School Refusal is when an adolescent will not go to school, may arrive late or skip class and or activities. It is different from truancy in that the child is staying at home with the knowledge of the family and despite their best effort to enforce attendance. They do not engage in anti-social behaviour and it is not the same as school withdrawal when the family may keep the child at home.

School Refusal is a serious issue; it may contribute to mental health difficulties, emotional and social problems, exiting school early and occupational dysfunction in later life.

Early detection and interventions is essential, the longer it goes on the harder it is to correct.

Reasons vary for school refusal. It’s important to understand and recognise some Red Flags!

- Anxiety - about social situations, activities, oral presentations, exams or sporting carnivals.
- Academic or learning problems.
- Peer issues or bullying.
- Transition to a new school, from Junior to Senior School, puberty or the senior years when thoughts of transitioning to work or university cause anxiety.
- Returning to school from a long absence, e.g. Holiday or illness.
- Disengaging, turning up late or missing class are all early warning signs.
What can schools do to cope with School Refusal?

Schools need to create a positive and friendly environment where students feel supported by peers and teachers and have a sense of connectedness to their school community.

Closely monitor school attendance for the whole day, classes and activities. Follow up absences early with family and parents to ensure early detection. Make consistent attendance a priority in your school.

Ensure staff are aware of the factors that contribute to school refusal; seek help, listen and support when working with students and their family of the persistent school refusal.

School and class should be fun interesting and engaging. Schedule wellbeing days such as R U OK? Day. Introduce some positive psychology strategies - what went well today, what is one good thing that happened today, gratitude days.

1. Students are more likely to attend school when they feel supported and valued as an important part of the school community.

Put in place steps to ensure students are enthusiastic about school and feel connected – check the school climate barometer.

Manage the risk; have programs and policies in place at vulnerable times such as school transitioning between grades (junior to senior) and changing schools.

Establish good relationships and communication with the family.

2. Know who can support you both inside and outside of school, to identify and address the underlying issues.

Work with families; to understand why the student my be refusing school; know how to support them with morning routines, flexible timetables, additional support on arrival times and keep in close contact even during extended periods of absence.

Understand anxiety; it is almost always indicated in school refusal cases and it presents itself differently in different students. Seek support, read and educate yourself and your team.

3. Recognising and responding to school refusal means that school staff might pick up on issues that would otherwise be missed. It also allows for referral to other services or professional that can help support students who are refusing school.

4. Working with parents, carers and referral personnel to build strong relationships with families and the community is the best way to support and maintain communication during periods of non-attendance and help the student to return to school.