



Understanding “School Can’t”

A Guide for Parents and Carers



About

School Can't Australia (SCA) is a charity that supports parents & carers of young people with school attendance difficulties. It's Facebook Peer Support group supports 16,500+ families. Established in 2014 it has developed Australia's most comprehensive collective of lived experience expertise in relation to school can't.

Our mission:

- **SUPPORT** families through peer connection and collective education.
- **EMPOWER** with evidence-based tools, resources and knowledge informed by lived experience.
- **ADVOCATE** for systemic change across education, disability and mental health.

What we do:

- We facilitate peer support & create resources.
- We use our insights to inform research, policy & practice.
- We work with educators, health professionals, and policy-makers, co-designing trauma-informed, neurodiversity-affirming approaches for children and young people who can't attend school.

Note: For simplicity, this resource uses the term "child" or "children" to refer to students of all ages.

What's In This Guide?

Sometimes life doesn't prepare you for the dilemmas you face as a parent/carer. **You are not alone.** Thousands have walked this road before you. This booklet contains insights that those who have supported a child experiencing "school can't" wish someone had shared with them sooner.

Explore:

- [What is "School Can't"?](#)
- [Signs of "School Can't"](#)
- [Just Keep Pushing?](#)
- [Types of Stressors](#)
- [Identifying Stressors](#)
- [School-based Stressors](#)
- [What Helps?](#)
- [What Hurts?](#)
- [Working with Schools](#)
- [Supports at School](#)
- [Collaborative Meetings](#)
- [Be Cautious of ...](#)
- [Professional Help](#)
- [Self Care](#)
- [Words of Wisdom](#)
- [What Can I Do Now?](#)
- [In Crisis?](#)
- [Resources](#)



What Is “School Can’t”?

“School can’t” refers to a child’s loss of capacity to attend or participate in full time education and may occur in the context of mainstream, distance, remote or home education environments.

It occurs on a spectrum from mild to severe distress.

It is not caused by bad parenting, oppositional defiance, weakness, or a lack of resilience.

School Can’t Australia views it as a nervous system response to stress, not a behaviour problem.

Most young people want to go but their brain and body are saying “I don’t feel safe”.

Stressors experienced in the context of: family, school, community or internally may impact capacity.

Other terminology: “School Refusal”, “School Distress”, “Emotion based School Avoidance”, or “Barriers to Attendance”.

Signs of “School Can’t”

Early signs of “school can’t” can be confusing or hard to identify. If you are persistently noticing any of the following, don’t put off investigating what might be causing your child distress.



At Home You Might See:

- Big emotions; morning meltdowns or shutdowns
- Difficulty getting dressed or leaving home
- Panic, vomiting, headaches, stomach aches
- After-school: exhausted, angry, sad, or silent
- Sleep trouble, clinginess, regression
- Lost enthusiasm for learning or school

At School You Might See:



- Quiet, compliant, “fine”, masking
- Sudden withdrawal
- More absences, late arrivals, sick bay visits
- Running or hiding
- Quick anger or frustration
- Big behaviours, driven by stress

Some children show visible distress at school, while others mask and fall apart at home. Just because they seem fine at school doesn’t mean they are fine.



Just Keep Pushing?

Pushing through

Under pressure to get them to school, we often ask them to push through. We use rewards & consequences, or dismiss distress, hoping it will get easier.

The problem remains

If our children don't have capacity to resolve the things that are causing them distress, then their problems remain and distress escalates.

Shame & frustration build

Child's thoughts: "I'm a failure, "I'm a disappointment", "There is no hope for me"
Either anger builds, or they quietly implode.

Trust is damaged

Sometimes pushing through damages our parent-child relationship. Trust takes time to rebuild.

Instead, our children need us to listen, validate their experiences, co-regulate with them, and to be holders of hope. They need us to be stress detectives, and advocates.

Types of Stressors

School Can't Australia's (SCA) research suggests stressors in the contexts of: family, community, school, or within the student can contribute to "school can't". Stressors are often chronic or severe in nature. There may be a few big stressors or many smaller ones.

Examples:

Family

- Relationship difficulties
- Family violence
- Mental/physical illness of a family member
- Financial difficulties
- Moving house

Community

- Severe weather eg: bushfire, flood
- Pandemic
- Housing availability
- Neighbourhood safety

Internal

- Pain conditions
- Hyper-mobility
- Sleep difficulties
- Illness
- Hunger/Thirst
- Allergies

School

- Bullying
- Work not of interest
- Sensory overwhelm
- Learning difficulties
- Communication barriers

Be curious and remember: What feels okay for one person may be challenging for another.



Identifying Stressors

There is no single reason why a child might struggle in school. Every child faces a unique combination of stressors, understanding these is the first step.

Start With Curiosity, Not Correction.



Notice patterns: Mornings, transitions, subjects, people. Are there triggers?



Ask: What felt hardest? What went well? What is overwhelming? What do you look forward to?

If they can't explain it yet, their distress is still real. There are often multiple reasons.



Seek support: GP, Paediatrician, Psychologist, Occupational Therapist



Build strategies together: Reduce stress, remove barriers. Explore solutions.

