

TRIPLE P–POSITIVE PARENTING PROGRAM

SUBMISSION

INQUIRY INTO THE NATIONAL TREND OF SCHOOL REFUSAL AND
RELATED MATTERS

SENATE EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT REFERENCES
COMMITTEE

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Triple P International (TPI) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Senate Inquiry into the National Trend of School Refusal and Related Matters.

TPI will address how increasing support for parents can help reduce school refusal, improve the connection between schools and families, provide much needed mental health treatment and support to children and young people experiencing school avoidance.

For the purpose of this submission, parents and carers will be referred to as 'parents'.

KEY POINTS

- School refusal is a growing issue and is closely linked with anxiety
- Anxiety has increased in recent years due to ongoing stressful life events including COVID-19, natural disasters and cost of living pressures
- Parents are overwhelmed, need support and do not feel confident in managing children's anxiety
- Teachers are under-resourced to deal with increasing rates of school refusal
- Parents and proven parenting programs are under-utilised resources schools can use to help support children experiencing anxiety and school refusal
- Schools play an important role in helping families learn about, and gain access to, evidence-based parenting programs and services
- Early intervention and prevention are crucial to helping children develop emotional regulation and resilience to manage school related anxiety
- The Australian Government's *Parenting Education and Support Program* (PESP) gives families in Australia with children under 12 years **immediate and free access** to Triple P's online programs
- The Triple P – Positive Parenting Program is one of the world's most extensively researched and evaluated parenting support programs and is proven to significantly improve symptoms of child anxiety

RECOMMENDATIONS

Triple P recommends all levels of government work together to leverage the Australian Government's \$40 million investment in PESP to:

- **Enable schools and families to work together to combat school refusal by empowering educators and teachers to act as a conduit for connecting parents with available tools by:**
 - raising awareness of evidence-based programs available such as PESP to parents of children experiencing school refusal, or showing early signs of school refusal
- **Equip all schools with information regarding the Australian Government funded and freely available Triple P online programs during orientation as students begin Primary School to:**
 - Ensure parents have access to resources and evidence-based tools that will positively influence child behaviour and school outcomes
 - Provide help and support to all parents – irrelevant of economic status, cultural background, current situation or health of their child
 - Reduce the stigma associated with parenting programs



ABOUT TRIPLE P

The Triple P – Positive Parenting Program® was researched and developed at The University of Queensland and has been helping families for over 40 years. It is delivered in over 30 countries.

Triple P is the most evaluated parenting program in the world. There are now more than 400 evaluation papers on Triple P programs, with the vast majority of these demonstrating significant outcomes for children and their parents, including across different cultures, socio-economic groups, and family structures. The Triple P evidence base includes over 790 papers published in over 40 countries and involving over 1700 researchers across 539 institutions. It has been ranked the world's most extensively researched family skills training program by the United Nations.¹

Triple P is a suite of interventions ranging in intensity from parent education, anticipatory guidance, and targeted brief interventions, through to interventions for childhood mental health conditions. It also includes adjunct interventions to address adjustment issues of parents. Programs can be delivered one-on-one, in groups, via large seminars, or as self-help online or workbook-based programs.

This multi-level and multi-format approach ensures Triple P is flexible enough to meet the needs of individuals as well as specific communities when offered as a population health approach. Triple P gives parents as much help as they need without over-servicing and encourages self-sufficiency.

Triple P's 'proportionate universalism' approach, rather than 'one size fits all', means there is a level of support for all, but more for those with greatest need.

Triple P is one of only two programs to be given a 'very high' evidence rating in a recent Australian review by the Centre of Research Excellence in Childhood Adversity and Mental Health of 26 different interventions designed to prevent or reduce the negative effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).² The two very highly-rated programs were both parenting programs amongst interventions such as; community-wide initiatives, home visiting programs, economic and social service interventions, psychological therapies, and, school-based programs² demonstrating that the quality of parenting a child receives is a critical risk factor for children's mental health and wellbeing.

