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*Yellow Ladybugs Submission to the Inquiry into  
School Refusal – December 2022*

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9 December 2022

## Yellow Ladybugs Submission: Inquiry into School Refusal

### Introduction

Yellow Ladybugs is grateful for the opportunity to make a submission to the **Inquiry into School Refusal**. Throughout this submission we will be reflecting the preference of our community in using the term *school can't* rather than 'school refusal.' This terminology is an acknowledgment that the young people experiencing *school can't* generally do want to participate in school but are facing systemic barriers that prevent them from engaging in an ongoing basis with the mainstream schooling environment. It also speaks to the reality, that for *school can't* students, the school environment has become psychologically, emotionally and physiologically unsafe. Their inability to go to school is not a choice, and what they are feeling is real and valid. If they could go to school, they would, and if their parents could get them to school, they would.

We would also like to state that **this is not a new problem** that has come about due to the COVID 19 pandemic. *School can't* has always been a significant and ongoing issue for autistic and otherwise neurodivergent girls and young people, and their families. These are complex issues but we hope to break down the barriers and stereotypes that tend to place blame at the feet of families and students. We appreciate that it takes time to create meaningful change, but we welcome an open and honest discussion as the starting point.

We are making this submission in order to further our stated mission to improve the lives of autistic girls and women<sup>1</sup> and gender diverse individuals, by ensuring that they are seen, heard, supported, and valued. We are participating in this Inquiry, to ensure that the particular vulnerabilities and challenges of autistic girls and gender diverse young people, their parents, and autistic adults who have experienced and are still experiencing *school can't* are addressed adequately during the Inquiry.

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*'School can't' is not a choice. It is the result of the child's central nervous system going into a threat response. It is the brain's way of communicating 'I feel unsafe'. (Neurodivergent Psychologist)*

As an autistic-led organisation, our submission also reflects both the lived experience and the professional expertise of the actually autistic community. We are deeply grateful to the families that

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<sup>1</sup> This document will use identity-first language based on our community's preference. We will also use the term 'girls and women' as our key focus but also support and represent gender diverse individuals. We are committed to helping people understand the less heard about and understood internalised autistic experience, which is less visible and often found with women, girls and non-binary individuals, but seen in all genders



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have contributed to this submission. We acknowledge their generosity in documenting and sharing their lived experience in the hope that we can begin to better support all children, but particularly autistic and neurodivergent children, by addressing the systemic barriers that contribute to *school can't*.

### **About Yellow Ladybugs**

Yellow Ladybugs is an autistic-led non-government organisation with strong bridges to the community. We are dedicated to the happiness, success and celebration of autistic girls and women. We believe all autistic individuals of all genders deserve to be recognised, valued, accepted and supported in order to realise their full potential. We are committed to shining a light on autistic girls and women through the creation of positive and inclusive experiences for our members and through advocating for the rights of all autistic individuals and celebrating their neurodiversity.

Yellow Ladybugs runs regular informal social events that offer peer-to-peer connections for autistic girls<sup>2</sup> generally between the ages of five and sixteen. Our events bring our members together in an inclusive, fun and sensory-friendly setting. Underpinning every Yellow Ladybugs event, our mission is to foster a sense of belonging for all our autistic girls, to help them connect with their tribe and to instil a sense of autistic pride within our community.

We are also committed to changing the common misconceptions about autism, ensuring autistic girls and women are properly supported according to their needs and building a society that values and empowers all autistic individuals. We actively seek to address the many challenges the community of autistic girls and women face, including barriers to diagnosis, lack of inclusion in school and employment and access to support services.

Yellow Ladybugs is an inclusive organisation, and while we have a particular focus on autistic girls and women, we recognise all genders and welcome trans and gender diverse autistic individuals into our community. We also support the idea that the different presentations of autism exist as spectrum across all genders, and as an organisation we seek to dismantle all stereotypes which are harmful to the autistic community. We know that autistic girls and women, and particularly those with hidden needs, continue to be significantly disadvantaged however and we remain committed to our mission to reduce these issues.

### **Background: School Can't is Not a Choice.**

As a neurodiversity-affirming and trauma-informed organisation, Yellow Ladybugs contends that 'all behaviour is communication' and that this is the key to understanding *school can't*, and why this experience is so prevalent for autistic and neurodivergent students. The reasons behind *school can't* and school-based trauma are very individual, but safety is often a major factor. Neuroscience tells us that our body has an innate sense of when we are safe, and when we are not. Chronic stress or trauma often experienced by autistic individuals can lead to the autonomic nervous system being

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<sup>2</sup> Yellow Ladybugs also welcomes gender diverse autistic individuals to our events.



