ASD Helping Hands

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School Refusal in Autistic Pupils

Supporting Autistic Children and Young People with School Refusal

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1. Introduction

School can be a challenging place for many children and young people, but for some autistic individuals, the experience becomes so overwhelming that they are unable to attend. This is often referred to as school refusal, although many families prefer terms like school-based anxiety or school distress, which more accurately reflect the emotional experience behind the behaviour.

This booklet has been written to support parents, carers, and professionals who are navigating this complex issue. Whether a child is starting to struggle with going to school, has already stopped attending, or is stuck in a cycle of anxiety and absence, this guide aims to help you understand what might be happening – and what can be done to support them.

We'll explore how autism can influence a young person's experience of school, what might be triggering their refusal to attend, and how families and schools can work together to find supportive, compassionate solutions. We'll also provide information on your rights, options for alternative education, and where to go for help.

Every autistic child is different, and there is no single path to follow. But by listening to their voice, understanding their needs, and challenging the idea that school is always the right place, we can start to build a more inclusive approach that supports both wellbeing and learning.

Let's begin by understanding autism and how it might affect the school experience.

2. Understanding Autism

Autism is a neurodevelopmental difference that affects how a person experiences and interacts with the world around them. It's not an illness or something that needs to be "fixed" – it simply means the brain works differently. Autistic people may process information, communicate, and respond to their environment in ways that differ from what's typically expected.

In the context of school, these differences can make the day-to-day environment feel overwhelming or confusing. Understanding how autism can affect a child's experience is key to recognising why school might become a source of distress.

Key areas that may affect school life include:

Sensory Processing

Many autistic children have heightened or reduced sensitivity to sounds, lights, smells, textures, or movement. A noisy classroom, strong cleaning products, or uncomfortable uniforms can all cause discomfort or distress.

Social Interaction

Navigating friendships, group work, or playground rules can be incredibly challenging. Some children may want to connect but don't know how, while others may prefer solitude. Misunderstandings and social exhaustion can lead to anxiety or isolation.

Communication Differences

Navigating friendships, group work, or playground rules can be incredibly challenging. Some children may want to connect but don't know how, while others may prefer solitude. Misunderstandings and social exhaustion can lead to anxiety or isolation.

Need for Predictability	Routine and structure can provide a sense of safety. Sudden changes, unclear expectations, or surprise events (like fire drills) can cause extreme stress.
Emotional Regulation	Many autistic children experience strong emotions but may struggle to identify or express them. What looks like defiance or “acting out” is often a sign of distress or shutdown.

Autism Is a Spectrum

It’s often said that “if you’ve met one autistic person, you’ve met one autistic person.” Autism is a spectrum, which means it affects each individual differently. Some autistic children may thrive academically but struggle socially or emotionally. Others may need more day-to-day support with learning, communication, or independence.

Labels like “high-functioning” or “mild autism” can be misleading. A child who appears to be coping on the surface might be masking their distress – using up enormous energy to appear “fine” at school, only to come home exhausted or upset. This is known as autistic masking, and it can contribute significantly to school-related anxiety and burnout.

Autism and Co-occurring Conditions

Many autistic children also experience other conditions that can add to their challenges in school. These might include:

- Anxiety disorders – especially around social situations or separation
- ADHD – which may impact attention, impulse control and activity levels
- Sensory Processing Disorder – where sensory input is intensified or dulled
- Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) – a profile associated with high anxiety around everyday demands
- Learning differences – such as dyslexia or difficulties with working memory

These overlapping needs can make the school environment even more difficult and are often a key part of understanding school refusal.

3.What is School Refusal?

School refusal isn't about a child simply not wanting to go to school – it's about a child being unable to go. For many autistic children, school becomes so stressful or overwhelming that their anxiety builds to a point where attending feels impossible.

This isn't a choice, defiance, or laziness. It's a sign that something in the school environment is not working for them. In many cases, school refusal is a distress response to unmet needs or ongoing emotional exhaustion.

