



Working with your child to address school avoidance

A resource for parents

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About this resource



Dr Catriona O’Toole and Tara Ćirić in Maynooth University developed this resource based on their research. Their research involved many conversations with parents, young people and professionals across many services in Limerick city and county. The research was funded by Limerick Children and Young People’s Services Committee through the Healthy Ireland Fund, with support from Southill Hub.

The School Attendance Project steering group also supported the development of this resource. Their membership includes:

- **Limerick Children and Young People's Services Committee (CYPSC)**
- **Tusla Prevention Partnership and Family Support (PPFS) Service**
- **Tusla Education Support Service**
- **HSE Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)**
- **National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)**
- **HSE Primary Care Psychology**
- **HSE Child Disability Network Teams**
- **Limerick and Clare Educational and Training Board (ETB), Youthreach**
- **Foróige (Youth Diversion Project)**
- **Limerick Youth Service (Youth Diversion Project)**
- **Southill Hub**
- **National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals**
- **Barnardos**
- **University of Limerick Research Evidence into Policy Programmes and Practice (REPPP)**
- **An Garda Síochána.**

We give our heartfelt gratitude to all the young people, parents and practitioners who took part in the research that informed this guide. This resource is informed by your experiences.

Introduction



This resource is intended to offer information and advice to parents and guardians who have a child or young person who has difficulties going to school. We call this ‘school-avoiding behaviour’ (see next page).

There is a lot of information in this resource. If you need help working through it, ask someone you trust to go through it with you.

This resource is designed to support parents or guardians of children and young people of all ages. We recommend that you read this along with one of the two National Educational Psychological Service’s (NEPS) guides. There is one guide for primary school children and another for secondary school children.



- **‘Supporting your Child when they are Reluctant to Attend School: Guidance for Parents and Guardians of [Primary Schools](#)’**
- **‘Supporting your Child when they are Reluctant to Attend School: Guidance for Parents and Guardians of [Post-Primary Schools](#).’**



Towards the end of this document, you will find a locally developed list of groups and organisations that can help to support while you manage school-avoiding behaviour.

What is 'School-avoiding' behaviour



When we talk about 'School-avoiding behaviour' we include many different things like:

- **struggling to arrive on time**
- **often leaving early**
- **feeling worried about school while still attending**
- **missing or skipping classes during the school day**
- **not attending at all.**

A child can avoid going to school:

- **on-and-off throughout the school year**
- **for days or weeks at a time.**

Phrases used to describe 'school-avoiding'

When a child avoids going to school it is sometimes called:

- **'school refusal'**
- **'school avoidance'**
- **'emotional-based school avoidance'**.

These terms usually refer to problems going to school due to a child's intense anxiety or emotional upset about having to go.

'Truancy'

Another term you may hear is 'truancy'. This is where a young person skips school or class without their parent knowing or giving their permission.

'School withdrawal'

'School withdrawal' is when parents take their child out of school or do not encourage them to attend.

'School exclusion'

'School exclusion' is when a school fails to accept a child at all or in a way that makes it impossible for the child to attend their school. It includes things like:

- **inappropriate use of suspensions or expulsions**
- **failing to provide reasonable facilities for a child's special educational needs.**

Shortened descriptions that we use

We use abbreviations in this resource. The main ones are:

CAMHS – Child Adolescent Mental Health Service

CDNT – Child Disability Network Team

CYPSC – Children and Young People’s Service Committee

DEIS – Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools

EWO – Education Welfare Officer

EWS – Education Welfare Service

HSCL – Home School Community Liaison

HSE – Health Service Executive

NCSE – National Council of Special Education

NEPS – National Educational Psychological Service

PPFS – Prevention, Partnership and Family Support

SCP – School Completion Project

TESS – Tusla Education Support Service

How young people might express their worries about attending school



Children show us they are struggling in different ways



Not wanting to get up and get ready.



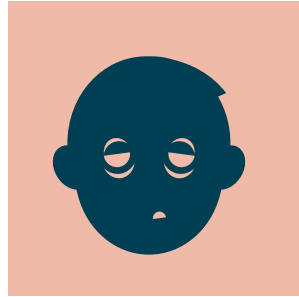
Saying they can't go.



Worrying a lot about small issues such as having the right copies, pens, equipment.



Feeling sick.
Having stomach aches, headaches.



Not sleeping well.



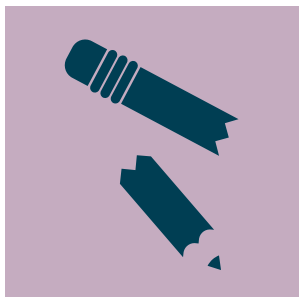
Not doing homework.



Not wanting to take part in school outings or events.



Being angry or upset.
Acting out at school, on the way to school and/or at home.



Disengaging from learning at school.



Withdrawing
having low mood, being quiet or sad

You are not alone



Research tells us that parents and carers can feel isolated and alone when they have a child that struggles to attend school. Parents have told us that they often feel:

- **judged**
- **blamed**
- **misunderstood**
- **frustrated.**

You do not deserve to feel any of these feelings.

Going through issues around school-avoiding behaviour with your child is full of challenges and tensions. As a parent it is very challenging to have your child's needs and well-being as your main concern, while at the same time experiencing pressures to get your child back into school.

You may find yourself struggling with how to strike the right balance between how much:

- **your child is capable of**
- **you should challenge or push them.**

You may feel that the school is judging you and that the wider system is monitoring you. You may feel that your child is a problem to be managed rather than a person who needs care, love and understanding.

