



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte  
Health Service Executive



# School Refusal

## Good Practice Guide for Schools

*Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (DCAP) Waterford  
National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), Waterford*

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**This HSE/NEPS Good Practice Guide is based on current knowledge in this area. It is intended as a guide only. Not all the suggestions here will apply to any one student or situation.**

**This pack is intended to support students, parents and schools in working together to prevent school refusal occurring. In addition, if school refusal does happen, this pack attempts to seek and provide successful solutions so that the student can once again become part of the school community and enjoy a positive experience of school. The suggestions and strategies outlined in this pack are not exhaustive. However, it is hoped that the pack will provide some guidance and support to students, parents and teachers.**

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## School Refusal

### Information and Support Pack for Schools and Parents

#### Introduction:

School refusal can be defined as the 'child motivated refusal to attend school or difficulties remaining in school for an entire day' (Lyons and Coulter, 2007). There are many reasons why a student may refuse to attend school or remain in school. These include fears originating within the school environment such as;

- Social and peer related difficulties
- Learning and curriculum difficulties
- Difficulties with the physical environment

In addition, there may be family and community based concerns which make it hard for a student to leave the family home to attend school for fear that something may happen to a parent or loved one whilst they are away.

A student may also choose to stay away from school as the alternatives are more attractive at that time. Whatever the reason, school refusal is a significant difficulty affecting many students, families and schools.

Early identification that there is a potential difficulty is a key factor in addressing problems in this area. At this stage, there are strategies and interventions that school, class teachers and parents can adopt. There is a process available in schools that can be followed to support this stage. This is called the Continuum of Support process which is recommended for supporting all students in schools and particularly when difficulties arise. Further information on this process and supporting resource materials are available in the following NEPS documents;

- Special Educational Needs – a Continuum of Support (2007)
- Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties – a Continuum of Support (2010)
- A Continuum of Support for Post Primary Schools (2011))

When the problem is more advanced and a student has stopped attending, correctly identifying the source of the difficulty is paramount to identifying the most appropriate supports needed. This is to increase the chances of reaching a successful outcome; that of getting the student back into school and feeling safe, secure and supported. Ultimately, a co-ordinated, consistent and timely response by all parties involved is essential to successfully re-integrating the student back into the school community.

## How does School Refusal come about?

The following diagrams illustrate the cycles of thoughts and feelings that can lead to a student initially refusing to attend school and continuing to refuse to attend.