Signs of School Refusal

School refusal can look different from one child to another, but common signs include:

- Ongoing difficulty getting to school, often with high levels of anxiety or distress
- Frequent complaints of feeling ill (e.g. headaches, stomach aches) with no clear medical cause
- Refusing to get dressed or leave the house in the morning
- Tantrums, meltdowns, or shutdowns before or after school
- Trouble sleeping, eating, or regulating emotions
- A significant drop in attendance over time

Some children manage to attend school but come home exhausted, anxious or withdrawn – this is sometimes called 'masked school refusal', where the child appears to cope in school but crashes at home.

Why It Matters

It's important to identify school refusal early. The longer a child is out of school or struggling with the environment, the harder it can be to re-engage them – especially if the underlying issues aren't addressed. When autistic children are repeatedly exposed to an environment that overwhelms them, it can lead to long-term mental health challenges, including burnout and trauma.

Understanding the difference between a child who won't go to school and one who can't go is crucial. One needs discipline – the other needs support.

4. Why Might Autistic Children Struggle with School?

For many autistic children, school can feel like an unpredictable, noisy, and socially demanding place. While some manage well with the right support, others find the environment too difficult to cope with – emotionally, socially, or physically.
School refusal often happens when a child's needs are not being fully understood or met. Below are some of the most common reasons why an autistic child may begin to struggle.

1 Sensory Overload

Classrooms can be overwhelming sensory environments. Fluorescent lighting, loud chatter, scraping chairs, crowded corridors, and even certain smells can be distressing. For children with sensory sensitivities, this constant overload can lead to anxiety, shutdowns, or meltdowns – and eventually school avoidance.

2 Social Challenges

Social interaction can be exhausting for autistic children. They may find it hard to read social cues, keep up with conversations, or manage the unspoken rules of friendship. Group work, unstructured time (like break or lunch), and fear of rejection can all create deep discomfort and anxiety.

3 Communication Differences

Following verbal instructions, understanding abstract language, or dealing with unexpected questions can all cause stress. If a child struggles to express themselves or isn't given enough processing time, they may feel misunderstood or isolated.

4 Anxiety and Emotional Regulation

Many autistic children live with high levels of anxiety. School environments often lack the flexibility or support needed to manage this. Difficulties with emotional regulation can also make it hard to recover from small setbacks – what looks like an overreaction might be the tip of a much deeper struggle.

5 Fear of Failure or Being Misunderstood

Autistic children may be very aware of their differences and worry about "getting it wrong." If they've experienced punishment, misunderstanding, or embarrassment at school, this can lead to a fear of returning.

6 Pressure to Mask

Some autistic children work incredibly hard to appear as though they are coping. This "masking" hides their distress and helps them blend in – but it comes at a high emotional cost. Over time, this can lead to burnout, anxiety, and refusal to attend.

5. Identifying the Root Causes

When a child is refusing school, it's vital to look beneath the behaviour and ask: why? School refusal is a symptom – not the problem itself. Uncovering what's causing the distress is the first step to helping a child feel safe and supported again.

Every child's reasons will be different, and often there are several factors at play. Taking time to explore what's really going on can make all the difference.

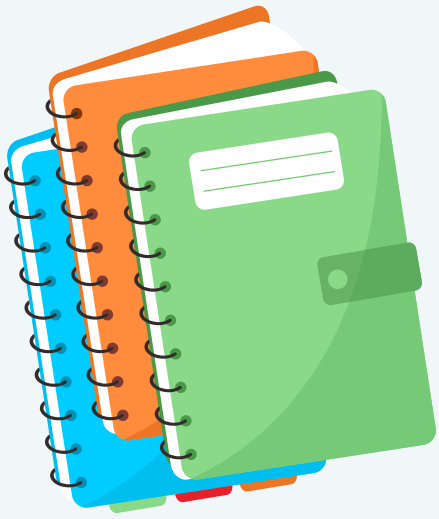
Listen to the Child or Young Person

The most important voice in this process is the child's. Even if they struggle to explain their feelings, they may give clues through their behaviour, body language, drawings, or the things they say at home. Creating a calm, non-judgemental space where they feel safe to talk – or not talk – is key.

Ask open questions like:

- "What part of school is the hardest for you?"
- "When do you feel most anxious or tired?"
- "What would make school feel easier?"