You might find yourself feeling frustrated or angry at your child for not going to school. It might have an effect on your relationship with them or others in your family. It can be overwhelming juggling all this along with work and other family commitments.

Know that if your child is avoiding school, it is not your fault. You are not alone in this.

There is an African proverb that says, '**It takes a village to raise a child**'. The message in this phrase is that it takes many people (an entire village) to provide a safe, healthy environment for children. The village allows the child to:

- **get the security they need to develop and flourish**
- **be able to realise their hopes and dreams.**

These people (the 'villagers') include:

- **parents**
- **siblings (brothers and sisters)**
- **extended family members**
- **neighbours**
- **teachers**
- **professionals**
- **community members**
- **policy makers.**

This proverb reminds us that we all need to work together to help children thrive. Parents and carers are the most influential people in children's lives, but children (and their families) need a network of support around them to help them flourish. It is OK to ask for help. It doesn't mean that you've failed or that you're a bad parent or carer.

Why do children struggle to attend school?



There are many reasons why a child could be struggling to attend school.



Expectations

School life comes with a variety of expectations like:

- **paying attention**
- **keeping still**
- **staying seated**
- **being quiet**
- **answering questions**
- **reading aloud.**

For some children, these expectations can feel overwhelming. Sometimes children and young people can start to worry about not meeting these expectations. They may fear small mistakes, like:

- **forgetting homework**
- **having the wrong book**
- **giving a wrong answer.**

They may worry that they will be shamed or shouted at for:

- **making a mistake**
- **not being organised**
- **other 'misbehaviour'.**

Over time these worries can build up until it becomes overwhelming.



Difficult relationships

Some children struggle with relationships at school. This may be with other children or teachers, or both. They may not like their teachers or feel that their teachers don't like them. They may have difficult relationships with other children in school. Some children and young people have experienced bullying or have been excluded from groups of friends. This can lead to feelings of insecurity and low self-esteem.



Stressful events

Sometimes, experiences outside of school can make it harder for a child to feel settled at school. All families experience stressful events at times, like:

- **illness**
- **grief**
- **loss**
- **parents separate or divorce**
- **even violence.**

Some families experience:

- **poverty**
- **homelessness**
- **discrimination.**

Other families have faced war and have to flee their home and country. Stressful events can make it more challenging for a young person to attend school and engage with lessons.



Physical and mental health problems or other commitments

Some children may miss school because of physical illness, mental health difficulty or disability. They may miss days due to concerns about picking up infections, or because of medical appointments. Others may leave school to take up employment, or to help out at home or with the family business.

Sensory overload

Some children find the school environment overwhelming. There can be:

- **loud noises**
- **shouty voices**
- **busy corridors**
- **bright lights**
- **overpowering smells**
- **uncomfortable or scratchy uniforms**
- **sudden changes from one thing to another.**

The school environment comes with a sensory overload. For some young people, it takes huge emotional energy to manage this.



Learning and achievement demand

School also places learning and achievement demands on children. Schools focus on exam results and achievements in certain areas, especially coming closer to the Leaving Cert. Some young people get disillusioned in a system that they feel puts too much pressure on them. Some may find lessons confusing, boring, or irrelevant.

Feedback and other research

Parents, children and professionals in Limerick have expressed all these possibilities to us as reasons why children may struggle to go to school.

Research also tells us that parents and carers can often feel isolated and alone when they have a child that struggles to attend school. Parents have told us that they often feel judged, blamed, misunderstood, and frustrated.

Sometimes, schools and other support services found it difficult to reach parents. Sometimes it may seem that a parent is not willing or able to engage with the school, but this can be a symptom of a larger problem. It may be linked to:

- **shame**
- **culture**
- **socio-economic barriers**
- **a poor personal history with the education system.**

You, the parent, should be at the centre of the response schools and other services provide to support your child back to school. They need to do this to create a positive relationship with you.

School-avoiding behaviour is often a signal that all is not well in your child's world; it can be a symptom of a bigger difficulty. It is important to explore what is going on for your child and look for help if you need it. Generally, the earlier a parent does this, the better.

Figuring out what is going on for your child



It is helpful to encourage your child to express what they are feeling about school. However, children can often find it hard to respond to direct questions about what's going on. They may not be able to identify exactly what their feelings are and why they are feeling them.

Using simple activities like the 'iceberg activity' can help open a conversation in a more relaxed way. See also video link on this page. The video is 4 minutes long.

The iceberg activity can help you and your child explore reasons for school-related worries.

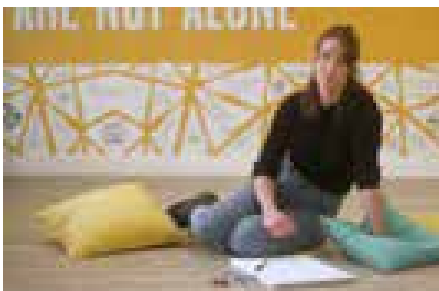


Figure 1.
Video Explaining
[The Iceberg Activity](#)

Start by drawing an iceberg, with the tip above the surface of the water

Write down or draw the behaviours that can be seen above the surface – the things that your child does when thinking about or preparing for school, for example:

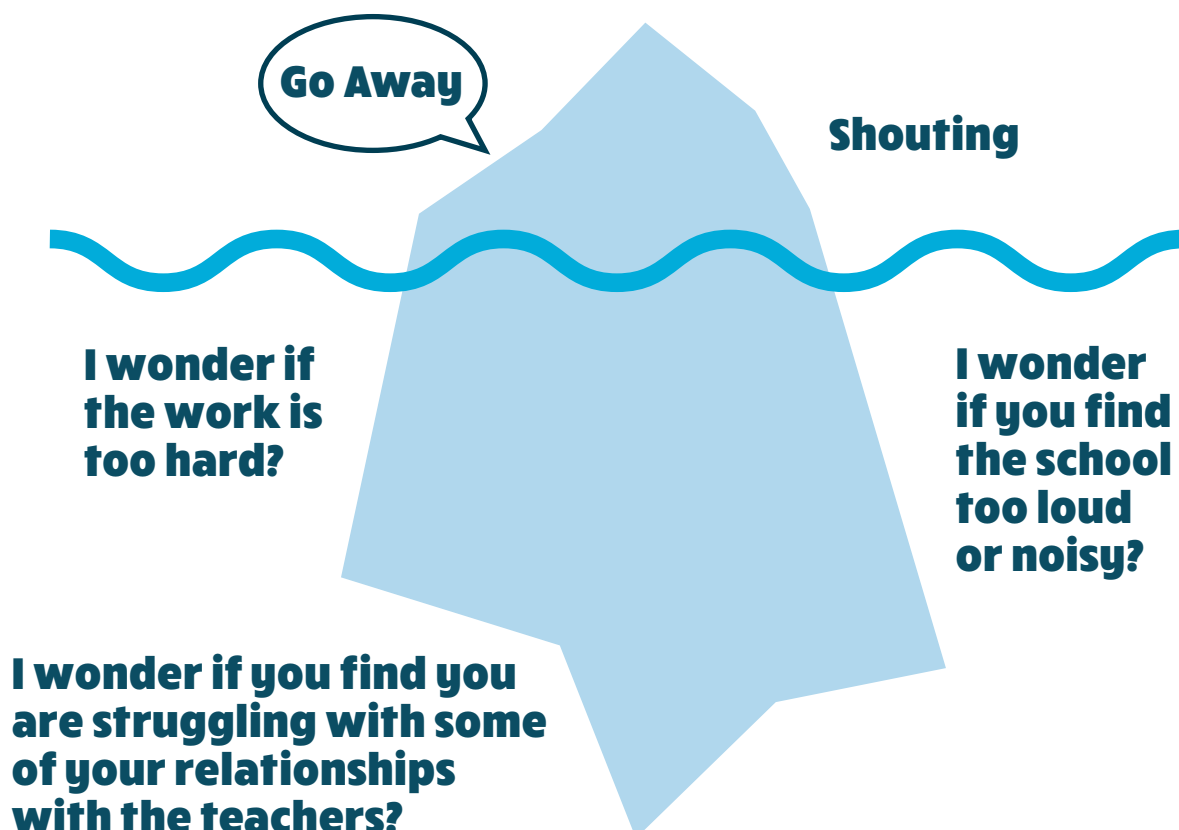
- **crying**
- **shouting**
- **telling you to go away.**

Explore what's going on beneath the surface. What is it that your child is feeling? Use open, non-judgemental statements, like:

- **"I wonder if the work is too hard."**
- **"I wonder if you find school too loud and noisy".**

It can also be helpful to offer up your own experiences, if any, around what you found difficult at school like:

"I know I always avoided maths. On days when I knew I had maths, I would feel like I wouldn't want to go".



When helping your child explore their thoughts and feelings about school:

- **try to create a relaxed atmosphere**
- **listen carefully**
- **recognise that your child's feelings are valid.**

Even if they may feel like small things to you, or not a reason why you yourself wouldn't go to school, they may feel big to your child. Let your child know you:

- **believe in them**
- **are there for them**
- **will figure this out together.**

You will feel your own stress as well as the distress of watching your child going through a time of difficulty. As best you can, try not to allow your normal and natural concerns for your child's future to take over the present situation. Try to stay calm and reassure your child, even though you might be feeling stressed.

Remember: Your child's experience is an understandable reaction to a stressful time or environment. Try to remind yourself, and help your child to know, that the experiences you are going through now will pass. They won't last forever.

Perhaps you can describe the experiences to your child as a key learning opportunity where you and your child might learn important life lessons, like:

- **how to manage stress**
- **how to take care of emotional and physical well-being**
- **who to get support from when needed.**

Starting a conversation with your child's school



Speak to the school

Ask to speak to someone in the school. In primary school this will most likely be your child's:

- **class teacher**
- **principal**
- **deputy principal.**

In post-primary school this may be your child's:

- **year head**
- **class tutor**
- **guidance counsellor**
- **principal or deputy principal**
- **special educational needs coordinator**
- **a teacher you trust.**



Ask school to follow these guides

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) has developed two guides for [primary](#) and [post primary](#) schools on:

- Managing Reluctant Attendance
- School Avoidance Behaviour.

These guides will help the school, parent and student to identify and respond to the cause of your child's school attendance issues.

We suggest that you ask the school to use these guides and to follow their tips. It can be helpful to include your child in these discussions if they feel comfortable coming with you. This can help them feel like they have a say in what happens and how.



Tell the school the specific things that your child is finding difficult. It may be helpful to write down what you want to say beforehand and bring your notes with you to the meeting.

Ask the teacher if they have noticed anything that your child finds particularly challenging.

Ask teacher for ideas

You and your child may already have identified some things that might help them at school. You can also ask the teacher for their ideas on what changes or supports could be put in place.