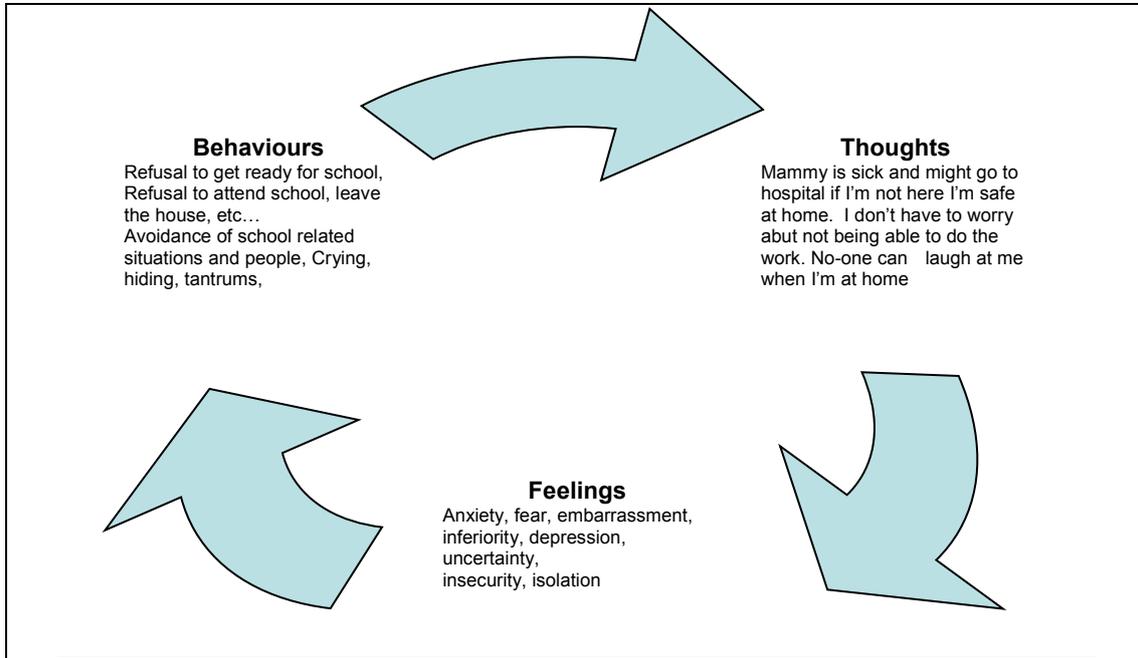


Figure 1 When School Refusal Starts

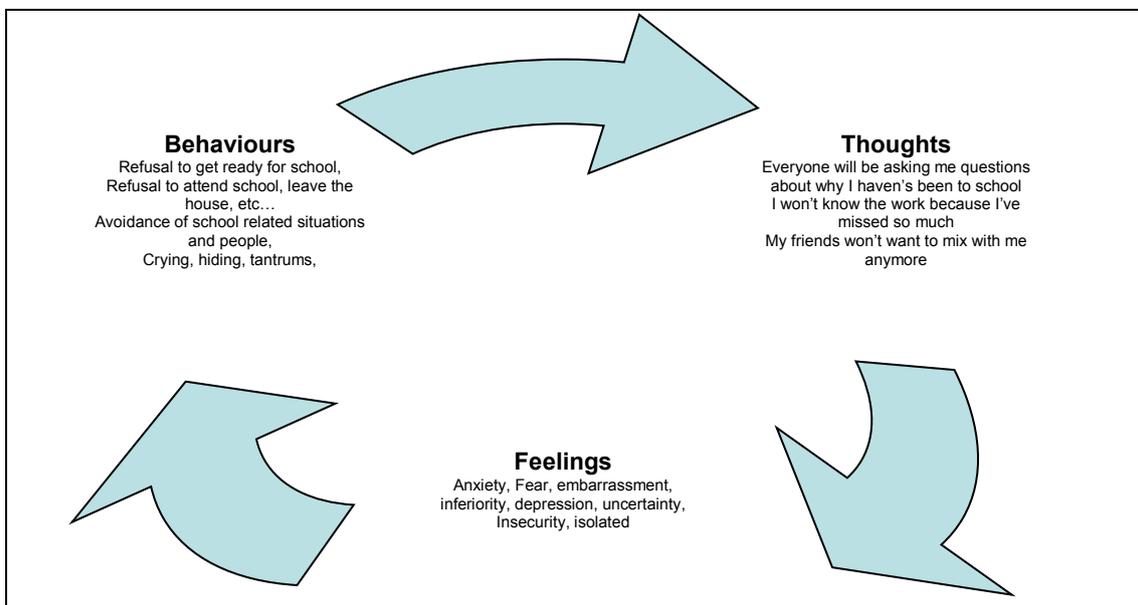


Figure 2 Maintenance of School Refusal

The following are further contributory factors that may lead to a student either refusing school **or** having the resilience and skills to deal with difficult situations that may lead to school refusal.

### **Predisposing Factors**

- Student's temperament
- Environmental factors
- Family context including parental mental and/or physical health and coping skills
- Inconsistent parent discipline style
- Marital disharmony

### **Precipitating Factors/Triggers to School Refusal:**

- Social Isolation
- Bullying
- Poor relationship with teachers
- Poor coping skills or a perception of inability to manage and cope
- Struggling with academic demands

### **Maintaining Factors to School Refusal:**

- Poor coping skills
- Secondary gain to staying at home such as access to fun stuff and one to one time with a parent
- Parent's own anxiety and uncertainty how to best manage the situation
- Student's fear about others asking why they have been absent
- Limited support at home
- Parent's inability to support the student to return to school by sympathising with them, accepting the situation
- Marital difficulties/discord
- School based difficulties-staff unable to support the student
- Poor co - operation among those supporting the student to return to school

### **Protective Factors – that help avoid school refusal behaviours occurring**

- Secure parent child attachment
- Parents share parenting tasks and are consistent, clear and firm
- Accurate knowledge of anxiety and factors that maintain it
- High levels of support and low levels of stress
- Student's easy temperament, average ability, good coping skills and ability to make friends
- School has the resources and knowledge necessary to support the student
- Cooperation between those involved in supporting the student

## **Interventions Based on Function of School Refusal Behaviour**

The approach and intervention to be used when a student is refusing to attend school is dependent on the reason why this is happening. Therefore, when there are indications of difficulties, it is important that those involved with the student make observations and collect information to help understand the cause of the problem. Resources to support this process are available in the Continuum of Support documents. Possible reasons for school refusal and potential intervention approaches and strategies to support the student returning successfully to school are set out below.

