



PARENT GUIDE • SCHOOL ACCESS

School Refusal Behavior Blueprint™

Look beneath “I won’t go.” Find what makes school feel impossible.

ACCESS BEFORE ATTENDANCE. SAFETY BEFORE PRESSURE.

What school refusal is

School refusal is difficulty attending or remaining at school because distress, fear, overload, pain, unmet needs, or barriers have exceeded the child's current ability to cope. The goal is not forced attendance at any cost—it is safe, supported access to education.

School refusal is not automatically defiance, laziness, manipulation, or poor parenting. Start with the environment and body before assuming the child is choosing the behavior.

A child cannot learn in an environment their nervous system experiences as unsafe.

Step 1: find the barrier

ANXIETY OR FEAR

Separation, performance pressure, social situations, uncertainty, panic, or a feared event may make attendance feel unsafe.

SENSORY OVERLOAD

Noise, lighting, crowds, smells, transportation, cafeterias, assemblies, or masking may exceed capacity.

BULLYING OR RELATIONAL HARM

Peer mistreatment, exclusion, conflict, humiliation, or fear of retaliation can make school unsafe.

LEARNING OR DEMAND MISMATCH

Work may be too hard, too easy, too fast, unclear, inaccessible, or unsupported.

PAIN, SLEEP, OR HEALTH NEEDS

GI symptoms, headaches, fatigue, medication effects, illness, or other concerns may drive avoidance.

TRAUMA OR BURNOUT

Repeated distress, restraint, exclusion, discipline, failure, or prolonged masking may create protective shutdown.

The hardest days, classes, people, places, or transitions:

Ask before assuming

Talk when the child feels safe—not during the morning crisis. Ask one question at a time, allow silence, and do not demand eye contact. Let the child talk, type, draw, point, use pictures, or answer yes/no. The goal is to understand, not prove a theory.

START BROAD

“What is the best part of school?”
“What is the hardest part?”
“If you could change one thing, what would it be?”

ASK ABOUT SAFETY

“Do you feel safe in class, hallways, bathrooms, on the bus, and outside?”
“Is anyone hurting, scaring, teasing, threatening, or embarrassing you?”

ASK ABOUT ADULTS

“Is there an adult who makes school easier?”
“Does any adult yell, punish, ignore, restrain, embarrass, or stop your supports?”

ASK ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT

“Is anything too loud, bright, crowded, confusing, painful, or rushed?”
“Which place or time feels worst?”

ASK WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

“What happens before you want to leave?”
“What do you think will happen if you go?”
“What are you afraid may happen again?”

ASK WHAT WOULD HELP

“Who could meet you?”
“Where could you take a safe break?”
“What would make tomorrow one step easier?”

Investigate the school itself

Compare the child's report with patterns, records, observations, and the written plan. A school saying "everything is fine here" is not the end of the investigation.

PEOPLE & SAFETY

Bullying, peer rejection, staff conflict, public correction, retaliation, restraint, seclusion, discipline, or inadequate supervision.

IEP OR 504 IMPLEMENTATION

Are accommodations available in every setting?
Are breaks, sensory tools, communication, or safe-person access denied?

INSTRUCTION & WORKLOAD

Look for inaccessible work, unclear directions, missing teaching, excessive catch-up, testing pressure, or demands beyond capacity.

ENVIRONMENT & TRANSITIONS

Check arrival, bus, hallways, bathrooms, lunch, recess, assemblies, class changes, noise, lighting, crowding, and unstructured time.

HEALTH & BODY ACCESS

Are food, water, medication, bathroom, movement, rest, nursing, and health-plan supports reliably available without shame or delay?

RECORDS & DATA

Request attendance patterns, incident and discipline reports, nurse visits, removals, missed work, support logs, and staff observations.

What the child says is happening:

Records, patterns, or observations to request:

Step 2: match the support

ANXIETY, PANIC, OR OVERLOAD

Reduce language and pressure, create safety, co-regulate, and use gradual re-entry with predictable supports.

BULLYING OR UNSAFE RELATIONSHIPS

Document, protect the child, increase supervision, investigate promptly, and prevent retaliation.

LEARNING OR ACCESS BARRIER

Adjust instruction, workload, sensory demands, communication, pacing, testing, transitions, and recovery.

HEALTH OR PAIN CONCERN

Track symptoms and seek appropriate medical input. Do not treat pain, fatigue, or illness as a motivation problem.

Ask: What changes on easier days? What happens before, during, and after school? How long does recovery take?

Step 3: map the 0-60 Journey™

	Sunday worry, repeated questions, slower preparation, or new physical complaints
	Sleep changes, irritability, requests to stay home, or reassurance seeking
	Stomachache, headache, tears, hiding, freezing, or difficulty dressing
	Cannot leave home or car; panic rises and flexibility decreases
	Shutdown, meltdown, aggression, bolting, vomiting, or complete refusal
	Crisis, unsafe behavior, severe panic, or inability to function

10-20 signals:

30-40 signals:

50-60 signals:

Steps 4-7: Believe–Investigate–Support–Rebuild Plan™

04 • BELIEVE

Stay calm, lower pressure, and communicate that the child is not in trouble.

Say: “I believe this feels hard.”

05 • INVESTIGATE

Listen to the child first. Then examine people, records, incidents, supports, attendance, health, sensory load, academics, bullying, and recovery.

06 • SUPPORT ACCESS

Request immediate accommodations, a safe person and place, reduced load, alternative work access, and a written attendance plan.

07 • REBUILD GRADUALLY

Use achievable steps and increase demands only when the current step is safe, regulated, and sustainable.

Measure: Safety, access, regulation, participation, and recovery—not attendance alone.

Step 8: teach access skills

NAME THE BARRIER

Use words, pictures, scales, body maps, writing, pointing, or AAC to show what feels unsafe or impossible.

ASK FOR A SAFE ARRIVAL

Request a quiet entrance, trusted adult, alternate doorway, or regulated start.

REQUEST BREAK, HELP, OR REDUCED LOAD

Make the request easy to use and ensure adults respond before crisis.

USE A STEP-BY-STEP ENTRY PLAN

Practice prepare, travel, enter, connect, participate, and recover one achievable step at a time.

FIND A SAFE PERSON AND PLACE

Teach exactly where to go and who will help when distress rises.

RECOVER AND RETURN

Plan after-school recovery and return after absence without shame or overwhelming catch-up demands.

The first access skill we will teach:

How adults will respond when it is used:

School support plan

ATTENDANCE & RE-ENTRY

Use a gradual, flexible plan with predictable arrival, a safe adult, breaks, alternative access, and manageable catch-up.

IEP OR 504 SUPPORTS

Tie each support to a documented barrier. Specify who provides it, when, how often, and how progress is shared.

ENVIRONMENT & INSTRUCTION

Reduce sensory load, adjust workload and pacing, support transitions, and make communication accessible.

SAFETY, HEALTH & BULLYING

Investigate reports, prevent retaliation, coordinate health needs, and document an exact response plan.

Barrier and immediate access support:

Gradual re-entry step and responsible person:

Important: Do not wait for perfect attendance before providing education and support. Consider an evaluation or IEP/504 meeting when disability-related needs affect access, attendance, safety, participation, regulation, or learning.

Safety note: Seek urgent professional help for threats of self-harm, severe medical symptoms, abuse, exploitation, or immediate danger. This educational guide is not medical or legal advice.

Need help preparing for the school meeting? Schedule at calendly.com/optimizemylife/newclientintake or email mary@supportiveminds.us.

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