Remember this is a process, it will take time.

School-Based Stressors

In December 2022, SCA asked 441 parent/carers about 57 school-based stressors. Respondents identified an average of 28 school-based stressors as relevant to their child.

Types of School-Based Stressors:



Emotional Safety

Not feeling seen, heard, or believed when distressed, with no trusted adults to turn to.



Learning Environment

Overwhelming sensory input or learning demands which exceed current capacity.



Social Challenges

Bullying, peer stress, or feeling judged, leading to social anxiety or masking.



Systems & Rules

Rigid policies, poor collaboration, and a focus on compliance instead of safety and inclusion.

Unaddressed stressors / barriers add up, until school feels overwhelming. By the time it's "can't," distress has often been building for months or years.



What Helps ?

- ✓ **Put student experience at the centre**
- ✓ **Connection and curiosity**
- ✓ **Reduce what's causing distress**
- ✓ **Be responsive to fluctuating capacity**
- ✓ **Provide regulation supports**
- ✓ **Offer choices and flexibility**
- ✓ **Adjust the environment**
- ✓ **Compassion, kindness and hope**

Be Kind To Yourself

Remember: We do our best with the knowledge and resources we have at any given point in time. Many of us have said or done things we wish we hadn't, whether due to pressure or not knowing better.

What Hurts ?

- ✓ **Trickery or shame**
- ✓ **Force; “Just get them here”**
- ✓ **Physical restraint**
- ✓ **Reward charts or punishments**
- ✓ **Make home boring or less pleasant**
- ✓ **Coercive exposure or attendance targets**
- ✓ **Telling the child to “just push through”**
- ✓ **Dismissing or ignoring masking and shutdown**
- ✓ **Fines, threats of legal action**

These responses might result in improved attendance in the short term. However, sustained attendance is often not facilitated as any underlying difficulties have not been addressed.



Working With Schools

School meetings can feel intimidating. You should expect support, and collaboration from your school. No one should feel dismissed, blamed, or discriminated against.

Collaboration works best when:

- We work towards shared understandings of the child's experience,
- We listen to one another's perspectives,
- Blame and shame are set aside, and
- We work together to explore solutions that are responsive to the child's needs..

**To facilitate collaboration,
try these sentence starters in meetings:
"I wonder if..." or "Could we try...?"**



School Supports

The Goal of Support

Supports should meet the student at their point of need. You can ask for adjustments that support your child's wellbeing, not just their attendance. For more information see the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (link in *Resources*).

Reasonable Adjustments Are Not Special Favours

When co-designed and responsive, they help restore safety, trust, and capacity. They are most effective when individually tailored to student needs.

Supports That May Help

- Shorter days or reduced subjects.
- Quiet space or sensory breaks.
- Adjusted workload and modified tasks.
- Flexible start times.
- Pass to leave class when overwhelmed.
- Trusted adult to check in with.
- Permission to rest, regulate, and re-engage gradually.



Collaborative Meetings

School meetings can feel overwhelming. It's okay to advocate for what feels safe, calm, and manageable. When your child is ready, request a collaborative meeting with the school.

Before The Meeting

Choose the right time: When things feel a little steadier, book a collaborative meeting with the school.

Talk with your child first: Ask what feels hard, what helps, and what they want you to share on their behalf.

Share discretely what you're seeing at home: Morning distress, shutdowns, meltdowns, exhaustion, sleep changes as these aren't visible at school.

Provide medical certificates for absences: This can reduce pressure and ensure your legal obligations are met.

Ask for details of the agenda and attendees: You can request fewer people or ask for a shorter or online meeting if that feels easier.

Ensure child-safe discussion: If your child will be present, set appropriate limits on topics to be discussed.

Meeting supports: You can arrange a partner, friend or advocate to attend to support you, or your child and/or to take notes.

During The Meeting

Include student voice even if the student can't attend. Without their voice, we risk creating ineffective supports.

Help others understand: Explain what your child experiences and how stress shows up for them.

Ask for breaks when needed: You can pause, step out, or ask to revisit a topic later.

Stay curious: Keep the focus on identifying stressors/barriers and exploring supports. Ask, "What might help reduce stress?" or "What adjustments could make things feel safer?"

If you feel pressured to agree to something: It's okay to say "No" or "I need time to think about this and talk it over at home."

After The Meeting

Request meeting minutes, or follow up with a short email summarising what was discussed and agreed.

Keep everything together: Store emails, plans, and medical certificates in one place so you don't have to rely on memory.

Check in with your child: Debrief together or share what will support their sense of safety and control.

Give yourself time to recover: Meetings can be draining.



Be Cautious of ...