### **Refusing school to avoid school-based experiences that the student finds uncomfortable** (e.g. fear of the toilets; the noise in the playground; lots of people moving all together in the corridors between classes)

- Educational programmes regarding anxiety and how it affects our thinking, feeling and behaviour
- How avoidance of the scary situation makes things worse
- Anxiety management techniques such as relaxation training and deep breathing
- Gradual re-exposure to school setting using avoidance hierarchy from least feared school situations to most feared
- Self-reinforcement of gains-starting small and building up to the most feared situation while using anxiety management skills and rewarding yourself as you go

### **Refusing school to escape difficult social situations** (e.g. feeling left out at playtime; reading out loud in class or other public speaking/group task; working as part of a group)

- Educational programmes regarding anxiety and how it affects thinking, feelings and behaviour
- Anxiety management techniques such as relaxation training and deep breathing
- Problem solving skills-how to break something scary down into smaller tasks so it's more manageable
- Cognitive restructuring to change unhelpful thoughts
- Practicing coping skills in real-life social and evaluative situations, starting small and building up to most challenging
- Gradual re-exposure to school setting using avoidance hierarchy
- Self-reinforcement of gains - starting small and building up to the most feared situation while using anxiety management skills and rewarding yourself as you go

**Refusing school to get attention from significant others (parent-based)** (e.g. *there's a new baby in the house and child feels excluded; parent/s are pre – occupied with other issues and have less time to spend with the child; parent has a new partner*)

- Establish some positive time to spend with the child outside of school hours
- Focus attention on positive behaviours the student engages in
- Support parents to use problem solving techniques with their child
- Support parents to use commands that are brief and clear
- Establish a set morning routine prior to school as well as daytime routines as necessary
- Limit the attention a student receives when they are not in school
- Establish rewards for attendance and consequences for nonattendance
- Forced school attendance in specific cases

**Refusing school to enjoy other activities and have fun outside of school (family-based)** (e.g. *student gets to go shopping with parent on their own, student gets to 'hang out' with other friends who are out of school or who have left school*)

- Limit attention the student receives at home if it's during school time
- Contingency contracting that involves increasing "rewards" for attendance and disincentives for nonattendance i.e. laptop time, access to internet, phone credit, time with friends in town etc...
- Establish times and places for family members to use problem solving
- Communication skills training for parents and student
- Escorting a youth to school and classes as necessary
- Increasing monitoring of attendance from parents and school
- Peer refusal skills training- supporting the student to refuse offers from others to miss school

## **Prevention of School Refusal**

### ***Preventative Interventions and Strategies in School***

#### **Introduction:**

What ever the reasons for a student refusing to attend school, there are interventions and strategies which can be put in place within the school setting. These can be done in both in a preventative capacity and when a difficulty starts to appear **before it becomes embedded**. Many of the strategies suggested below are already present in schools. It is important that they are evaluated regularly to ensure that interventions are effective in supporting students.

The following interventions and suggestions are not exhaustive and for the purpose of this pack, are not detailed, but it is envisaged that there is enough information here for schools to implement them.

#### **Supporting Documents and School Based Resources:**

All schools have been furnished with the NEPS documents, Special Educational Needs – a Continuum of Support (Primary), Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties – a Continuum of Support (Primary) and A Continuum of Support for Post Primary Schools (Secondary). These documents are intended to support schools in their work with supporting all students, with particular regard to students who are presenting with difficulties, from transient to more enduring, be they academic, social, emotional and/or behavioural.

At the earliest stage of concern, it is the teacher, with the parents who need to examine what the difficulty may be and what might be tried to support the student through this time (Classroom Support/Support for All). If concerns remain, the school's existing resources, including learning support/resource teachers, social skills groups and other resources can be called on to provide some support to the student (School Support).