Triple P programs deliver a return on investment of 1,283%, equating to nearly \$14 for every \$1 spent and \$68.1 million per year in benefits.³ It has been found as cost-effective in improving child behavioural problems, emotional problems, and effective parenting.²

SCHOOL REFUSAL IN AUSTRALIA

School refusal is a complex issue, arising from distress related to attending or remaining at school, attending school-related activities, or not feeling well at school.⁴⁻⁶ Child and parent mental and physical health, family functioning, parental school engagement, school and home relationship, and community support may all contribute to school refusal.⁷

Although there are no official statistics on school refusal in Australia, research shows that it is most common in 5-6 year olds and 10-11 year olds.⁸ The overall prevalence rate of school refusal is approximately 1-5% of children and adolescents.^{6,8} Amongst vulnerable populations, this prevalence is much higher, for example in students on the autism spectrum, school refusal accounts for 43% of absences.⁹ School refusal can be broadly categorised into two main functions¹⁰:

1. avoiding school-related aspects (anxiety about school), and
2. avoiding social related aspects.

School attendance can place academic, social, and emotional challenges and pressures on students, some of whom find this demand overwhelming and turn to avoidance as a coping mechanism.¹⁰

It is common for school refusal to occur alongside major changes in a child's life such as transitioning to a new school, moving house or death of a relative or pet.⁸ Children and adolescents may use school refusal as a way to avoid psychological distress arising from school-based issues such as bullying or academic struggles.¹¹

School refusal-related non-attendance is linked to negative experiences of learning in school, emotional wellbeing and mental health needs, and inconsistent relationships with, and support from, parents.¹²

Short term impacts of school refusal include breakdowns in family and peer relationships, increased family conflict, increased daily emotional distress, mental illness, and social withdrawal, as well as decreases in academic performance.⁴ Long term impacts include disrupted social, emotional, and intellectual development, poor interpersonal relationships, lower career opportunities and higher rates of lifetime mental disorders.⁴

Evidence-based interventions can help address short and long term impacts of school refusal.⁴

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SCHOOL ATTENDANCE, YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR FAMILIES

School refusal and general anxiety amongst students has been exacerbated by the pandemic due to COVID-19-related sleep problems, anxiety and loneliness.¹³ Research shows Australian COVID-19 restrictions disproportionately impacted the subjective well-being of parents raising children aged 0-18 years old. An Australia mental health survey found higher psychological distress rates of adolescents aged 12-17 years in 2020 compared to 2018.¹⁴

School refusal in Australia is reported to have tripled since COVID-19.^{15,16} Even after lockdowns ended, anxiety about attending school did not, and there is a new cohort of post-COVID children who are experiencing school refusal.¹⁷ Post-pandemic absences are underpinned by difficulties in adapting to new school routines, COVID-related anxiety, concerns about catching up with academic work loads, and poor communication and interaction between schools and home.⁷

The pandemic has negatively impacted the mental health of parents and children, especially those with special education needs, low incomes, and with pre-existing mental health issues.⁷ In Australia, COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted students from lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds.¹⁸ Whereas high SES students show similar attendance rates pre- and during the pandemic (following the return to in-class learning), those from low SES backgrounds displayed a significant decrease in attendance. Evidence also demonstrates that COVID-19 school closures created education gaps, and that students from lower SES backgrounds were less likely to have access to online learning than their high SES counterparts.¹⁴

With a focus on early intervention and working together to establish appropriate support for children, families and schools can increase attendance.