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extra sensitive and signalling danger. This creates a fight, flight, freeze, fawn response, and in some children, that fear is debilitating, and one common result of this is *school can't*.

When we understand that *school can't* is not a choice, and rather, is a neurological stress response, we can also start to understand that the conventional 'reward or punishment' approaches used on *school can't* students will not work, and may in fact cause even more harm to their mental health and wellbeing. *School can't* is not something that can be fixed by using reward charts and prizes for 'good attendance'. It is also not something that can be solved by the standard advice given to parents which is to make home so boring that the child wants to go to school. Neither of these approaches address the underlying cause of *school can't*, which is that the child does not feel safe at school. If the situation was reversed and our children were telling us they weren't safe to go home, we would be asking them why, and looking to that home environment, rather than offering them incentives to comply with our wishes.

This neurological stress response is often behind the *school can't* experience of autistic girls and gender diverse young people who have a more internalised autistic presentation, and whose needs are often hidden. Autistic girls are more likely to mask (hide or camouflage their autistic traits). The exhaustion that comes with masking, together with anxiety, sensory overwhelm, and systemic bullying and exclusion in the school setting are all major contributors to the prevalence of *school can't* in the Yellow Ladybugs community.

### **Yellow Ladybugs Community Views on *School Can't***

Yellow Ladybugs ran two simple surveys in November 2022, asking our Victoria-based community to share their experiences of *school can't*. These surveys confirmed that *school can't* has been a significant issue for autistic girls and young people, long pre-dating the Covid-19 pandemic. As was the case with autistic student experiences of remote learning, the impact of Covid, has essentially been to highlight and in some cases, exacerbate what was already a systemic problem of school-based trauma for the autistic community.

*"I feel like a lot has been blamed on Covid. And people assume my daughter struggles as a result of Covid, when actually her sensory and social overwhelm from navigating school as [an autistic girl] are far bigger factors" PARENT QUOTE*

*My 15 year-old has been to school a total of two days this term, each day for under two hours. Really the last three years her attendance is at about 10%. It is definitely not refusal, she wants to go." PARENT QUOTE*

*My daughter was a little *school can't* before Covid, but once she realised the reality of an OPTION to stay home and never leave, it blew up into complete *school can't* and then also a fear of outdoors. PARENT QUOTE*

As one parent has shared: "The impact of *school can't* and school phobia, and the lack of supports for children and families can be devastating. There is a distinct shame attached to being unable to participate in school when you are considered by observers to be "healthy and well". Invisible disabilities and mental illness by their nature can not necessarily be "observed" by others. Observers



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start to assume that the child is being deliberately disobedient. Frustration turns to ambivalence. Children can lose years of learning and feeling valued by the world outside.”

### **Yellow Ladybugs is asking the Inquiry to Listen to Lived Experience**

Based on the feedback of our community, we are sharing the following lived experience observations for the Inquiry to consider, and would welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues and suggestions directly with the Inquiry. They all speak directly to the experience of autistic girls and gender diverse young people, as an especially vulnerable *school can't* cohort.

- Teaching style and gentle common-sense accommodations can make a positive difference, especially when they are in line with **neuro-affirming and trauma-informed care**. When children are identified as facing school phobia challenges there should be more care taken to match them with a teacher than is better able to support these students.
- **School leadership acceptance of neurodiversity** and complex mental health challenges will have a positive impact for children who are experiencing *school can't*. This is about acknowledging that the problem is real and accepting that the cause is not parents being too soft or children being too weak. These children want to be included. They crave the feeling of safety and understanding.
- The **chronic levels of stress** (caused by *school can't*) on parents and siblings can be monumental. School phobia and *school can't* has a profound effect on the mental health and functioning of the entire family unit.
- Families are **financially restricted** by years of supporting a child with *school can't*, with parents unable to work in regular jobs that require steady hours each week. Financially this can be devastating for many families.
- **Mental health presentations are not classified as learning disabilities and do not attract formal support**. It should not matter exactly why a child needs support. Whatever the reason a child is experiencing school-based trauma, telling them ‘we can see you are having a hard time and we want to help you’ is so often the start of repairing the relationship with schooling. Rebuilding trust is a slow but crucial process.
- When support is not offered early on in the education journey, **school-based anxiety tends to compound over time**. When children are constantly told that they “should” be able to cope but they are clearly not able to cope with the demands of mainstream schooling it eventually begins



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to erode their sense of self. Watching a child slowly fade away and give up on being included in school is heartbreaking.

- Students who internalise their autism (often the experience of autistic girls and gender diverse young people), may not cause trouble and may appear 'fine at school, when in fact they are distraught and desperate for help. We are aware of **no specific training on how to support this cohort** of children who, as their internalised distress accumulates, are unable to attend school.