If, following a period of intervention there continues to be concerns, then more intensive involvement of outside agencies may be sought for evaluation, information and advice (School Support Plus). At any time, schools can consult with the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) and NEPS with regard to potential interventions and strategies that may be tried to support the student.

## Preventative Interventions and Programmes for Schools:

In order to ensure relatively minor situations do not develop into situations of full school refusal, it is essential that difficulties are identified and addressed early. However, sometimes school refusal situations can occur suddenly and with no apparent warning signs.

### School Based Programmes and Interventions:

#### *Promotion of Parental Involvement:*



The importance of developing a positive and active relationship between the school and parents is crucial in ensuring that when difficulties do arise, a speedy, collaborative and effective response can be made. Ensuring that communication channels remain open is important in the sharing of information relating to the student's social, emotional, behavioural and educational development when concerns do occur, they can be dealt with quickly. Parents can be included in the school and their student's educational life through the following activities:

- Helping with homework
- Taking an interest in school projects
- Attending school events including school plays, parent – teacher meetings, fund raising events, etc...
- Keeping regular contact with the classteacher either through face to face meetings or through the use of a communication notebook
- Inviting them in to help in the school/classroom with reading, cooking, making resources, etc...
- Supporting the student to attend after school activities

As part of preventive interventions, it is important that the parents receive consistent information and advice as to how to encourage regular school attendance and what to do if a problem starts with attendance. For further information on this, see 'Information and Tips for Parents' on page 15 of this resource pack. Further information for parents on encouraging regular school attendance can be found on the NEWB website, [www.newb.ie](http://www.newb.ie).

#### *Screening:*



In order to ensure that students do not 'fall through the net', it is suggested that areas to be regularly screened include reading, writing, spelling, numeracy and behaviour – including social skills. Materials to support this process, including screening for behaviour and emotional needs, is included in the Continuum documents.

### **Post Screening:**



Planning and implementing individual programmes for those identified with special educational needs should be done in a timely manner to ensure that difficulties do not escalate and become embedded. In order to support this process, there are helpful materials within the Continuum of Support documents for schools to use including gathering relevant background information, planning, evaluating a plan and information on specific interventions and resources.

### **School Based Programmes/Curriculum:**

Schools already have a variety of programmes and interventions in place or the information they need to do this. Programmes and interventions include;

- Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)
- Stay Safe
- Social skills programmes
- The School's Code of Behaviour (including incentive programmes to encourage positive behaviour including regular attendance)
- Health and Safety policy

DEIS schools may also have additional programmes in place including breakfast clubs, homework and/or after school clubs, etc...

### **Attendance:**



The monitoring of attendance is an important intervention to pick up on those who may be on the path to school refusal. This is something that all schools do as a matter of course and it is important that this information is used effectively. Potential areas of difficulty to be checked include;

- Medical difficulties to ensure that there is no underlying physical or emotional reasons for the student to be refusing school
- Social reasons – is the student having difficulties with their peers
- Educational reasons – is the student having difficulties with the curriculum
- Environmental reasons – is there something in the environment that is causing distress or difficulty for the student

This can then lead to a focussed and individual intervention being put in place as soon as possible to prevent the problem from escalating. In order to support schools in gathering this information and developing an intervention plan, the Continuum of Support documents contain a variety of information

gathering templates and templates to use in the development of an individual plan. Case studies are included in these documents to support teachers in the development of their own interventions.

***Involvement of Outside Agencies and Support Services:***



Sometimes, a student experiences difficulties which require a more detailed response from other professionals and agencies. Difficulties may also be present involving the whole family for which additional supports may be required. It is therefore important that schools identify these difficulties and if, following collection of additional information, it becomes evident that further professional supports are required, timely referral on is needed. This may include referral to Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Clinical Psychology, Speech and Language Therapy, Occupational Therapy, and/or other agencies. Where a family needs additional support in ensuring that the student's basic care needs are being met, referral to the Social Worker Department of the HSE may be required. Advice and information on making such referrals may be found in the HSE Child Protection documents. In cases of difficulties with school attendance, the National Educational Welfare Board through localised Educational Welfare Officers will be involved.

## **When School Gets Scary – Information and Tips for Students and Young Adults**

Every student in the world at some stage of their school life gets worried about school. And every adult in the world was scared or worried about school at some stage. For some students this can pass but for others they get so scared that their stomach hurts, their heart races, their hands get sweaty and they will do anything not to go.