SCHOOL REFUSAL AND ANXIETY

School refusal is strongly associated with anxiety^{5,6} and has often been used as an indicator of anxiety in children.⁶ Anxiety associated with school refusal may include social, school, and separation anxiety.⁵ Those children who consistently refuse or avoid attending school often also meet the criteria for anxiety disorders.⁶ The prevalence of comorbid mood disorders common in school refusal (including anxiety) range between 14% to 69%, with adolescents displaying higher prevalence.⁶

While well intentioned, some parental behaviours can accidentally maintain or increase children's anxiety. For example, parents may believe they are helping their child avoid distress by allowing them to stay at home. In this scenario, the anxiety that children have regarding attending school is encouraged or maintained through avoidance, as there is a temporary reduction in their anxiety symptoms when they do not attend.⁶ These parental behaviours may reduce a child's immediate distress, however long-term they maintain and reward avoidance behaviours.

As illustrated above, parents are unlikely to be able to help their children overcome school refusal and associated anxiety, without appropriate knowledge, tools, and support.

A recent survey commissioned by Triple P found that only 10% of parents believe they are doing a good job. The 2022 report on Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing found 93.7% of principals were concerned about anxiety in students and 72.1% about school refusal.¹⁹

Evidence-based parenting interventions such as Triple P programs have been shown to significantly decrease the severity of children's anxiety-diagnoses,^{5,4} significantly improve child anxiety symptoms,^{20,21} decrease severity of symptoms,^{20,21} and improve functional impairments.²⁰ Programs can also improve parental anxiety and parents' general well-being.²¹

Fear-Less Triple P is a targeted intervention for parents of children aged six years and up that may be experiencing symptoms of anxiety. It can help parents set a good example of coping with anxiety, assist parents to coach all their children to become emotionally resilient, help parents develop a toolbox of strategies for supporting children to manage their anxiety more effectively, and help parents choose effective ways to respond to their children's anxiety.

Results from a randomised controlled trial of Fear-Less Triple P showed that 61.3% of children whose parents completed the program were free of their original anxiety diagnosis.²² The program can be

practitioner-led or parents can access a self-directed online version of the program. This program is available for all families in Australia as part of the Australian Government's PESP initiative.

SELF-REGULATION AND SCHOOL REFUSAL

Self-regulation is a crucial skill that allows children to manage their attention, thoughts, emotions, behaviours, and interpersonal interactions in appropriate ways.²³ Children who can self-regulate in early school years are better equipped to navigate the academic and social demands of their environments.²³ Self-regulation is closely linked to academic achievement, with studies showing children with higher self-regulation abilities have better grades and test scores.^{8,24} Self-regulation in early school years is also associated with lower unemployment, criminal behaviour, depression and anxiety, alcohol and substance abuse, cigarette smoking, physical illness in adulthood, and obesity.²³

Children who struggle with self-regulation may have difficulty coping with the demands of school and may feel overwhelmed by the social and academic pressures they face.⁸ A study comparing students with school refusal and those without school refusal found that maladaptive behaviours and avoiding school behaviours were caused by poor self-efficacy and lack of self-regulation skills.⁸ Students who lack self-regulation skills do not have the appropriate strategies to set goals or cope with adjusting to school environments or academic pressure.⁸

Fostering self-regulation skills in early learning and primary school-aged children is critical for their overall success in academic and social domains. Children with lower learning-related skills (including self-regulation and social competence skills) perform worse in mathematics and reading between kindergarten and the end of primary school than their high-scoring peers. This gap widens in the first few of years of primary school, demonstrating the importance of self-regulation and social competence in the early years.²⁴

Research suggests there is a strong need for these skills to be taught and developed as an early intervention, rather than a retrospective treatment.²⁴ As a preventative measure, parents can be supported to instil self-regulatory skills and increase social competence in their children.

By emphasising early intervention and improving mental health literacy among parents, evidence-based parenting programs like Triple P play an important role in supporting the prevention of child mental health difficulties and school refusal. Triple P provides parents with both knowledge of how to recognise anxiety and strategies to manage symptoms of anxiety. This ultimately helps prevent more serious problems down the line – inclusive of prolonged school refusal and accompanying issues.

