



Signs your child may be disengaging in primary school

There are many reasons why a child might disengage at school including when they are experiencing stress at home, at school or with relationships.



Key Points

- Children are engaged at school when they enjoy their learning, have positive relationships with their teachers and other children, and feel like they belong at their school.
- Children who disengage early at school are more likely to leave school early.
- There are signs to watch out for that might indicate your child has disengaged or is at risk of disengaging from school.
- There are many reasons why a child might disengage at school including when they are experiencing stress at home, at school or with relationships.
- Schools and families can help children re-engage at school by supporting them in ways that respond to their individual needs.

We all want our child to feel happy and safe at school. For some kids, school is a place where they enjoy learning and playing with their friends. However, some children can find school hard because they struggle

socially, emotionally or with their learning. Such struggles can lead children to disengage and even refuse to go to school. Preventing disengagement and dealing with it when it happens can make all the difference to a child's experience of primary school and beyond. Here's some tips on how to recognise your child may be disengaging at primary school and what you and your child's school can do to support your child.

What do we mean by 'engagement'?

When we talk about children being engaged in their education, we are referring to the attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion they show when they are learning, and the sense of belonging they feel about being part of their school community, including the quality of their relationships with teachers and other children at school. Researchers¹ consider student engagement to have three parts:

- Behavioural engagement: how a child participates in their learning, social, and extracurricular activities at school
- Emotional engagement: how a child responds to their teachers and classmates, and the extent to which they feel a sense of belonging in their school community
- Cognitive engagement: how invested a child is in their own learning and how self-motivated they are to find ways to learn.

Why engagement matters

Research² has found that children who disengage early at school are more likely to leave school early. We also know from research that young people who leave school early do not have the same chance of success as those who complete Year 12. Because disengagement from school can start during the primary school years, it's important for parents and schools to work together as soon as the signs of disengagement become obvious. If children can get the help they need early in their schooling years, they can enjoy primary school, transition smoothly to high school, and go on to fulfil their potential.

Encourage your child to talk about school

Encourage your child to talk about their experiences at school so you can keep track of how they are feeling and find out early if they are experiencing any problems. Try asking open-ended questions like these:

What was the best part of your day at school?

- What was fun at school today?
- Who did you play with at breaks?

- What made you laugh today?
- What was something different that happened today?

Signs of disengagement

There are a number of signs that may indicate your child has disengaged or is at risk of disengaging from school. If you notice any of these signs, talk to your child's teacher so they are aware of what's going on for your child and can give them the support they need. Does your child?

- show little interest in school and talk about wanting to leave
- miss a lot of school or refuse to go altogether
- have ongoing difficulty with reading, writing or maths
- have negative interactions with other children
- exhibit behaviour that is aggressive, violent or socially withdrawn
- show a significant change in behaviour, attitude or performance at school.

Possible reasons for disengagement

First and foremost, a child needs to feel happy and safe at school. When children feel safe and supported at school, they are able to learn. There are different reasons why a child might be disengaging from school, including when they:

- are experiencing stress at home, at school or with friendships
- are feeling unsafe and/or not accepted in the classroom or school
- are feeling discomfort due to tiredness, hunger, heat, cold, or feeling unwell
- have an undiagnosed learning problem or condition
- are struggling to establish positive relationships with teachers and other children
- are feeling uninterested in the content being taught
- are gifted and feel bored or are hiding their abilities so they can fit in.

When you should seek help

While it is normal for a child's level of focus to vary depending on the time of year (some children become tired by the end of the term, for example) or what they are learning in the classroom (some children find some subjects more interesting than others), if your child is showing signs of disengagement over an extended period of time, is refusing to go to school, or is consistently resistant to going to school, then you should speak to your child's school to seek their help.

How schools can help

Every school is different and each school will have different services and programs to support their students to re-engage at school. Schools work hard to respond to the needs of individual children. So whether the reasons for your child's disengagement relate to the way they learn, their behaviour, their cultural needs or their social and emotional needs, the team at your child's school will look for ways to respond to your child's individual needs. Some ways primary schools can help children who have disengaged or who are at risk of disengaging include:

- teaching in flexible ways to respond to the different ways children learn, their personal interests, and their individual abilities
- developing individual curriculum plans tailored to the learning needs of children who are exceeding, or not yet meeting, the achievement level for their year at school
- implementing flexible learning arrangements and individual learning plans for students who need additional support with their learning
- talking to support staff like teaching assistants, learning enhancement staff, inclusive education support and allied health professionals (such as speech, occupational therapists and advisory visiting teachers), to give children the additional help they need
- referring children to the school guidance officer so they can either work with the child or refer them to someone outside the school for specialised help
- providing individualised support plans for children who need more intensive help with their learning, behaviour or social skills
- giving cultural support to children to increase their cultural safety and engagement.

Work with your child's school

Schools want to work closely with parents as partners in supporting students. If your child has disengaged or is at risk of disengaging, your child's school will work with you every step of the way so you are part of the effort to help your child re-engage at school.

It can take time

If your child has disengaged at school and you are working with the school to help your child re-engage, remember that it might take time to see positive results. It's important that you and your child stick at it and recognise that while it might take time, the effort will be worth it in the end and help set up your child for a successful transition to high school.

If your child is experiencing trauma or grief

Sometimes when children experience trauma or grief, it can lead them to disengage at school. Schools can play an important role in supporting children experiencing trauma or grief especially if their parents are also coping with their own grief and loss and would benefit from additional support. Let the school know if your family is going through a traumatic time so the school can help support your child.

If your child has a disability or individual learning needs

You may already know your child has additional learning needs or could be concerned that they might. It's during the primary school years that such issues can start to emerge and sometimes it's not until towards the end of primary school that they are diagnosed. So it's worth acting early if you are worried about anything or think your child is not where they should be developmentally for their age. Talk to the school and discuss your concerns with your doctor. Children develop at different rates and professionals are the best people to advise you on whether there is a need for follow-up testing or additional support. In the meantime, alerting your child's school to your fears can help the school focus on any areas for concern, organise support staff to work with your child, and/or provide additional diagnostic information. And for some of you, the Autism Hub or the Reading and Writing Centre could be a useful place to gather information to help you support your child's engagement at school.

References

1. Fredericks, J et al, School engagement: potential of the concept, state of the evidence, (2004)
2. Lamb, Stephen and Dulfer, Nicky, Predicting disengagement and its effects: what evidence is there on the extent to which disengagement can be predicted at younger ages? (8-12), (2008)

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