Some approaches can increase stress or break trust. You're allowed to slow things down, ask questions, set boundaries and say, **"This doesn't feel safe yet."**

Be cautious of:

- **Pressure to sign contracts** or commit to attendance targets which exceed your child's current capacity.
- **Plans that expect change only from the child** or family.
- **Steps that move too quickly** and overwhelm your child before trust, safety and regulation are rebuilt.
- **Returning too soon** or before underlying difficulties have been identified or addressed.
- **Coercive strategies**, including restraint or forced attendance. These can cause further harm.
- **Invalidating comments**, such as "They're fine at school."
- **Removing supports too quickly.** Progress often depends on ongoing supports and scaffolding. Recovery can take time.
- **Meetings that feel unsafe** or one-sided, where families don't feel able to speak openly.
- **Student voice being dismissed or ignored.**

Professional Help

Professionals can help identify stressors and support you, as the bridge between your child and their school.

Start with your GP for a full health check.

They consider the whole child including medical, physical, neurological, psychological, and learning differences.

Families often also consult with:

Paediatricians: Neurodevelopment, health conditions.

Psychologists: Anxiety, trauma, masking.

Occupational Therapists: Sensory, regulation, motor skills or other assistive aids.

Speech Therapists: Communication and language processing.

Disability Advocates: NDIS and school liaison.



Tips for seeking support

- Ask for recommendations from other parents.
- Finding the right professional supports can take time.
- It's okay to find an alternate provider if a support is not helpful.
- If your child is not ready to talk to someone, consider seeking support for yourself instead.
- Seek supports that are neurodiversity affirming and understand "school can't" as a stress response.



Self Care

School Can't Australia's research highlights significant impacts on parent carer wellbeing:

80% indicated their caring role had a moderate to severe impact on their mental health.

67% stated overwhelm & exhaustion adversely impacted their ability to access personal support.

Common Stressors parent/carers experience:

- Parent blame
- Unpredictability
- Social isolation
- Impact to finances
- Impact to career
- Impacts on siblings
- Relationship conflict
- Emotional load
- Finding support
- Feeling judged
- Advocacy role
- Loss of trust in people & services
- Unhelpful advice



**Practice self compassion.
This is really hard.**

Be kind to yourself.

- Negative self talk like: "I'm a bad parent- I can't even get my child to school" is not helpful.
- Remember, you are doing the best you can with the information, knowledge, resources and capacity that you have now.
- Reduce demands and expectations while things are hard and set boundaries that protect energy.
- Where possible, create space and time to slow down, connect, and tend to your own regulation needs.

Take 5 Minutes to:

- cuddle a pet
- enjoy some music
- take a walk
- listen for birds
- have a cuppa
- draw or paint
- take a shower/bath
- talk to a friend

**You can't pour
from an empty cup**



**Finding time for self care difficult?
Start small. Micro-moments count.**



Words of Wisdom

Once you have identified causes of distress. Ask yourself: “Who has the power to change what is causing my child’s distress?”

- Does my child?
- Does the school?
- Do I?”

Can we work together to change it?

Changing schools only helps if it means you can leave the problem behind.

It’s important that demands match capacity, otherwise overwhelm is experienced.

We learn best when we feel safe and when challenges are “just right”.

Meet your child where they are at now, rather than where you **think** they should be.



Remember to do activities with your child that have nothing to do with school:

- Enjoy music together
- Craft something
- Go for a walk
- Watch a movie
- Go for a drive
- Spend time in the garden
- Cook together
- Play a game



What Can I Do Now?



Take a breath. You don't have to fix this all at once.

Write down what you're noticing in your child.



Start gathering a support team.

Listen to our podcast or read a parent story.



Sign up for our newsletter or explore our website.

Consider sharing this information with your child's school, doctor or therapist.



Visit: www.schoolcantaustralia.com.au

In Crisis?

Seek professional support if needed.

School Can't Australia does not provide crisis support.

If you or your child need immediate help:



 13 11 14



 1800 55 1800



 000

Seek help as soon as possible if your child is self-harming, expressing suicidal thoughts, or if you're distressed and need support. Be aware that in young children suicidal thoughts might sound like: "I wish I had never been born" or "I wish I could disappear".

Do not leave young or distressed children at home without adult supervision.

This guide was developed by School Can't Australia, based on lived experience, professional expertise, and ongoing research. It is general in nature and not a substitute for professional advice. Please seek guidance from a qualified health or education professional for support specific to your circumstances.



Resources

In addition to the resources on SCA's website you may find the following helpful:

SCA's Submission to the Federal Senate Inquiry into School Refusal provides information about our December 2022 parent/carer research which is referenced in this booklet.

Information about the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on school students with disability (NCCD).

The Disability Standards for Education 2005, clarify the obligations of schools in relation to the Disability Discrimination Act.

It may be helpful to familiarise yourself with your state or territory department for education's:

- School Attendance / Absence policies,
- Disability and Inclusion policies,
- Bullying policy, and
- Complaints procedures.

NOTE: The definition of disability used by governments in Australia is broad and includes those with:

- physical and intellectual disabilities,
- learning disorders eg. dyslexia/dysgraphia or
- mental health conditions such as anxiety or depression.



Developed by:



Donations welcome:



As a volunteer-run organisation, donations help us to continue creating and sharing resources like this one. Please consider making a tax deductible donation via our website.

Visit: **[schoolcantaustralia.com.au](https://www.schoolcantaustralia.com.au)**
to order physical copies or download an e-book
version of this resource.