Some children may express fears of bullying, shame over past incidents, or worries about being different. Others might not fully understand why they're struggling – and that's okay too.



Work with School

Schools have a duty to identify and respond to barriers to attendance. Meeting with the class teacher, SENCO, or pastoral team can help piece together patterns:

- Is there a particular time of day they find hardest?
- Have routines or staffing changed?
- Are certain lessons or environments triggering distress?

Ask the school to share their observations, and be honest about what's happening at home. A joined-up approach helps build understanding on both sides.

Use Tools to Explore Triggers

Some families find it helpful to use simple tools to spot patterns, such as:

- Daily journals or emotion charts
- ABC charts (Antecedent–Behaviour–Consequence)
- Anxiety trackers or rating scales
- Sensory profiles to identify environmental stressors

These don't need to be formal – just noting things down over a few days can highlight useful clues.

If you're looking for something more structured, ASD Helping Hands offers the School Refusal Assessment Scale – Revised (SRAS-R), a professional screening tool designed to explore the underlying reasons behind school refusal.

It helps identify whether a child's avoidance is due to emotional distress, social difficulties, or other reinforcers such as seeking attention or escaping tasks.

You can learn more or request an SRAS-R screening through our website:
www.asdhelpinghands.org.uk/shop/school-refusal-assessment

Involve the Right Professionals

If the reasons behind school refusal are complex or unclear, it can be helpful to involve professionals such as:

- Educational Psychologists – to assess learning and emotional needs
- Autism specialists – who understand how autism impacts school life
- Mental health services (e.g. CAMHS) – if anxiety or trauma are significant factors
- Speech and Language Therapists – to assess communication challenges

A Team Around the Child (TAC) meeting can be a helpful way to bring everyone together and create a shared plan.

6. What Can Families Do?

When a child starts refusing school, it can be distressing for the whole family. You may feel helpless, frustrated, guilty, or under pressure to “fix” things quickly – especially if professionals or the school don’t fully understand your child’s needs. But your support and understanding can make a huge difference.

While there’s no one-size-fits-all solution, there are practical steps you can take to help your child feel safer, more supported, and less overwhelmed.

Stay Calm and Compassionate

Children in distress need connection, not correction. Even if emotions are high, try to stay calm and show your child that you believe them. Reassure them that their feelings are valid and that you’ll work together to find a way forward.
Avoid pressure or punishment – this can increase anxiety and damage trust. Instead, focus on emotional safety and listening.

Open Up Communication

Give your child space to talk about their worries at their own pace. Some children find it easier to express themselves through drawing, play, or writing. Try gentle prompts like:

- “Is there something at school that’s bothering you?”
- “What would make tomorrow feel easier?”

Let them know it’s okay to not have all the answers. Just being heard can be a huge relief.

Work Together with School

Try to keep communication open and constructive with the school. Share your child’s perspective and ask for adjustments that could help – such as:

- A quiet place for breaks
- A later start or reduced timetable
- A named adult they can go to when overwhelmed

Don’t be afraid to ask for a meeting with the SENCO or pastoral team to discuss support. Document your concerns and any agreed plans in writing.

Look After Yourself

Supporting a child with school refusal can be exhausting. You may feel isolated or blamed, especially if attendance teams or professionals don’t fully understand the situation.
Make time for your own wellbeing, and reach out for support where you can.

7. What Should Schools be Doing?

Schools have a legal and moral duty to support all children, including those who are autistic and experiencing school-related distress. When a child is unable to attend, the response should be one of understanding, not punishment. Every behaviour is a form of communication – and school refusal is no exception.

A supportive school can make all the difference, helping a child to feel safe, respected, and better able to engage with learning.

Make Reasonable Adjustments

Under the Equality Act 2010, schools must make "reasonable adjustments" to ensure autistic pupils are not disadvantaged. These might include:

- Access to a quiet space or sensory room
- Reduced timetable or flexible transitions
- Visual supports and clear, consistent routines
- Permission to leave class if overwhelmed
- Alternative ways of recording work or demonstrating understanding

These adjustments should be personalised – what works for one child may not work for another.