Perhaps the school could link your child with someone that checks in with them during the day like:

- **a peer buddy (this is a child the same age as your child)**
- **staff mentor (an advisor)**
- **another safe person.**



If your child finds school overwhelming or makes them feel anxious provoking, perhaps during difficult moments they could get to a quiet space like a:

- **library**
- **sensory room**
- **nurture room.**

'Exit card'

Schools may consider allowing your child to have an 'exit card' that allows them leave a lesson if they are too anxious. This can give your child a sense of control when things get too much. The school's capacity to do this may depend on their resources.

Take notes

Agree on any changes that you're going to try. It is a good idea to take note of these during the meeting.

Arrange a time to check-in again to see how things are going and if the changes are helping.

If you're not happy, ask for someone else

If you feel the person that you're speaking to isn't helping, you can ask to speak to another member of staff. If necessary, you can ask to speak to the principal or deputy principal. If you are not satisfied with the outcome, consider contacting your local Education Welfare Officer (EWO) from Tusla Education Support Service.

Education Welfare Officer (EWO) is there to support you

You may be uncertain about going to the EWO. Some parents worry that they may be judged or that to come to the attention of the EWO is not a good thing. However, the EWO is there to support you and help make sure your child's right to education is protected. Remember: you can reach out to your local EWO whenever you think you need to. You do not need to wait for your child's school to do so.

How you can help your child



Invest in your relationship

First and most important, you help by investing in your relationships with your child. Parenting is the most important, but also the hardest, job you will ever have. We know from research that by far the most protective and influential factor in a child's life is a safe, caring and supportive parent-child relationship.

Within this safe, loving relationship, you can help your child develop the skills needed to adapt to the challenges life can bring. So, prioritise spending quality time together doing things that you both enjoy. Laugh and have fun together, show an interest in your child's hobbies, and be available to listen, support and empathise.

Trust in yourself

As a parent or carer, you have a unique insight into your child's history, relationships, behaviours and emotions. Don't be afraid to advocate for what you believe your child needs.

Your child's school has a duty to respond to your concerns. Don't be afraid to speak up for yourself. If you need help, or guidance, there are supports available for parents. If you need help working through this or other documents, ask someone you trust to go through them with you.

Make sure to look after yourself. School-avoiding behaviour can be incredibly stressful and exhausting. Reach out to trusted family and friends and say "Yes" to any offers of help.

Strategies you could try at home

Establish routines

Establish a bedtime and a morning routine. The night before prepare by doing things like:

- **packing school bag**
- **laying out uniform.**

Encourage good sleep habits (good 'sleep hygiene'). For example, encourage your child to avoid looking at any screens like, phone, TV or computers for an hour before bedtime.

Have a morning routine for:

- **getting up**
- **getting dressed**
- **having breakfast**
- **leaving the house.**

Plan how to manage worries

Think together about how to manage worries. Younger children might find it helpful to bring a favourite toy to school with them. Older children or teens might find it helpful to create a 'self-soothing box' to use when they are at home– this is a box that contains things that helps to soothe or ground them.

This could include:

- **tactile (things to touch) like Play-Doh or pebbles**
- **favourite music**
- **positive memories, such as award certificates, letters or cards, ticket stubs from concerts or sporting events**
- **precious photographs**
- **meaningful poetry or quotes**
- **favourite smells – scented candles, room sprays, essential oils.**

Create space to unwind

Children may need time to unwind after the school day. They may like to:

- **listen to music**
- **play with toys**
- **take a bath**
- **watch a video**
- **bake**
- **play sport**
- **talk with friends.**

Spending time in nature is also a great way to relax and bring a sense of inner peace.

Celebrate small achievements

Notice small successes, like:

- **getting out the door on time**
- **having things organised the night before.**

Let your child know you are proud of them.

Help your child manage screen time if they need support with this.

Children use their screens and devices for a range of creative, learning or social activities. However, sometimes screen time can come at the cost of other important activities like quality family time, exercise or sleeping well.

You may find this [Digital Parenting Guide](#) from Cybersafe Kids useful. It can also help to have 'no phone time' for you and your child at the same time. This would show them that you are in this together.



Good sleeping habits (sleep hygiene)

Lack of sleep is a huge issue and often reported by schools as a strong factor for avoiding school.

Sleep hygiene is a term used to describe healthy sleep habits and behaviours. It deals with things in our home that you can adjust to help your child have a good night's sleep. For example, dimming lights.

Encourage calming drinks before bed	Encourage your child to have drinks before bed that have a calming effect on the body and help sleep. For example, warm milk for younger children or decaffeinated or herbal tea for older children. Have them avoid drinks that contain caffeine or a lot of sugar.
Eat sleep-friendly foods	Eat foods that promote sleep if your child feels hungry before bed, like bananas and even tomatoes!
Prioritise exercise	Prioritise time during the day for your child to exercise or move their body. This can release tension and energy and bring your child's body into a restful state for sleep.
Reduce screen time before bed	Screens can make it harder to fall asleep because they slow down the production of the sleep hormone, melatonin. We produce melatonin when it is dark. Your child could still use their phone or device to listen to music, a podcast, or a guided meditation to help get to sleep. However, they should limit their time looking at screens before bed.
Use a sleep diary	Create and use a sleep diary where you can write down how long and how well your child's sleep was. For younger children, you can help you child make the diary entry. The diary will help you and your child to get a more realistic idea about the type of sleep they get. You can then help them plan how to get better quality sleep.
Wind down before bed	Create a wind-down routine in the hour before bed. During this time, limit screen time, homework, or physical activity. Instead, encourage things that work for them to calm their mind. For example, reading, listening to relaxing music, or writing a diary.