SUPPORTING FAMILIES EXPERIENCING SCHOOL REFUSAL

The majority of cases of school refusal do not return to school without treatment.⁴ Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is the current standard of treatment for school refusal, research suggests that parental involvement is a necessary component in any intervention addressing school refusal.⁴ Parents play a critical role in both the prevention and treatment of anxiety and other mental health and wellbeing impacts arising from school refusal. Evidence supports the clinically significant improvement in school refusal and attendance rates when CBT treatment involves parents.⁴

Consistency between school and home can play a significant role in ensuring positive outcomes for children. When families and schools work together, students thrive – they grow in confidence, resilience and learn to self-regulate their emotions. Thanks to the Australian Government's current investment in the PESP, educators and schools have the opportunity to provide parents with evidence-based tools and

strategies to help combat the detrimental impacts, both short-term and long-term, of school non-attendance and refusal.⁴

The pressure of school attendance and its resulting distress is a well-established stressor for children and young peoples' mental health, that has only intensified since the pandemic.^{9,13} Research has shown that parents and their approach to parenting plays a significant role in influencing children.⁴

The impact of school refusal also extends to the family as a whole, particularly where the financial and employment security of parents is impacted by the challenge of balancing work with child supervision.^{25,26} Parents also find school refusal to be emotionally challenging, leading to feelings of fear, worry, guilt, loneliness, and confusion about what to do.²⁷

Through its Fear-Less program, Triple P provides an evidence-based toolbox that can create the consistency between school and home and positively impact the short-term and long-term outcomes of school refusal.

To assist parents and provide them with effective tools and strategies to positively influence children's behaviour and mental well-being, the Australian Government's PESP initiative has made Triple P's evidence-based online programs freely available to all families with children under 12. These programs include Triple P Online (0-12 years), Fear-Less Triple P (for children with anxiety), and Triple P for Baby Online (expecting and new parents).

Since the launch of Triple P online programs as part of PESP, over 80,000 Australian families have already accessed Triple P support.

By creating a formal pathway, schools can become the major connecting point between parents and government-provided evidence-based interventions such as Triple P's online programs. Schools are well-placed to facilitate increased information sharing and raise awareness to better equip parents to recognise and respond effectively to anxiety and school refusal. Schools already play a critical role in supporting children's healthy social, emotional and behavioural development, and this action seeks to further enhance student mental health without increasing the workload placed on teachers, as the intervention is accessed by parents. This additional channel for raising community-wide awareness of the PESP initiative would allow a larger number of families struggling with school refusal and child anxiety to access proven, evidence-based parenting support programs.

THE INCREASING CASELOAD ON SERVICE PROVIDERS AND SCHOOLS

According to the *National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing 2021*, 21.4% of Australians experienced a 12-month mental disorder in 2021, equating to 4.2 million people.²⁸ Anxiety was the most common mental disorder accounting for 16.8% of the population (3.3 million people). 16.8% of Australians reported experiencing anxiety in 2021, up from 11% in 2014.^{28,29}

Even before the pandemic, anxiety levels in children under the age of 14 were on the rise, with an increase from 6.2% of males in 2014 to 7.3% in 2017. Rates in females increased over the same period from 4.4% to 4.7%.²⁹

These increases have placed greater pressure on service providers. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 3.4 million Australians aged 16-85 years accessed a health professional for mental health reasons, equating to 17.5% of the population in 2020-2021.²⁸

According to the Australian Psychology Association, demand for services has increased dramatically since the pandemic with statistics showing that pre-pandemic 1 in 4 people were living with mental health illnesses, and now it is as high as 1 in 2. This increase can be attributed to lockdowns, loss of work, rising cost of living and school restrictions including schooling from home. This demand has increased waitlist times and burnout amongst service providers.³⁰

Pre-pandemic, 82% of psychologists could see new clients within 2 months and 29% of psychologists had wait lists of 2-4 weeks. During the pandemic this rose to 56% with waitlists for new clients extending past three months and 88% have increased waitlists for existing clients. 1 in 5 psychologists cannot take new clients at all.³⁰

These increases in anxiety, combined with longer wait times have placed greater strain on our schools and education system who are on the front line dealing with child anxiety.

