SCHOOLS + FAMILIES / PRACTICAL GUIDE

When School Avoidance Starts

A Parent–School Conversation Guide

> Start with curiosity, not blame. A child who is struggling to attend school may be communicating distress, overwhelm, or a problem they cannot yet describe. This guide supports a calm, coordinated conversation.

1 | Notice the pattern

Signs worth exploring

- Repeated morning stomachaches, headaches, tearfulness, or requests to stay home.
- Late arrivals, frequent nurse visits, absences, or leaving early.
- Changes in sleep, mood, friendships, academic engagement, or behavior.
- Specific triggers: a class, hallway, peer interaction, transportation, transition, or test.

Look for possible barriers—not a single explanation

Consider anxiety, bullying or exclusion, learning challenges, sensory overload, sleep problems, illness, family stress, safety concerns, or unmet accommodations. Multiple factors can overlap.

What have we noticed, and when?

2 | Open the conversation

With the child

- “What part of the school day feels hardest lately?”
- “Is there a time or place when you feel more comfortable?”
- “What do you wish adults understood about what is happening?”
- “What is one change that might help tomorrow feel more manageable?”

With the school team

- “What patterns do you see in attendance, class transitions, or peer interactions?”
- “Who is a trusted adult the student can check in with?”
- “What short-term support can we try, and how will we know it helps?”
- “Are educational supports or a healthcare assessment appropriate?”

> Useful language: “We want to understand what is making attendance difficult and build a plan together.” Avoid calling the child “lazy,” “manipulative,” or “defiant” before exploring underlying needs.

3 | Make the next school day more manageable

- Select one clear morning routine and one reassuring adult contact.
- Consider a calm arrival, brief check-in, modified transition, or predictable break.
- Keep expectations realistic; reinforce effort without punishing symptoms.
- Agree on a follow-up date and a way to communicate across home and school.

When additional help is needed

Contact a pediatric or mental health professional when distress persists, worsens, or affects functioning. If a child describes imminent danger, suicidal thoughts with intent, or an inability to remain safe, seek urgent professional or emergency help. In the U.S., call or text 988 for crisis support; call 911 for immediate danger.

4 | Shared support plan

Use this page together. Keep the plan small, specific, and revisable.

Student / date / key school contact

What we believe is making attendance difficult

Two supports to try this week

Who will do what (home / school / student)

How will we measure progress? (e.g., arrival, minutes in class, stress rating)

Review date and how we will communicate

> Reminder: The goal is not perfect attendance at any cost. The goal is safe, sustainable participation and a child who feels understood and supported.