Horrible scary thoughts can go through our minds the night before school and we think of all the awful things that might happen. The next morning we may tell our parents we don't feel well so we are allowed to stay at home and watch some TV and so our anxiety goes away. But that night it starts all over again and so on and so on. It's a vicious circle!

Sometimes when we get worried about things, it can affect us by making us want to stay somewhere we know well and feel safe, close to our family and friends. When students are scared and worried, it can be hard to concentrate in class and in school and this can mean that the work seems to be getting harder and harder, maybe too hard for us to do. Then, it seems easier to stay at home and not face these difficulties.

### **There are four main reasons why students refuse to go to school or can get super worried;**

1. School related stuff like teachers, difficult subjects, certain class based or school based situations.
2. Social situations including bossy people, bullies, mean girls, mean boys, having to stand up and read in front of the class and walking past older students.
3. One to one attention from Mum, Dad, Granny, Aunty staying at home often means spending time with an adult without others around.
4. Fun stuff- watching DVD'S, TV, internet access, reading favourite books, playing on phones, shopping with parents, staying with Granny, staying in bed late,etc...

It might be a few of these reasons. The most important thing is to let an adult know if you are worried about anything in school and get the help to make it better rather than let things get worse and get stuck. Let an adult know what the scary thoughts about school are and list them all out. With their help you, can start to problem solve.

Also beware of worry thoughts. A lot of students who worry think like this.....

**“What if....?”**

Usually we finish this thought by imagining something awful will happen and that we won't be able to cope. **Don't listen to this worry bully!!!**

List all the ways you managed before, problem solve with an adult and then share this list with a teacher. Don't forget that the more you fight this the stronger you will get. It might help to set small tasks first and then build these up. Take a big deep breath, tell yourself you can do this and don't let worry boss you around!

**Things you can do to help you when you feel scared and unsure about coming back to school:**

- ✚ If the work in school is too hard and you don't understand it, tell your parents and/or teachers.
- ✚ If you are being bullied, tell an adult.
- ✚ If you have not been going to school for a while, keep in contact with your friends and classmates and keep up to date with what is happening in school.
- ✚ Your parents, teachers and other adults will want to help you to get back into school. Take part in the planning on how you are going to return to school.
- ✚ Catch up on some of the work that you may have missed before you go back.
- ✚ Practice answering questions that you think others might ask you about why you have not been in school.
- ✚ Be strong and brave and will yourself to go to school. Once there, you will find that things are not as bad as they seem.
- ✚ Take little steps to get back into the routine – don't expect that everything will get back to normal/will be okay immediately.
- ✚ Recognise your small successes at getting back to school.

***Remember, this may be hard now, but it is all worth it in the end.***

## Information and Tips for Parents

School Refusal is behaviour that results in your child refusing to attend school altogether or has difficulties remaining in class/school for a full day (Kearney 2007).

If your child is presenting with persistent tummy aches, delays going to school, shows distress attending or is ringing to come home from school, acknowledge that there is a problem. The most important thing you can do for a child experiencing school anxiety is to acknowledge that their fears are real *to them*. If nothing else, you'll ensure that they won't be afraid to talk to you about them.

### Children refuse school for four main reasons;

1. Avoid school related things that provoke anxiety like busy corridors, PE class.
2. To avoid social situations in school like lunch time, speaking in front of others, bullies.
3. To receive attention from parents/carers outside of school.
4. To get or try to get "rewards" outside of school. For example spend one to one time with Mum, get to go shopping or watch T.V.

Be aware that all children feel some anxiety about school, **even the ones who seem successful and carefree**. Knowing this won't lessen your child's anxiety, but it may lessen yours and help your child understand that they are not alone.

#### School:

The longer school refusal goes on, the harder it is to treat. If a child avoids an anxiety provoking situation their anxiety subsides without learning that by staying in that situation the anxiety will eventually decrease naturally. Things you can do include getting help from your child's school. Teachers need to be aware there is a problem. They can support the child to use coping strategies or address bullying/social situations in class or in small groups. Sometimes being taught in a special unit or resource room in school (if the school has one) may help your child feel more secure as it is a cosier place and acts as a half-way point between home and school before gradually introducing the classroom again. It should be made quite clear to your child's teachers that she is not 'playing up' but that her anxiety is very real and she is suffering from it. However, be firm that the ultimate goal is to return full time to the classroom.