Build Positive Relationships

Trust is key. Assigning a named adult who can check in with the child daily can help reduce anxiety. Staff should aim to be predictable, patient, and supportive – not reactive or punitive.

Taking the time to understand how the child experiences school can prevent assumptions and improve communication.

Involve the Family

Parents and carers know their child best. Schools should involve families in any discussions about support, and avoid placing blame. Regular, two-way communication is essential – and meetings should be collaborative, not confrontational.

If a child is unable to attend, families should not be pressured or threatened with fines. The focus should be on support, not attendance targets.

Plan for Reintegration Carefully

If a child has been out of school, rushing them back too quickly can make things worse. A personalised reintegration plan should:

- Start with the child's voice – what do they feel able to manage?
- Be flexible and gradual, with no fixed deadlines
- Include emotional and sensory support
- Celebrate small steps, not just attendance
-

For some children, returning to the same school may not be appropriate, and that's okay too. **Well-being must always come first.**

Think Outside the Box

Traditional classrooms and teaching methods may not suit every autistic learner. Schools should be open to creative solutions, such as:

- Using interest-based or strengths-focused learning
- Accessing support from autism advisory teachers
- Offering blended learning (e.g. combining home and school work)
- Exploring alternative provision if mainstream isn't suitable

It's not about "getting the child back into school" at all costs – it's about finding an approach that meets their needs and supports their growth.

8. Seeking Help and Support

Navigating school refusal can feel like an overwhelming and lonely experience, but you don't have to face it alone. There are professionals, services, and organisations that can help identify needs, advocate for your child, and support you in finding the right path forward.
The earlier help is sought, the better the chances of putting effective support in place before the situation escalates further.

Speak to the School SENCO

The school's Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) should be your first point of contact. They are responsible for identifying and coordinating support for children with additional needs.
Ask for a meeting to discuss your concerns, share information from home, and request reasonable adjustments. Keep a written record of these discussions and ask for any support plans to be put in writing.

Ask for Specialist Involvement

If your child's difficulties are ongoing or complex, it's appropriate to ask for input from professionals such as:

- Educational Psychologist (EP) – can assess learning, emotional needs, and recommend adjustments
- Speech and Language Therapist (SaLT) – can assess communication and social interaction
- Occupational Therapist (OT) – may help with sensory processing or daily functioning challenges
- Autism Advisory Teachers – many local authorities offer support from teachers trained in autism
- CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) – for support with anxiety, depression or mental health concerns

If the school is unwilling or slow to involve these services, you can speak to your GP or contact your local SEND Information Advice and Support Service (SENDIASS) for guidance.

Consider an EHCP

If your child's difficulties are affecting their ability to access education, it may be appropriate to apply for an E**ducation, Health and Care Plan (EHCP)**. This legal document outlines a child's needs and the support they must receive – including alternative provision if school is no longer suitable.

You can request an EHC needs assessment from your local authority. It's helpful to gather supporting evidence, such as professional reports and records of school refusal.

Support Organisations You Can Contact

If you need advice, advocacy, or just someone who understands what you're going through, the following organisations offer free, reliable support:

- **SENDIASS (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Information, Advice and Support Service)**

Local services offering impartial advice on education, health, and social care. Find your local branch: www.sendiass.org.uk

- **IPSEA (Independent Provider of Special Education Advice)**

Legal advice and resources about special educational needs and EHCPs.
Website: www.ipsea.org.uk

- **Contact**

Supports families of disabled children with advice on education, benefits, and more.
Website: www.contact.org.uk

- **National Autistic Society (NAS)**

Information, helplines, and support on autism and education rights.
Website: www.autism.org.uk

- **YoungMinds**

Mental health advice for young people and parents, including school anxiety.
Website: www.youngminds.org.uk

- **ASD Helping Hands**

Support, resources, and specialist assessments for autistic children and their families in Norfolk and beyond.
Website: www.asdhelpinghands.org.uk

Remember, you don't have to wait until crisis point to reach out – support is available, and you're not alone.

