

School can't

Part 1: Understanding and identifying the early signs

For teachers of Autistic students experiencing school can't.

There can be many early signs of school can't that teachers may notice in Autistic students. Awareness of these early signs allows you to provide support and collaborate with families and care team members as soon as signs appear. This will help to reduce demands that may lead to stress or anxiety and help to maintain a connection to the school.

What is school can't?

School can't is when a child is so overwhelmed by the demands of school that they find it difficult, or sometimes impossible, to attend. Autistic children and young people who experience school can't experience extreme stress and anxiety about attending school. This may result in:

- Missing days of school,
- Being frequently late, or
- Leaving school early.

Many students who experience school can't feel stressed or anxious just thinking about school. This stress or anxiety can build up over the weekend or towards the end of the school holidays. Often, parents and carers of a child experiencing school can't are aware of their child's stress and have tried various strategies to help them manage their stress to get their child to attend school.

It's important to understand that school can't is different to truancy or wagging, where a student fails to attend school or leaves school early without knowledge of their parent or carer. Autistic students experiencing school can't often want to attend school but are unable to do so.



Early signs of school can't

Missing school is a defining sign of school can't. There are other early signs of school can't that both teachers and parents/carers may see, which include:

- Reporting tummy aches and headaches
- Difficulty separating from parent/s
- Loss of interest in preferred activities
- Not eating at school
- Exhaustion, tiredness or apathy
- Becoming more withdrawn
- Sleep disturbances
- Talk of hating school or being bored at school
- Social difficulties and/or social withdrawal
- Becoming emotionally reactive / dysregulated, crying, angry, irritable, grumpy, defiant
- Reduced communication abilities and situational mutism
- Low self-esteem
- Meltdowns
- Discomfort due to sensory inputs (e.g. covering ears when there are loud noises)
- School absences
- Grades dropping and/or difficulties completing schoolwork
- Difficulty with routine changes.

Primary school students may show or report more physical signs of anxiety, such as tummy aches, as well as behavioural signs like difficulty getting ready in the morning.

Secondary school students may be more likely to articulate stressors at school and provide specific details, such as identifying specific classes or times of day when their anxiety increases.

It may also be observed during parent-teacher meetings or Student Support Group (SSG) meetings that there is a big discrepancy between a student's behaviour at home and school.

For example, an Autistic student might show increased distress and behavioural changes or difficulty getting to school - but may mask these challenges once at school. This can indicate that the student may be internalising anxiety and releasing their bottled-up emotions in a safe environment, such as in the car after school or at home.

Autism and the impact of stress and anxiety

Stress and anxiety are both normal feelings to have, but when they exceed normal levels, they can become overwhelming and debilitating(1). Autistic people are significantly more likely to experience anxiety or be formally diagnosed with an anxiety disorder than non-Autistic people(2).

A child's inability to go to school may be caused by stress and/or anxiety. If the social, emotional, cognitive and sensory needs of the Autistic student are not accommodated, they can experience significant overwhelm.

Being in a state of overwhelm for extended periods can contribute to anxiety. Often when Autistic students experience cumulative stress or feelings of overwhelm, they may not be able to identify the specific triggers or demands that are contributing. Students may recognise physical symptoms of anxiety such as 'I feel sick' or make general statements to express their distress, such as 'school is boring' or 'I hate school'. Anxiety can also impact a student's ability to learn and engage, further contributing to feelings of overwhelm.

Many Autistic students mask at school. Masked autism means that an Autistic person hides their Autistic traits to blend in. It can take a huge amount of mental and physical energy and can lead to poor mental health in the long-term.

Physical and mental exhaustion from masking at school can contribute to school can't. Often an Autistic student only feels safe expressing their stress or anxiety at home. Their physical and mental exhaustion can show in several ways, including shutting down or meltdowns, which can be very difficult or distressing for the Autistic student and the family members supporting them.

It's important to recognise that school can't is a response to feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, and/or anxious. In some cases, it can trigger a fight, flight, freeze, or fawn response. How you approach your Autistic student's situation should take this into careful consideration and involve reducing anxiety for the student and supporting their overall wellbeing.

What is the flight, flight, freeze and fawn response?

Fight	The brain prepares to overcome a threat.	An example would be arguing with parents/carers about going to school.
Flight	Running away or leaving in response to a threat.	An example would be hiding from people, avoiding tasks, and/or leaving spaces.
Freeze	Becoming stuck in response to a threat.	Examples could include a student who may shutdown (becoming unresponsive) when overwhelmed, or express feelings of being 'stuck' on certain tasks.
Fawn	The brain tries to please and defuse in response to a threat.	Examples may include people pleasing, including not asking for help when needed or withholding sharing feelings of stress and anxiety.

(1) American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.). <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596>

(2) Hossain, M. M., Khan, N., Sultana, A., Ma, P., McKyer, E. L. J., Ahmed, H. U., & Purohit, N. (2020). Prevalence of comorbid psychiatric disorders among people with autism spectrum disorder: An umbrella review of systematic reviews and meta-analyses. *Psychiatry Research*, 287, 112922. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.112922>

"It's hard to go to school because I am worried that teachers don't understand how I am feeling. When this happens and I am feeling overwhelmed they just make me do more work and they think I am just being naughty."

- Autistic secondary school student



Start a conversation with students and families

When signs of school can't begin to appear, it's important to be curious. This might involve calmly asking the student and family questions to understand what is happening. If you notice changes in the student, it can be useful to keep a record, especially with primary school students, if they are reporting general symptoms such as tummy aches and boredom.

For students who can articulate their feelings and needs, it's important to listen and validate what they are reporting. Be mindful of the language used with the student. Use positive language without referring to previous behaviours or experiences. For example, if an Autistic student is regularly arriving late to school, you may say, 'Nice to see you', rather than, 'Oh, you made it today'. Small language changes can have a big impact on the student's wellbeing and whether they feel included.

Summary

- School can't is a response to stress, exhaustion, and/or anxiety.
- Parents/carers are aware of their child's stress.
- It's important for the student, their family and the school to work together and find out the causes of school can't.
- Use positive and inclusive language when speaking about school can't.

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