#### Home:

At home, life should continue as normal and your child should be encouraged to carry on as normal. They might want to stop going out, especially without you, even to parties or sports that they were quite happy being left at previously. Although you need to deal sensitively with them, if they don't

absolutely have to miss something, it is best to help them go by going with them for part (or all) of the time so that their world does not shrink altogether. Both parents/guardians need to encourage and prompt for coping and work as a team to support their child returning to school.

Ask, "What three things are you most worried about?" Making your request specific can help your child start to sort through fears and feelings. If they are unable to name the things that are *most* worrying, have them tell you the most recent three things. Ask, "What three things are you most excited about?" Most kids can think of *something* good, even if it's just going home at the end of the day. But chances are your child does have things they really enjoy about school that just gets drowned out by all the scary stuff. Bring those good things out into the light.

### How to Support Your Child to Go Back to School:

- ✚ Reassure and encourage your child. Tell them that they will be fine once they have got over the part he/she dreads. Anxiety does get less.
  
- ✚ Work through with your child ways to help them cope with the scary aspects of school. Brainstorm all possible ideas and look at the pro's and con's of each suggestion. Decide which is most likely to work and give that a go. Review how this worked then adapt it if necessary.
  
- ✚ Tell them that they are brave for going to school. Although their friends might find it easy, they have a private battle they have to fight every school day. Each time they battle this fear they will get stronger! Tell them that you are proud of them for being so brave.
  
- ✚ During school time, make life boring for your child at home; no T.V. time, no laptops or DVDs. These activities are far more fun than being in school. If home is a fun, relaxing place during school time, then why bother with school!
  
- ✚ If not attending school (or attending on a reduced day) it is recommended that your child gets up at the same time and gets into school uniform as usual. They must sit at the kitchen table or somewhere boring and complete some school work .

- ✚ Don't interact with your child too much at this time and try to keep to a school timetable. One to one attention from a parent can be rewarding.(No fun stuff like trips to see friends, going out shopping or T.V. at break-time).
  
- ✚ Continue with routine. Make them go to bed and get up at the same time every day (even on weekends) so that they have some secure framework to live around.
  
- ✚ Encourage your child to find things they can enjoy in the school day, chatting with friends, favourite subject or class, P.E., playtime/break-time, home-time.
  
- ✚ Explain that their fears are brought on by thoughts that are not always true thoughts (Stinking Thinking): they are reacting to normal things in an extreme way.
  
- ✚ Have the parent who is better at encouraging attendance take the child to school.
  
- ✚ Get a lift from other parents and include a class friend to accompany the child.
  
- ✚ Deal constructively with family concerns and parenting issues, perhaps with the assistance of a mental health professional such as a psychologist or counsellor.

## Information and Tips for Schools

### Individual Interventions when School Refusal is a Problem - Returning to School

When a student has been identified as having a difficulty with attending school, the key is to implement supportive interventions as soon as possible with the aim of getting the student back into school as soon as possible. It is therefore essential that a potential difficulty in this area is picked up early through preventive measures and when non attendance starts, help is provided immediately to prevent the non attendance developing. The longer this goes on, the more difficult it is to get the student back into the routine of school.

'Individual teachers need to be carefully briefed by those managing the student's school refusal and return to school and to act only where strategy has been agreed beforehand. For example, if a student asks to go home/contact parents/feels unwell, etc... the teacher should contact the assigned teacher in charge of managing the return to school strategy if unsure with regard to how to manage the situation appropriately in a firm and supportive manner. Illness complaints without physical basis, crying, protests, negotiations or tantrums are all likely to occur initially, when parents and teachers are being firm about school attendance. As a student starts to manage their anxiety about attending school, there may be an initial increase in protest behaviour until the student settles in. This can be minutes, hours or several days.' Tyrell, NEPS.

### ***School Interventions:***

It is important that consultation occurs between professionals involved with the student to ensure consistency of approach and management. This will ensure that attempts to encourage the student back to school are done as smoothly as possible and increase the likelihood of success. The following is therefore recommended:

### ***Preparation by School Staff:***

-  A meeting/s between all professionals involved with the student with school staff involved in the school strategy for return to school.
-  Following this meeting, regular phone contact between these professionals for several weeks and, if necessary, further meetings to deal with issues arising.
-  All school staff, teachers, SNAs, etc... should be informed of the student's return to school.
-  One or two members of staff should meet the student when they return. If possible, this should be someone that the student already has a positive relationship with.

