and leadership. She has also advised the Department for Education on their mental health green paper.



The National College

Source: See full reference list on guide page at: nationalcollege.com/guides/school-avoidance

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