

# The National Trend of School Refusal: What Role Does ADHD Play?

In August 2023 a Senate Inquiry was carried out to improve our understanding of the problem of school refusal and its impact on Australian families (McKay-Brown & Melvin, 2023) .

## What is School Refusal?

Despite some disagreement about terminology, school refusal is generally conceptualised as the 'inability of a young person to attend school due to a severe negative emotional reaction to school' (Parliament of Australia, 2023) .

School refusal should be seen as distinct from truancy, as it is caused by complicated emotional barriers, as opposed to a simple choice to avoid school (Parliament of Australia, 2023) . School refusal also lacks the antisocial behaviour associated with truancy. Consequently, some parents who responded to the recent inquiry suggested alternative terms for school refusal, such as 'attendance anxiety' or 'school can't' (Parliament of Australia, 2023) .

## What Did the Inquiry Find?

Due to a lack of high-quality data, it is difficult to estimate the prevalence of school refusal, but the inquiry found evidence that school refusal had been increasing, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic (Parliament of Australia, 2023) . The inquiry also found that school refusal was an especially common problem among neurodivergent children and children with mental health issues and/or disability (Parliament of Australia, 2023) .



There are many negative consequences of school refusal affecting children, families, and wider society. Professor Jim Watterston reports that the fiscal and social costs of school detachment per cohort are \$12.6 billion and \$23.2 billion respectively. It was also noted by the inquiry that the true costs may be higher. On a personal level, school refusal poses risks to the mental health, self-esteem, and social functioning of young people affected by it. Virtual School Victoria (VSV) warns that the loss of social connection associated with school refusal may 'compound social isolation, leaving many of our students struggling to leave their home, or in some cases, even their bedroom.' This is a particularly important finding for families of children with ADHD, as children with ADHD already experience above average levels of social isolation (Thompson et al., 2023).

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It is difficult to untangle factors related to school can't and factors related to other forms of school non-attendance.

However, the following issues were listed by the parliamentary report as factors associated with school non-attendance:

### Individual Factors:

- Mental health issues
- Physical health issues
- Substance abuse
- Learning disabilities/Neurodivergence



### Family Factors:

- Family functioning
- Parenting style
- Socio-economic disadvantage
- Parental physical or mental health issues



### School Factors:

- School transitions
- Bullying and isolation
- Poor classroom management
- Unpredictability at school



### Community Factors:

- Academic pressure
- Perception of threats
- Structural barriers (eg poverty)
- Remoteness and lack of infrastructure



(Parliament of Australia, 2023)

The inclusion of school and community factors is important, as the issue of school refusal cannot be attributed purely to the factors related to the students and their families, and it is important for schools to take responsibility for creating an environment that facilitates attendance (Parliament of Australia, 2023). This is particularly important for students who are affected by school refusal because of a school environment that does not accommodate for neurodivergence, including ADHD (Parliament of Australia, 2023).



## The Relevance of ADHD

Reasons for school refusal among children and adolescents with ADHD include academic deficits, social rejection, and a lack of enjoyment of the schooling experience (Zeigler Dendy, 2022). Stages of schooling where children with ADHD are especially likely to experience problems include the beginning of school (kindergarten and preschool) and the transitions between primary school/middle school and middle school/high school (Zeigler Dendy, 2022).

## What Can Be Done?

The report from the recent inquiry into school refusal listed among its recommendations that state and territory governments 'review their child health and development screening programs to identify opportunities to improve early identification of autism, ADHD, specific learning disorders, and anxiety disorders' (Parliament of Australia, 2023). This would facilitate students with these conditions getting the help they need at school.

The provision of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) has previously been identified as a way of reducing school refusal among young people with ADHD (Zeigler Dendy, 2022). An IEP is a written document outlining adjustments/supports for a student with unique learning needs (ITAC, n.d). An IEP can be invaluable for ensuring that students with ADHD get the assistance that they need at school (CAHDS, 2022). Accommodations can include extra time on tests and prior warnings before routine changes throughout the day (Oladipo, 2021). It can also be helpful to allow a student with ADHD to sit in a location with minimal distractions, possibly next to a peer who is able to serve as a good role model (Oladipo, 2021).

## References

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