Support a positive sleeping environment at home

Not all of these suggestions might be possible depending on your living situation.

Pick out the things you and your child can do to help their sleep.

Dim the light in living and sleeping spaces at night time	Keep living and sleeping spaces as dimmed as possible at night time. This will also help your child's body to release the hormone melatonin. Melatonin relaxes the body and prepares it for sleep. We produce melatonin when it is dark. Blackout curtains or even eye masks may also help your child to sleep.
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Keep school work out of the bedroom	If possible, encourage your child or young person to do school work somewhere other than their bed. Try to keep their bed just for sleeping. Encourage your child to think about their bedroom in 'zones' and keep a space dedicated to sleeping.
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Lead by example	Follow these sleep tips yourself and be a good role model for your child.
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Avoid overheating and clutter	Try to keep the temperature of the bedroom cool and the space clutter free. This creates a calming environment for sleeping.
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Avoid noise	A quiet space promotes good sleep. This may not always be possible to achieve when sharing bedrooms or living with family members with different sleep patterns. However, you could encourage the use of earplugs or noise-dampening curtains in the bedroom to help.
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Be realistic, patient and understanding	There is a lot going on for children and young people including very real, biological changes to their circadian rhythms, or 'body clocks', that can impact their sleep.
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Work with your child to find positive ways to promote good sleep that work for them as individuals and that benefit their mental health and wellbeing.

If your child cannot go to school at the moment



Sometimes, despite the efforts of parents and school, children are simply not able to attend. This can be incredibly stressful for both you and your child.

Your employment

If necessary, speak to your employer, explore possibilities for flexible working arrangements or parental leave entitlements.

Avoid force

Avoid forcing your child to attend. Don't shout, threaten or bribe because these tactics may make your child's anxiety more intense. Even if your child does physically go to school, they may be in no position to learn.

Show you understand

Instead, show your child you understand what they are going through, remind them that you believe in them, and that you will figure this out together.

Keep a record

Keep a record of your child's absences from school and what you and the school did to address absenteeism. This may help if the situation continues and you need to ask for more support or seek out-of-school educational support.

Set up home-learning

Try to establish a home-learning routine. Just like your child was going to school, encourage them to:

- **get up at a particular time**
- **have study time**
- **breaks**
- **lunch time.**



The school may be able to provide tasks or activities suitable for your child. Alternatively, you may find [Scoilnet](#) useful. It is the Department of Education's official site for Irish education resources.

If you need access to a computer for your child at home, your child's school may be able to help.

Encourage your child to meet other children

Encourage and help your child to have social time with their friends. Young people can easily become isolated when they do not go to school. Hanging out with friends, attending sports or clubs can stop that from happening and help your child to develop a sense of belonging to their school and community.

Accessing additional supports



Sometimes, despite the best efforts of parents and the school, a child may not return to going to school every day. This may be because a lot is going on in the life of your child. For example, your child:

- **may face challenges in their home environment**
- **your child or you, or both, may need extra supports than are available from the school.**

If you need this support, it is important that you get a referral as soon as possible. Your school may be able to help you identify these supports.

It is a good idea to seek professional advice and support if your child is struggling with things that are affecting their everyday life and interactions like:

- **anxiety or low mood**
- **sensory or learning difficulties.**

Your child may be referred to:

- **Primary Care Psychology**
- **Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS)**
- **Child Disability Network Team (CDNT).**

If needed, they may be referred to other agencies too. It depends on the specific needs of your child.

There are out-of-school supports for you and your child in many Youth, Family Support or Community organisations across Limerick. Youth work

organisations provide personal and social development programmes that can add to and work alongside your child's formal education or training.

If your family is going through very challenging and stressful times at present, there are a range of supports that you may be able to access. These challenges may include:

- **housing insecurity**
- **illness**
- **addiction**
- **violence**
- **break-up**
- **loss.**

These services are free of charge. Depending on the service, there may be wait lists. See the final section of this guide for an explanation of the different services that can get involved with supporting your child or you as a parent.

What happens if my child does not attend school?



Parents sometimes worry about getting into trouble with the authorities or prosecution. However, schools and support agencies recognise that school avoiding behaviour is complex and finding solutions can be tricky.

School Returns

Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) is responsible for ensuring that a child's right to education is safeguarded. Schools must inform TESS if a child is absent for more than 20 days in a school year. The school does this by sending in a School Returns report twice a year.

Referral to local Education Welfare Officer

School Returns are different to a referral to a local Education Welfare Officer (EWO). If a school refers a child to the Educational Welfare Officer, it means they are concerned about the student's attendance and are looking for the EWO's support.

Other support services can also refer your child to an EWO on your behalf. A referral can be made before 20 days are missed if a school is concerned about your child's attendance.

Know that the EWO is there to support you and help make sure your child's right to education is protected. Remember: you can also reach out to your local EWO whenever you see fit, and you do not have to wait for your child's school to do so.

Accessing out-of-school education

There is a small range of alternative or out-of-school educational services that you can use in specific circumstances. These are vital options for some young people. While these options are available, they depend on a number of factors. This can make access difficult.

Home tuition



The Department of Education offers a [Home Tuition scheme](#). This is designed to address the needs of a small group of learners who need home-based support for relatively short periods of time because of special educational or medical need. Under this scheme, the Department of Education provides funding for eligible families to employ a qualified teacher, or teachers, to provide tuition to their child within their own home. If you receive approval under the Home Tuition scheme, you may find it difficult to find a qualified teacher who is willing to provide tuition.

