

1. Be aware of early signs of distress

These may include:

- Showing signs of anxiety or distress about going to school,
- Teariness the night before school or complaints about physical illness,
- Difficulties getting out of bed or leaving the house,
- Complaining of problems with friends or teachers,
- Difficulty returning to school after term breaks,
- Difficulty eating or sleeping,
- Difficulty getting dressed in the mornings
- Easily distressed after school.

If you consistently observe signs of distress you should seek more information from your child and let school staff know. Work together to find out why your child is distressed and seek to address their concerns.

2. Be curious about stressors and barriers

School Can't Australia encourages parents to work with their child/young person and their young person's school to seek to identify and understand what the stressors and barriers are/were so that these can be addressed.

Prioritise safety and connection with your child so that your child may feel able to tell you about the difficulties they are experiencing. Avoid using rewards and consequences as these do not address the difficulties a young person has and can damage the parent child relationship, making it difficult for children to share about their lived experience.

It may be that your child can not tell you what is causing them distress. If this is the case it can take time and detective work to understand the source of their distress. There are lots of reasons why it might be hard for them to tell us what has caused their distress.

3. Seek support:

Many families find it helpful to seek support and assessments for their child from: psychologists, paediatricians, occupational therapists, and disability advocates. These people can assist in identifying any unmet support needs that the child or young person may have. An assessment and set of well written support recommendations can be very helpful. Remember it can take time for therapists to build a relationship with your child.

Parents and carers may also find it helpful to seek support for themselves. Supporting a child or young person experiencing school can't can be very stressful and can impact significantly on parent carer well-being. Many parents feel very isolated and find it helpful to join a peer support group. Parents and carers can join School Can't Australia's online peer support group or ask their child's school about local peer support groups that may be suitable. Parents and carers may also seek support for themselves from a mental health practitioner or counselor.

4. Make sense of what has happened:

It's important to remember that chronic experiences of stress and barriers to education can impact mental health and lead to increased anxiety and depression. It is important that stressors and barriers are identified and addressed in conjunction with providing mental health supports. Teaching coping skills and anxiety management strategies will be ineffective in the face of ongoing stress and may result in the student experiencing increased distress, withdrawal and depression. It can take time to make sense of what has happened and to find supports.

It is important that families, schools and clinicians have a shared language and understanding about the nervous system. It is beneficial when those supporting the student are able to recognise signs of fight/flight/shutdown and have an understanding of the things that help a student feel safe and regulated. In time, students can be supported to learn to recognise signs of stress in themselves, strategies to self-regulate and self-advocate.

5. Prioritise well-being over attendance

Children and young people who are distressed are not going to have capacity to learn. If a child or young person's health or mental health is severely impacted, then recovering their wellbeing should be the first priority. A period of rest and recovery may be necessary, before expectations are placed on a child or young person to return to school. Return to school plans should proceed at a pace that feels safe to the student and in a context where their concerns have been addressed.

WHICH PROFESSIONALS CAN HELP?

Should you require assistance beyond the support offered at your child's school, the following may be of assistance:

- A General Practitioner (GP) is a good first port of call. A GP can provide referrals to a paediatrician, or child and adolescent psychiatrist or assist with setting up a mental health care plan. They can also refer to mental health or other allied health clinicians.
- A developmental paediatrician can assist with referrals to allied health and identify the need for assessments. They can also prescribe and monitor medications if needed.
- Mental health clinicians can include: psychologists, mental health social workers, child and adolescent psychiatrists (psychiatrists specialise in fine tuning and managing medications if needed).
- Other allied health clinicians who may be helpful include occupational therapists (sensory, somatic) and speech therapists (language or literacy).