



School Refusal in PDA

A guide for Australian families

School refusal is one of the most distressing and misunderstood challenges facing PDA families. It is not laziness, manipulation, or bad parenting. It is a neurological response to an environment that has exceeded the child's capacity to cope. Understanding it correctly is the first step toward addressing it effectively.

Why PDA Children Refuse School

- School is the highest-demand environment most PDA children experience
- The structure, rules, schedule, and social demands are relentless and non-negotiable
- Masking costs enormous energy — the child knows the day ahead is exhausting before it begins
- Previous negative experiences (meltdowns, peer conflict, correction) create anticipatory anxiety
- The child's nervous system has learned: school = threat

First Steps for Families

1. Stop framing it as a behaviour problem. Frame it as a mental health and disability access problem.
2. Request a meeting with the school — not to problem-solve attendance, but to understand what is costing your child so much energy.
3. Get professional support in place — paediatrician, psychologist, or school counsellor with PDA understanding.
4. Document everything — duration, patterns, physical symptoms, what precedes refusal.
5. Consider whether current attendance expectations are sustainable, or whether a modified plan is needed.

Having the Conversation with Your School

Key messages to communicate

- "This is not a choice — my child is experiencing genuine anxiety about school."
- "Forcing attendance without addressing the underlying causes will make things worse, not better."
- "I need the school to work with me on reducing what is costing my child so much."
- "We need a plan — not a consequence structure."

Education Options When Attendance Breaks Down

- Negotiated modified attendance — reduced hours, specific days, specific classes
- Home-school liaison program support
- Hospital school or flexible learning centre (for significant mental health impact)
- Distance education — through state distance education programmes



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- Home education — registered with your state education authority
- Flexible online schooling — various accredited options available in Australia

If your child is not at school

Your child's education matters. Their mental health matters more. An extended period outside school is not the end of their education. A child who is safe, stable, and recovering can re-engage with learning. A child who is in chronic crisis at school cannot.