Online learning

[iScoil](#) provides an online learning service for young people (13-16 years of age). It offers an alternative pathway back to education, learning and qualifications. It provides a tailored learning programme either in students' homes or in a Blended Learning Centre (BLC) in the community. Blended learning centres are youth-friendly, safe spaces where students log on and receive a combination of digital instruction from tutors and face-to-face support from designated centre-based staff, known as support workers. Support workers monitor and follow-up on student attendance and engagement and identify and support student progression. Students attend blended learning centres at set times.



Referrals to iScoil are made through Education Welfare Officers and must meet specific criteria (conditions). iScoil has a limited capacity and it may not accept referrals. The conditions for referring a child to iScoil include:

- **students must be absent from their school for at least 6 months**
- **significant interventions and supports have not worked or resulted in a child returning to school**
- **the student is between 13 - 16 years of age and has not yet completed the Junior Certificate cycle in post-primary school (1st year to 3rd year)**

Youthreach programme



The [Youthreach programme](#) provides two years' integrated educational opportunity (personal development, vocational training and work experience) for young people aged between 15 and 20 years. It is for people who have disengaged from school and are without formal qualifications or vocational training.

The programme is full-time, operates year-round, and students can apply at any time of the year. There are no costs for the programmes. In addition, if you are 16 years of age or more while attending, you will receive:

- **a weekly training allowance**
- **a meal allowance**
- **a travel allowance**
- **childcare allowance (if applicable).**

Céim ar Chéim education and training



In Limerick, [Céim ar Chéim](#) is an education and training project addressing the needs of:

- **young offenders**
- **youth at risk**
- **early school leavers.**

This project provides a training programme that includes activities promoting personal development and others that are:

- **educational**
- **creative**
- **physical.**

The Education Welfare Officer will be able to provide advice and guidance on these or other educational services.

Returning to school after an absence



Coming back to school after a period of absence can be very difficult, but there are things that you and your child's school can do to make it more manageable.

Take it slowly

Lower the hurdles at the beginning. Set small achievable targets, like visiting the building or attending just one lesson. A reduced timetable might be helpful in this early period.

Gradually increase the number of days, or hours at school, in line with your child's capacity.

Create opportunities for your child to experience success and to contribute to their school or community. For example, there might be ways that your child can demonstrate their strengths and talents at school. They might like to participate in extra-curricular activities, get involved in a charity or fundraising campaign, have their artwork displayed, or support another student in difficulty through a peer mentoring programme. You could talk to your child and their school about these opportunities.

Plan with your child's school on how to address any gaps in knowledge. This will help to make sure that your child can progress and experience success.

Limerick School Avoidance Pathway



We consulted with young people, parents and organisations providing services before we developed this local framework. We designed the framework to support you so you can address school-avoiding behaviour. We used the national Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) problem-solving framework and their publication, [Managing Reluctant Attendance and School Avoidance Behaviour](#) to guide us.

Step 1: Identify school-avoiding behaviours

You or your child's school, identify school-avoiding behaviours.

Step 2: Point of contact with the school

The school identifies a staff member to be the main school contact between everyone involved including the:

- **child**
- **parent**
- **class teacher**
- **student support team member**
- **principal.**

Step 3: Meeting

The school should arrange a meeting with you. If your child feels comfortable coming to the meeting, it can help to include them in these discussions, so they feel like they have a say in what happens. If you are already linked in with a support worker or advocate (for example, a Family Support Worker, Home School Community Liaison Coordinator, supportive relative) ask if they can attend. The school should allow this.

If your child or your family is already working with a service it might be useful to tell that service, if they do not already know, about these school-avoiding behaviours. This includes services like:

- **Child Disability Network Team**
- **CAMHS**
- **Jigsaw**
- **Barnardos.**

If everyone is open to the idea, they can also be invited to this meeting between the school and parent.

The school may contact the local Education Welfare Service (EWS) or National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) for guidance before the meeting.

At the meeting, the school and parents should go through the School and Parental Checklist together. This is a questionnaire to help identify the cause of the school avoidance or any specific barriers about returning to school.

Depending on what you learn from completing the School and Parental Checklist together, the school may want to also contact other services:

- **School can consult and receive guidance from the EWO.**
- **School principals may wish to consult and receive guidance from NEPS**
- **Depending on your child's needs, it may be appropriate to refer them to a service.**
- **It may clarify possible pathways of support for you and your child if you consult with the Tusla Prevention Partnership and Family Support (PPFS) team**

Step 4: School and parent agree actions together

You and the school agree a plan together.

- **School, parents or guardians and student agree on school supports.**
- **A record of supports and their outcomes is noted on the Student Support file.**
- **All relevant teachers are told about the plan.**
- **You may agree to some home-based approaches.**

The agreed plan in school and at home should be put in place over an agreed period of time. A date for a review meeting should also be agreed.

Step 5: Review meeting

Progress made

Progress means you see your child go to school more often or a gradual return is underway.

If progress is being made, then the student does not need to be referred on to someone else.

You and the school should continue to put the plan in place.

No progress made

No progress is where a child continues with school-avoiding behaviour after the agreed plan has been followed.

If no progress is being made, another meeting should be arranged between parents and school to discuss next steps.

Keep communication open

Schools should continue to communicate with parent or guardians.

Continue to work with organisations

The school should continue to engage with the:

- **National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)**
- **Education and Welfare Service (EWS).**

The school may refer your child to the Education Welfare Officer (EWO).

Identify more services

The school or EWO can help you identify additional services where it may be possible for your child to get a referral and more help, (see below).