Workloads, lack of time and teacher shortages are the major stressors of school leaders and principals in Australian schools.¹⁹ Teachers provide emotional, instructional, and organisational support to students.¹⁰ They are a critical link in children returning to school but with classes of 25+ students, this has increased stress and workloads.

A whole of community approach would help enable teachers and parents to share the support required to help children manage school refusal. For example, emotional and organisational support could be done by parents, in tandem with teachers, reducing the overall pressure teachers are experiencing.

SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES WORKING TOGETHER

*“Effective schools have high levels of parental and community involvement. This involvement is strongly related to improved student learning, attendance and behaviour ... and can have a major impact on student learning, regardless of the social or cultural background of the family. Family involvement in schools is therefore central to high quality education and is part of the core business of schools.”*³³

The critical importance of a whole community approach with schools and families working together is highlighted through the Family-School Partnerships Framework implemented by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.³⁴

Under this Framework, family involvement is integral to education in that both schools and parents have a role to play in the education of children. One of the key dimensions of Family-School Partnerships is ‘Connecting Learning at Home and at School’ (dimension B) which emphasises schools as a venue and agent for parental self-growth, learning and the development of new skills, as well as families and schools working together to create positive attitudes to learning in each child.³⁴

Taking into consideration factors which influence school refusal, the importance and impact of schools and families working together is only strengthened further. Schools and families can work together to assist and support children through school refusal and create a smooth transition back to regular school attendance.³⁵ Many schools employ wellbeing officers, guidance counsellors and/or psychologists to assist students but when parents are in tune and highly skilled children thrive.

Partnerships between schools and parents allow for both parties to better understand the issues of the child experiencing school refusal, plan an appropriate support strategy and monitor the progress.³⁶ The proposed management takes the form of a school return strategy which involves working with parents to reduce doubts and increase school re-entry. This includes both school and home plans to help prevent

early school refusal from progressing as well as practical tools to help parents identify the difference between reluctance about school from early school refusal.³⁶

TPI suggests that Triple P, as an evidence-based intervention, can form part of this support strategy.

By equipping schools with access to evidence-based parenting programs such as Triple P, schools can be the conduit for increasing parental skills and capacity. By providing parents with effective strategies for managing school refusal, the burden on the school system will be reduced.

There are over 6,000 schools nationwide. Highly trusted by parents they have an important role to play in reducing the stigma around seeking support for parenting and normalising the use of parenting programs for all families in Australia.

With the Australian Government's PESP freely available, this is an opportune time to trial such an approach with no direct cost. If PESP is offered to every parent at the transition points of beginning primary school or high school, knowledge of parenting supports and skills would increase and stigma around parenting programs would decrease.

This will empower parents to identify early signs of school refusal and develop strategies to assist children build resilience and manage school related anxiety.

ROADMAP BACK TO SCHOOL

School refusal is a complex and growing issue which has been exacerbated by extensive disruption to learning in Australia due to COVID-19, natural disasters and cost of living pressures.

It is the responsibility and role of both parents and school communities to put their best foot forward in creating a supportive environment for children and helping those who already experience school refusal, re-integrate into the school community. Children will benefit when parents and teachers work together to assist and support students in managing anxiety, build resilience and develop self-regulation. Students with the ability to self-regulate their emotions at an early age are less likely to engage in school refusal.

Triple P is an effective intervention and gives parents proven, evidence-based strategies they can call upon to help support their child's development of self-regulation.

Schools play an important role as a conduit for families. Under the Australian Government's PESP initiative, Triple P's online programs can be offered free, to all parents upon key transition points of starting primary and high school at no direct cost to government or schools. This action would constitute both a preventative measure and an early intervention by increasing parental skills. In addition to this, it's anticipated any stigma around the use and access of parenting programs would also reduce as most families access some parenting support at key times in their children's development.

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