9. Legal and Attendance Considerations

When a child is refusing school, it's natural for parents to worry about attendance rules and legal consequences. Unfortunately, families are sometimes threatened with fines or prosecution, even when their child is genuinely unwell or unable to cope. It's important to know your rights and responsibilities – and where support can be found.

Understanding Attendance and the Law

In England, all children of compulsory school age (5 to 16) must receive a suitable full-time education. This doesn't always mean school, home education and alternative provision can also meet this requirement.

Schools must record attendance using set codes. If a child is absent due to anxiety or mental health issues, this may be marked as unauthorised unless supported by medical evidence or agreed adjustments. If absence becomes persistent, schools may involve the local authority's attendance team.

However, if a child is autistic and unable to attend due to unmet needs, this is a special educational issue, not simply a case of poor attendance.

What About Fines?

Fixed Penalty Notices (fines) can be issued for unauthorised absence, but they should not be used when absence is linked to disability, anxiety, or other health-related reasons. If your child's difficulties are supported by medical or educational evidence, you may be able to challenge any fines.

Seek advice from SENDIASS or IPSEA if you're under pressure or unsure of your rights.

School Attendance Orders

In rare cases, a local authority may issue a School Attendance Order (SAO) if they believe a child is not receiving a suitable education. These are legal documents, but parents have the right to explain why school isn't suitable and provide evidence of efforts to support their child.

When School Is Not Appropriate

If school has become a source of trauma or ongoing distress, it may not be the right setting – at least for now. Options include:

- Flexi-schooling – part-time attendance combined with home learning
- EOTAS (Education Otherwise Than At School) – where the local authority funds alternative education
- Elective Home Education (EHE) – where parents take full responsibility for education
-

Each option has different implications, so it's important to research carefully and seek advice before making changes.

10. Identifying the Root Causes

Sometimes, even with everyone's best efforts, a child continues to struggle with school attendance or stops attending altogether. This can be incredibly distressing for families, especially if you're doing all you can but feel judged or unsupported.

If things are not improving, it's time to pause, reassess, and consider alternative approaches that prioritise your child's wellbeing.

Understanding Burnout

Some autistic children reach a point of emotional and physical exhaustion known as autistic burnout. This often follows long periods of masking or trying to cope in environments that don't meet their needs.

Signs of burnout may include:

- Withdrawal or shutdowns
- Sleep and eating disturbances
- Loss of previously learned skills
- Increased anxiety, depression or meltdowns
- Refusal to engage in any learning, not just school

In this state, pushing for reintegration can do more harm than good. Rest, recovery and low-demand environments are essential.

Rethinking What Success Looks Like

It's easy to feel pressure to "get them back to school," but for some children, success may mean:

- Rebuilding trust and emotional safety
- Regaining confidence in low-stress settings
- Exploring creative, interest-led learning at home
- Finding an education approach that works with their needs, not against them
-

Every child's journey is different, and there's no set timeline for recovery.

Seeking a Fresh Start

If the current school is unable (or unwilling) to meet your child's needs, it may be time to consider alternatives:

- A change of school – mainstream or specialist
- Therapeutic or trauma-informed education settings
- Bespoke learning packages, possibly through an EHCP
- Elective Home Education, either short-term or long-term

You may need to gather reports, push for assessments, or challenge local authority decisions. It can be tiring but with the right support and persistence, a better path is possible.

You're Not Failing

You are not failing as a parent. You are not being difficult. You are responding to a child in distress with love and advocacy.

When things don't improve, it isn't a reflection of your parenting it's a sign that something in the system isn't working for your child. And change starts by acknowledging that truth.

11. Alternative Education Options

When a child is unable to attend school regularly – or at all – families often start to explore alternatives. While this can feel daunting at first, there are many flexible, creative options available that may better suit an autistic child's needs.
What matters most is finding an approach that protects the child's wellbeing while allowing them to continue learning at a pace and in a way that works for them.

Elective Home Education (EHE)

Parents have the legal right to educate their child at home, as long as they provide a full-time, suitable education. Home education can offer:

- A calm, low-pressure learning environment
- Freedom to follow the child's interests and strengths
- Flexibility around sensory needs and routines
- One-to-one support and emotional safety

Home education doesn't need to follow the national curriculum, but it should be age-appropriate and meet the child's needs. Some families follow structured plans; others take a more child-led approach.