Other services that you and your child may access



Where you and the school have explored all options for your child and they are still not attending school, it can be confusing to know what the next step should be. Over the next few pages there is a breakdown of all the main services that are typically involved if the school and parents cannot respond adequately to the school-avoiding behaviour.

You will see a number of references to 'Primary Care' in the next few pages. In Ireland, primary care is all of the health or social care services that you can find in your community, outside of hospital. It includes:

- **psychologists**
- **GPs (family doctors)**
- **Public Health Nurses**
- **Other community services (such as Jigsaw, Barnardos)**

Tusla Education Support Service (TESS)

[Tusla Education Support Service \(TESS\)](#) is responsible for ensuring that a child's right to education is safeguarded. TESS has three strands:



- **Education Welfare Service (EWS)**
- **Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme**
- **School Completion Programme (SCP)**

The Education Welfare Service is available to all schools. The Home School Community Liaison scheme and the School Completion Programme currently support DEIS schools, mainly in urban areas. Since 2022, a small number of non-DEIS schools have access to the HSCL scheme due to the schools' percentage enrolment of students from the Travelling and Roma communities.

In the schools with access to the three TESS strands, they work together with schools, families, and other relevant services to achieve the best educational outcomes for children and young people.

1. Education Welfare Service

The Education Welfare Service (EWS) operates under the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000. This law emphasises the importance of:

- **attending school**
- **taking part in school**
- **staying at school.**

Under the EWS Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs) are based throughout the country. They offer advice and guidance to parents who need support in making sure that their child attends schools regularly.

If a school principal is concerned about the attendance of a student, they can refer the student to the Education Welfare Service via the TUSLA referral portal. The referral will be reviewed to decide whether to refer the case to a local EWO. If the referral is accepted the EWO will contact the school principal to get a picture of what's going on and to make sure that the school has tried to help the child.

The EWO will then contact the family and meet them. Home visits, or meetings in an alternative setting, are an essential part of an EWO's work. The first meeting with an EWO often opens solutions for a child and family needing support. Once problems have been identified the EWO will work with those involved to improve the situation for the child or young person.

If there is school-avoiding behaviour, the Education Welfare Service can only get involved in a case if they receive a referral. The EWO can offer guidance over the phone to the school without a referral.

You can refer a student to the Education Welfare Service before they have missed 20 school days.

Who can refer to the Education Welfare Service?

- **A school principal.**
 - **A professional in other agencies.**
 - **A parent can make a referral by contacting their local Education Welfare Officer (EWO).**
-

2. Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme

The Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL) has HSCL Coordinators who work to improve educational outcomes for children. They do this by working with the key adults in the child's life.

The Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme aims to promote partnership between:

- **parents**
- **teachers**
- **community family support services.**

3. School Completion Programme (SCP)

The School Completion Programme (SCP) supports primary and post-primary children and young people. It is for those who:

- **have been identified as at risk of leaving school early**
- **are out of school and have not successfully transferred to alternative education or employment.**

National Educational Psychological Service – NEPS



The [National Educational Psychological Service \(NEPS\)](#) is a psychological service provided by the Department of Education. Psychologists in NEPS work with schools. They are concerned with children and young people and their:

- **wellbeing**
- **learning**
- **behaviour**
- **social and emotional development.**

Each psychologist is assigned to a group of schools. NEPS works with children and young people so they can develop to their potential. They work alongside:

- **teachers**
- **parents or guardians**
- **children and young people.**

NEPS can work by:

- **observing and meeting your child**
- **meeting teachers**
- **meeting parents or guardians.**

They may also consult with teachers, or parents or guardians, or all of these about your child's needs.

How to access NEPS

Always discuss your concerns with the teacher, or school principal, or both first. The teacher will normally be able to reassure you about your child's progress. If the teacher has similar concerns about your child as you do, they will discuss the issue with you and agree a plan called a Student Support Plan.

In some cases, the teachers and the parents or guardians will agree that it would help to have support from the NEPS psychologist. The school will arrange times and dates of any meetings with the psychologist and make sure any paperwork is complete. The school will then discuss the case with the psychologist to see if they agree that their involvement would help. A referral to NEPS can only be made through the school principal.

Who can refer to NEPS?

- **School principals are the only people who can refer to NEPS.**
-

Primary Care Psychology



Mid West [Child and Family Psychology Primary Care Service](#) provides a psychology service to children and families from birth to 18 years. The service is for when a child has mild-to moderate mental health needs that may be emotional or behavioural. It also provides a service to children who have non-complex disabilities. Non-complex needs arising from a disability refers to one or more impairments giving rise to functional difficulties which result in mild restrictions in participation in normal daily living.

The service is free for everyone. We provide interpreters for non-nationals and non-English speaking people in line with HSE policy. We have a general policy of inclusion for minority groups.

General reasons people attend primary care psychology include:

- **mild to moderate mental health difficulties**
- **emotional or behavioural difficulties**
- **adjustment or stress issues**
- **coping with health issues**
- **benefits from general psychological advice and guidance**
- **non-complex disability or developmental issues such as autism where difficulties arising from autism result in mild restrictions in daily living, and primary care support may well reduce these restrictions.**

Who can refer to Primary Care Psychology?

- Any professional – in or outside of the HSE once they have the consent of the parent or guardian of the child being referred.
- Parents can refer their children.

You can refer using this [referral form](#).



Other primary care-level mental health supports

Mental health supports

There are a number of community-based primary care supports level that support mild to moderate mental health issues. These include:

For a comprehensive list of these services, their referral criteria (conditions), and how to get a referral to them, please use the QR code or go to the [Mental Health and Wellbeing](#) section of the Limerick service directory.