- ✚ The student should be greeted in a friendly manner with no reference made to their absence or difficulties associated.
- ✚ The student should be allowed time to settle into school in a quiet place with the staff member before going to class, if necessary.
- ✚ The staff member can reduce anxiety and potential distress by using this time to explain to the student what's going to happen during the day and how the difficulties that may have contributed to the school refusal are going to be alleviated. For example, social or academic difficulties.

### ***Preparation of Peers:***

- ✚ Peers can be alerted and urged to be supportive with no questioning as to why the student has been absent.
- ✚ Select one or two suitable class peers to act as special buddies to help the student re-integrate into school life. This may involve these students sitting with the returning student, briefing them on class work, looking after them at break times and generally involving them in all aspects of school.

### ***Preparation of Educational Provision to Meet Special Educational Needs:***

In the case where a student has special educational needs which contributed to school refusal, the following is important to have in place to facilitate a smooth transition:

- ✚ All teachers, SNAs and other staff members working with the student have been briefed about anxiety related problems (e.g. reading aloud in class).
- ✚ The student's learning needs have been identified.
- ✚ A suitably resourced and planned special educational needs programme is implemented.
- ✚ Sufficient time has been allocated for a whole – school anxiety management programme. For example the student has learned about anxiety and how best to manage and cope.
- ✚ A co-operative working relationship exists between the school support team, outside professionals working with the student and family.

### **Sample Plan and Return to School Timetable**

## **Tuesday**

- ✚ Arrive in school at 9.30 a.m. (after school has started and all are settled in class)
- ✚ SNA meets the student and they go to the library until break to look at the timetable for the day and start work from individual plan.
- ✚ Student meets 2 peers at break time who take them somewhere quiet to play/engage in non threatening activities.
- ✚ Student goes with 2 peers to class.
- ✚ At lunchtime, student goes with 2 peers into the playground (if ready). If not, they go somewhere quiet to play.
- ✚ After lunch, student goes to class or the library with SNA.

## **Wednesday:**

- ✚ Arrive in school at 9.30 a.m. (after school has started and all are settled in class)
- ✚ SNA meets the student and they go to the library until break.
- ✚ Student goes with 2 peers into playground to play.
- ✚ Student goes with peers to class.
- ✚ Student goes out to play with 2 peers at lunchtime.
- ✚ After lunch, student attends class.

## **Thursday:**

- ✚ Arrive in school at 9.30 a.m. (after school has started and all are settled in class)
- ✚ SNA meets the student and they go to the library until break.
- ✚ Student goes to meet friends in the playground (if ready).
- ✚ Student attends class as normal.

## **Friday:**

- ✚ Arrive in school at 9.30 a.m. (after school has started and all are settled in class)
- ✚ SNA meets the student and they go to the library for half an hour and then to class.
- ✚ Student attends playground and class as normal.

## **Monday:**

- ✚ Student arrives in school at normal start time.
- ✚ SNA meets the student and they go to the library for half an hour and then to class.
- ✚ Student attends playground and class as normal.

## **Where to Next?**

If you find that school and home based interventions, including the Continuum of Support approaches are not working, then services available for support include:

#### **Educational Supports:**

The school Principal can consider prioritising a referral to the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) for support and advice on how to support the student.

#### **National Education and Welfare Board (NEWB):**

This service supports school attendance, participation and retention for students aged six years old to 16 years old. They can offer advice and support to families with regard to promoting attendance. Their website, [www.newb.ie](http://www.newb.ie), has information and leaflets for parents that encourage school attendance.

#### **HSE Psychology Department:**

Drop in Clinic: The HSE Psychology Department holds a Drop in Clinic for parents only every Wednesday in Community Care on the Cork Road. No appointment for this is necessary.

Individual appointments: The HSE Psychology Department also see children and families on an individual basis but there is a waiting list for this service.

#### **Department of Student and Adolescent Psychiatry:**

In certain cases, a GP referral to the local Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry may be warranted when dealing with significant mental health difficulties.

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