Before de-registering from a school, it's important to research your responsibilities and rights – and consider whether this will be a short- or long-term solution.

EOTAS (Education Otherwise Than At School)

If a child is unable to attend school due to health, disability, or unmet needs, and no suitable placement can be found, the local authority may agree to fund an EOTAS package. This can include:

- Online learning
- Specialist tuition
- Therapy and support services
- Bespoke timetables

An EOTAS package usually requires an EHCP and detailed evidence that school is not appropriate.

Specialist Settings

Some autistic children may thrive in specialist schools or provisions that offer:

- Smaller class sizes
- Autism-trained staff
- Sensory-friendly environments
- Therapeutic input as part of the school day

Specialist placements are usually accessed through an EHCP and a formal consultation process with the local authority.

Online and Blended Learning

Some children who cannot cope with the school environment are able to engage with education from home through:

- Online schools or virtual classrooms
- Tuition through local authority provision
- Blended approaches (e.g. part-time school, part-time home)

This can provide a bridge for children not yet ready to return to a physical setting.

12. Resources and Signposting

It can be difficult to know where to turn when your child is struggling with school refusal. Whether you're looking for emotional support, legal guidance, education advice or just reassurance that you're not alone – the following resources can help.

Support and Advice

- **ASD Helping Hands**

Support for autistic children, young people and families in Norfolk and surrounding areas. Offers the SRAS-R school refusal assessment, advice sessions, and workshops.
🌐 www.asdhelpinghands.org.uk

- **SENDIASS (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Information, Advice and Support Services)**

Free, impartial advice for families navigating SEN support, EHCPs and education rights.
🌐 www.sendiass.org.uk

- **IPSEA (Independent Provider of Special Education Advice)**

Expert legal advice on education law, exclusions, and EHCPs.
🌐 www.ipsea.org.uk

- **National Autistic Society (NAS)**

Information on autism, school refusal, rights in education and reasonable adjustments.
🌐 www.autism.org.uk

- **Contact**

Support for families of disabled children, including education and benefits advice.
🌐 www.contact.org.uk

- **YoungMinds Parents Helpline**

Mental health advice and guidance for families dealing with anxiety, burnout or emotional distress.
🌐 www.youngminds.org.uk

Helpful Reading and Tools

- The Explosive Child – Ross Greene
- My Child Won't Go to School – Eleonore Hargreaves
- School Refusal: Understanding Child School Avoidance – M. S. Walter
- PDA by PDAers – The PDA Society
- NAS School Anxiety Toolkit (free PDF)

Templates and Tools

- Anxiety trackers and emotion charts
- Sensory profiles
- Daily routines and flexible timetables
- School reintegration plans
- Example EHCP request letters

Supporting a child who is struggling with school refusal can be one of the most challenging – and emotionally draining – experiences a parent or carer can face. It's natural to feel overwhelmed, especially when professionals don't fully understand what your family is going through.

But please remember this: you are not alone, and this is not your fault.
School refusal isn't about bad parenting or a badly behaved child. It's about a child in distress – often exhausted from trying to cope in an environment that doesn't yet meet their needs. When we shift the focus from attendance to understanding, we open the door to meaningful change.

There's no quick fix, and every child's path will be different. But with the right support, recovery is possible. Some children return to school with adjustments in place. Others thrive through alternative education or take a longer road to find what works for them.

What matters most is protecting your child's wellbeing – and yours too.
Be patient. Keep listening. Celebrate the small wins. And don't be afraid to challenge systems that aren't working. You're your child's best advocate, and you're doing better than you think.

Together, with compassion, understanding, and the right support, things can get better.

ASD Helping Hands

Our Mission

“Empowering autistic individuals and those around them, ASD Helping Hands is dedicated to fostering confidence, independence, and inclusion at every stage of life. We provide guidance, education, and resources to help individuals, families, and professionals navigate autism with knowledge and empowerment.

We champion the rights of autistic people, striving to create a more inclusive society while ensuring our services remain accessible, reliable, and built on trust.”

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