Tusla Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS)

[Tusla](#) funds services in the community that offer a range of early intervention and prevention services.



Meitheal

‘Meitheal’ is a way of working with children and their families to identify and respond to their strengths and needs in a timely way.

Meitheal brings together people and services who want to support a child or parent so that they can make the changes to their life that they want and need. The kinds of services that might be involved in Meitheal are:

- **schools**
- **youth services**
- **family resource centres**
- **medical services.**

If you want to discuss a case with the Tusla PPFS team and see if it is appropriate for a Meitheal or other supports from Tusla's funded partner organisations, you can:

- **phone, 061-607 100**
- **Email, LimerickPPFS@tusla.ie**

How to access a Meitheal

- **A family can speak with any professional who works with them to discuss the suitability of Meitheal.**
 - **Parents can contact the Tusla PPFS team directly.**
-

Parenting and family support services in Limerick

There are a number of community-based parenting and family support services available across Limerick city and county. They can work with parents and their children where school attendance is an issue.

For a comprehensive list of these services, their referral criteria (conditions), and how to get a referral to them, please use the QR code or go to the [Parenting and Family Support](#) section of the Limerick service directory.



Youth work

Youth work organisations provide personal and social development programmes for young people aged 10-24 years. They offer them activities based on their needs and interests.

There are a number of youth services and youth work projects across Limerick City and County. For a comprehensive list use the QR code or go to the [Youth and Youth Work Services](#) section of the Limerick service directory.



Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)

[Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services \(CAMHS\)](#) is a specialist service for people under 18 with moderate to severe mental health difficulties. A moderate to severe difficulty is something that has a significant impact on your daily life. It stops you from doing things you want and need to do. For example, seeing friends and going to school.



The severity and length of a child or young person's symptoms influence whether or not CAMHS will accept a referral.

CAMHS only accepts referrals if comprehensive treatment at 'primary care level' has been unsuccessful, for example, Jigsaw, Pieta House, Primary Care Psychology. CAMHS will also accept referrals where the needs of your child are clearly beyond the scope of primary care services.

Who can refer to CAMHS?

- **Your GP (family doctor) is the main person who can refer your child to CAMHS.**

You can also be referred by:

- **paediatricians (specialist doctors for children)**
- **consultant psychiatrists**
- **emergency departments.**

CAMHS also accepts referrals from senior staff in:

- **Tusla, the Child and Family Agency**
 - **Jigsaw**
 - **Community Medical Doctors**
 - **National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS).**
-

Child Disability Network Teams (CDNT)



If your child's needs are complex and they have a significant impact on your child's life, your child will be seen by your local [Children's Disability Network Team \(CDNT\)](#). Complex needs arising from a disability refers to one or more impairments which contribute to a range of significant functional difficulties that require the services and support of an interdisciplinary disability team.

If CDNT accept your child's referral, your child may be seen by some or all health professionals from the interdisciplinary team. This includes professionals such as:

- **psychologists**
- **speech and language therapists**
- **occupational therapists**
- **physiotherapists.**

The interdisciplinary team is a group of professionals who work together to meet your child's needs. They use a joint care and support plan. The CDNT is a family centred service. This means that the team will work with you to set and achieve goals for your child and your family. They will create a support plan called the Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP). They will support you to use everyday activities to achieve the identified goals.

Who can refer a child to the Child Disability Network Teams?

- **A GP (family doctor).**
- **Public Health Nurse.**
- **Any health or education professional (for example, a teacher).**
- **Parents or guardians.**

All referrals need your consent in writing as the parent or guardian.

You can refer using this [referral form](#).



Assessment of Need

If your child has a disability or you think they may have a disability, you can apply for an [Assessment of Need](#).



Under the Disability Act 2005 all children in Ireland have a right to:

- **an independent assessment of their health needs**
- **an assessment report**
- **a statement of the services they will receive**
- **complain if they are unhappy with any part of the process.**

The assessment identifies your child's health needs and what health services are needed to meet these needs. You don't have to get an Assessment of Need to access HSE services.

Who can refer for an Assessment of Need?

Parents can directly apply themselves for an Assessment of Need. You do not need to be referred by a medical practitioner.

National Council of Special Education (NCSE)

The [National Council for Special Education \(NCSE\)](#) was set up to improve the delivery of education services to people with special educational needs arising from disabilities. They focus particularly on children.



1. Special Education Needs Organiser (SENO)

The Special Education Needs Organiser (SENO) supports schools and families with advice on:

- **special education needs**
- **transport**
- **assistive technology**
- **supports available in schools.**

The SENO plans with you for specialised placements in special classes or special schools if required. Please ask your school who the SENO is.

Who can refer to Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENO)?

Parents, guardians or schools can contact their local SENO to discuss their child's special education needs. No report or diagnosis is required. Professionals can contact the SENO on your behalf with your consent.

2. Visiting Teacher Service

Visiting Teachers are qualified teachers with particular skills and knowledge of the development and education of children with varying degrees of hearing loss, or visual impairment or both. They offer support to children, their families and schools from the time of referral through to the end of post-primary education. Visiting Teachers visit the home, primary and post primary school and support parents, teachers and the child with teaching and learning.

Who can refer to the Visiting Teacher Service?

- HSE audiology.
 - HSE eye clinic or ophthalmology.
 - GP (family doctor).
 - Parents.
 - Schools.
 - National Council for the Blind of Ireland (NCBI).
 - Cochlear Implant Unit, Beaumont Hospital.
 - Chime (national charity for deafness and hearing loss).
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