

Mental Health and School Avoidance:

Tips to developing an educational plan for your child

When school avoidance impacts attendance or classroom participation, parents and school staff should create a plan to help the child. The most successful plans will consider how the child feels and include known information about the child's needs. This will help the school and parent to determine what they need to help the child get back to school or participate in the classroom.

It may be helpful to think of developing this plan as a four-step process:

1. Define the school avoidance behaviors

Think about what your child's behaviors look like when they are avoiding school (for example, physical complaints, crying, refusing to get on the bus, and frequent trips to the school nurse) and talk about any diagnoses that may contribute to the behavior. Talk about how these behaviors have impacted your child's attendance and engagement at school:

- Check with the school on how many days your child missed school, if they were full days, or if they were in school but not where they were supposed to be. If you have your child's attendance records, bring them to the meeting.
- Find out if your child has been late to school or has been unable to stay at school, and how much time they typically miss when they are late or leave early.
- Ask if your child leaves the classroom and where they go.
- Ask if educators have observed any behaviors at school that contribute to your child not participating in classroom activities, being removed from the classroom, or leaving school early, and whether there are behavior patterns.

2. Discuss the goals you are hoping to achieve

While the long-term goal will be for your child's return to the classroom full time, that may not happen immediately. Engaging your child or teen in developing the plan is helpful in making sure the right supports are in place.

Here are some questions that may help you develop some steps to return your child to the classroom:

- Request information from your child to share with school staff about why he or she struggles to get to school or stay in school or the classroom. For example, are they being bullied, or is there another unmet need that might be identified?
- Consider increasing the amount of time incrementally that a child is expected to be at school or in the classroom. For a child that has been absent for a long period of time and is not able to get into the school building, what options do school staff recommend to help them return?

- What do the patterns to the school avoidance tell us about why my child struggles to get to school or stay at school or in the classroom?
- What strategies or skills will my child need to change the behaviors that are barriers to attending school or staying the classroom?
- If your child does not have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 Plan, consider requesting an evaluation to see if they are eligible for one of these educational plans. If your child has an IEP or 504 Plan, what changes to the IEP or 504 Plan are needed?
 - Does my child need to be evaluated or re-evaluated for special education or a 504 Plan? What will be included in an evaluation or re-evaluation?
 - If your child has an IEP, consider if your child has the skills needed to return to the school building and stay in the classroom. These skills may include identifying their triggers for school avoidance, learning and using coping strategies, building positive relationships, developing self-advocacy skills, or developing academic skills.

3. Define the interventions to accomplish the goals

Once goals have been decided, discuss how the plan will be implemented. This should include who is responsible for providing support or instruction to your child. It is best to include your child in this part of the planning process. Interventions and supports will not be effective if a student does not agree to them.

Here are some questions that may help you define those goals, interventions and supports:

- What accommodations will help my child? Accommodations may include places in the building your child can go for “breaks” from the classroom, trusted adults that your child can talk to when they are struggling, or tools they can access in the classroom to reduce their stress, anxiety or fears.
- Which staff members does my child trust and will feel comfortable seeking out if they are struggling?
- How can my child build additional positive relationships with school staff?
- If your child has an IEP or 504 Plan, what changes will be made?
- If your child has an IEP and will be working on skills to help them return to the classroom, who will be working with your child on skill building and where will they receive that instruction?
- How will we know if these interventions are working?
- When will we meet again to talk about next steps?

4. Meet again and revise the plan if necessary

Plan to meet with school staff after a set period of time to talk about how the plan is working and whether changes are needed. You may need to meet more than once to talk about your child’s progress and whether changes to the plan are needed.

During follow up meetings, be prepared to discuss questions such as:

- What interventions are working well for my child? Why are they helpful?
- What interventions are not working for my child? Why aren’t they working?
- Is it appropriate to add more time to my child’s school day or to the amount of time they are expected to stay in the classroom? How much increased time can we reasonably expect for my child?

- How much progress has my child made in the general education curriculum?
- How much progress has my child made in building skills to stay in the classroom?

In Summary

Regular school attendance is key to a successful education. When parents and their children or youth work with their school to create a positive plan that supports their mental health, emotional or behavioral needs they are more likely to succeed at school.

For more information about how to support your child or youth with mental health, emotional or behavioral needs, see PACER's companion handout PHP-c269a, [*Mental Health and School Avoidance: What Parents Need to Know*](#).