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The Parents' Guide to School Non-Attendance

Hello and thank you for purchasing your copy of 'I can't go to school!'. I'm Suzy Rowland, author of the book you've bought. I'd like to introduce myself, before you get stuck in. I have learned so much from doing the research for this book, and the most important things I have learned have come directly from the children and young people themselves. I see them as my teachers.

My story

Before we talk about your wonderful book purchase, I will share a bit of my story. When my son was out of school for almost a year, aged 12, we struggled to find a school that would complement his highly intelligent, sensitive, autistic, ADHD (attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder) personality. His move to secondary school wasn't successful and resulted in my husband and I pulling him out of his school without another one to go to. We did this because we could see how unhappy the school environment made him.

My son finally went back to full-time mainstream education in the last few weeks of 7th Grade (Year 8). It took him a while to fall into established friendship groups, and to build bonds with teachers and the workings of the school. But he did a great job and settled in pretty quickly. He was glad to be back in school and made huge efforts in his lessons as well as managing his autism, but a key part of the success – in my opinion – was due to the careful and sensitive re-introduction plan created by the head of his school's autism centre. She made my son, the whole family, in fact, feel 100% supported. If she's reading this, thank you Miss Smith.

A couple of years later, I set up the #happyinschool project¹ as a forum for autism and ADHD parent advocacy and empowerment. After lots of research and community engagement, it quickly developed into detailed training programmes for mental health professionals, educators and complex organizations, and after some intensive training in cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), I was able to work directly with children and young adults.

I absolutely love the work I do – and I hope some of this passion bursts through the pages of the book, and gives you the hope and confidence to move forwards with your child, either back into their existing school or successfully into a new school setting.

How you feel

Being the parent or carer of a child or young person is no walk in the park, but sometimes the problems are so overwhelming you can feel like you are a failure. Let me reassure you, *you are not*. While it is true that you are probably the most powerful influence in your child's life, which can be a big pressure, you are still your own person, with your own issues to deal with. You are doing your best in difficult circumstances, and you may need support for yourself, as you support your child as best you can.

1 www.happyinschoolproject.com

For many parents, when a child is out of school for weeks or months at a time, it creates issues you didn't see coming – such as having to juggle work commitments or change your hours or even give up work completely. This can mean a change in your financial situation, which creates its own stresses. You may feel the pressure from school, as if somehow your child's absence is your fault (more on this in the workbook). It is common to be fearful for your child. Our role as parents or carers is to protect and care for our little ones – so it's hardly surprising that keeping them at home feels like the best option sometimes. Your child's anxiety may trigger some feelings in you that you've kept hidden for decades. If they jump out of the bag, it's a good idea to deal with them, so you and your child can get to a more confident and healing place.

How your child or young person feels

Your child's pain and distress is the reason you are here. I am here for the pain and distress of your child too. I have experienced the crushing feeling of seeing your child at home, in anguish and too scared or upset to go into school. They want to go to school and 'be like the other kids' but they know that they're 'different' and school just doesn't make them happy. Remember that line in the Whitney Houston song, 'The Greatest Love of All'? It really gets the water works started! We want to treat them well, but sometimes we don't even know where to start. The workbook is a good place to start. Together you can start to talk about these painful and sad issues together. I hope you can laugh and cry and start to build a confident base of understanding and good communication skills, so you can move forwards.

Using the workbook

'*I can't go to school!*' is written and designed to be interactive. This means that you and your child are invited to talk, share thoughts, make notes or scribble in it. It's a living workbook and you can use it however you want. If your child has been at home long-term through anxiety, exclusion, waiting for an assessment, a diagnosis or other professional help, working through the book can help to provide some structure for the day.

Depending on how well your child reads, you can approach this workbook in a number of ways – choose whichever feels most comfortable to you:

- Leave the workbook lying around, so your child or young person can see it, and ask questions about it. Encourage them to read it with you, but if they want to read it on their own, that is totally fine too.
- If they want to read it alone, make sure you ask them how they're getting on. Do they have any questions to ask you or another adult? You can suggest that they could ask their support worker or therapist (if they have one) if there is anything they don't understand or wish to talk through.
- You can sit and read it together – with coloured pens and a scribble pad nearby. And some snacks and a drink of water. If your child tears up, reassure them that it's okay to let the sad feelings out. You can break off to explore feelings together or carry on going through the exercise.

- Check regularly if your child feels okay (and ask yourself in private if you feel okay too). Make some notes after your chats that you can discuss in your meetings with the school. If they tell you something upsetting, try not to get cross as this could prevent them from sharing more with you.
- You can ‘lead’ the reading, explaining any difficult words, and remember to take your time on each page, each chapter, each line. Read and re-read pages if you have to. Like every new skill or activity, you will grow in confidence as you talk, share and practise the exercises together.
- If your child is working with the school on an action plan to support their return to school, this book will be particularly useful in helping them to figure out their thoughts and feelings and to put them into words.

Asking for help

Even though this workbook will be hugely helpful as you and your child start to unravel the reasons why they aren’t going to school, it’s likely that you can’t solve this alone. From my interviews with the parents and young people who kindly shared their stories, I learned that children may have been feeling anxious or unhappy for many months or even years before going to school every day feels too much for them.

You may be getting help now from the school team (e.g., a mental health support worker, SENCO (special educational needs coordinator), pastoral lead, psychiatrist, educational psychologist, etc.). Whoever you are working with, it’s important to make sure there is a team around the child (TAC). It’s best for you, rather than your child, to open any letters from school, otherwise the situation may get more stressful for all of you.

If you’re not sure who does what, make a note of the questions you want to ask the teachers and other experts when you next meet. Keep the questions short: how exactly can they help your son or daughter? Using the five W’s is a great tool: who, what, when, where and most importantly, why?

Online help and resources

If you live in the UK, the youth suicide charity Papyrus runs a helpline for young people called HOPELINEUK. They provide confidential support and advice and can be contacted on 0800 068 4141, you can also text 07860039967 or email pat@papyrus-uk.org, and in the UK and Ireland, the Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123, or email jo@samaritans.org or jo@samaritans.ie

If you’re in the United States, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is on 800 273 8255. You can also text HOME to 741741 to connect with a crisis text line counsellor.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) *Anxiety and Depression in Children*. Available at: www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/depression.html

Sue Knowles, Bridie Gallagher and Phoebe McEwen (2018) *My Anxiety Handbook: Getting Back on Track*. London and Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. Available at: <https://uk.jkp.com/products/my-anxiety-handbook>

Suzy Rowland and Adam A. Freeman (2022) *The Professionals' Guide to School Non-Attendance*. London and Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. This will improve your understanding of school non-attendance as well as some of the psychology of avoidant behaviour. It will help you to put your situation into a global and sociological context.