### Recommendations to the Inquiry into School Refusal

Yellow Ladybugs welcomes the opportunity to participate in the **Inquiry into School Refusal** and is committed to ensuring that the particular vulnerabilities of autistic girls/students and families are specifically addressed as part of this Inquiry. The recommendations are based on the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry. They are informed by our experience and our deep interest in shaping and creating change.

**Recommendation 1:** Prioritise input from disability-led organisations, including autistic-led organisations such as Yellow Ladybugs throughout the Inquiry.

**Recommendation 2:** Ensure that autistic students, including girls/gender diverse young people and their families are a priority cohort during the Inquiry

As an autistic-led organisation, Yellow Ladybugs would like to remind the Inquiry of the importance of 'nothing about us without us'. It is critical that the Inquiry engages directly with the community of autistic families and individuals who have experienced many years of isolation and stress due to *school can't*, and with the autistic-led organisations who advocate for them,

**Recommendation 3:** Ensure that school absence data accurately reflects the magnitude of the *school can't* issue for autistic/neurodivergent students, including autistic girls and gender diverse young people.

**Recommendation 4:** Ensure data is collected about how each identified *school can't* child is being supported to return to school

The way schools collect data on absences needs to change. The currently available options of 'illness', 'medical appointment' and 'parent choice' do not acknowledge the underlying cause of being absent for *school can't* students, and as a result they are effectively 'lost'. This data process needs to better capture the proportion of students with extra vulnerabilities such as students with a disability, including autistic and neurodivergent students, students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and other students who may have suffered from school-based trauma.



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Other recommended improvements include an agreed definition of ongoing *school can't*, and systemic change to the way in which schools are obligated to offer supports to *school can't* students and their families (and appropriate interventions as agreed with the child and family). Traditionally “truancy” has been dealt with as a reportable offence which results in further marginalising of already vulnerable students and communities.

While it is critical that school leadership do not publicly or covertly question students for missing school days, we also recognise that schools need support to investigate the causes of individual students being unable to attend school – sometimes the solution is in plain sight. Has the child been through trauma and grief? Has the child lost one very important friendship with children moving between schools? Is there bullying or certain aversions that can be addressed? If a child has a phobia of something specific, this needs to be validated, not dismissed. Our community tell us that if their children are able to explain why they are distressed, they are too often silenced with outdated responses like “don’t be silly” and “you’ll be fine”. Autistic children experiencing *school can't* need compassion, understanding and genuine support. This is especially the case for autistic girls and gender diverse young people who have more hidden needs due to their internalised presentation. The support they require may also need to continually evolve. There may not be one simple fix. It is a constant discussion.

Schools must also take the time to understand the underlying factors that are contributing to school refusal. The starting point to this is to seek connection with these students and families, and to take the time to be compassionate and to collaborate with families in a meaningful way. It is important to acknowledge that all families and students are doing their best. Most *school can't* students and families are desperately trying to meet the expectations of the school environment. Nobody wants their child missing out on education.

**Recommendation 5:** Prioritise neuro-affirming and trauma-informed resourcing and training on *school can't* for relevant school staff.

**Recommendation 6:** Support and resourcing is needed for school leadership teams to champion meaningful accommodations for *school can't* students, and to provide flexible learning options for this cohort.

**Recommendation 7:** Investigate how school-run behaviour models (e.g. School Wide Positive Behaviour Support) are contributing to school trauma and *school can't* for neurodivergent students, and explore alternative models that are trauma informed and founded in neuroscience (eg the CPS model - Collaborative and Proactive Solutions<sup>3</sup>).

**Recommendation 8:** Fund and further investigate alternative schooling models as they are valid and often preferred educational settings for *school can't* students. This includes community and

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<sup>3</sup> Dr Ross Greene [Dr. Ross Greene — Collaborative & Proactive Solutions \(cpsconnection.com\)](http://Dr.RossGreene—Collaborative&ProactiveSolutions(cpsconnection.com))



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alternative schools, distance education, home education programmes, and schooling and outreach programmes for students engaged in mental health services (e.g., the CYMHS/CAMHS-affiliated Travancore and Austin schools and the DET Navigator programme in Victoria)

When schools are chronically under-resourced to support neurodivergent students (and in fact all students) in the area of mental health and wellbeing and this has a flow on effect to the vulnerable cohort of students who experience *school can't*. Whilst further resourcing is a must, it is also important that the training and resources developed are trauma-informed and appropriately targeted to the needs of individual students.

*"I'm aware that under-resourcing has led to the Wellbeing Officer role at my child's school being offloaded to a senior administrative staff member. Unfortunately, they are rarely able to offer consistent, timely and effective support. Whilst they may have good intentions, they have chronically failed to provide consistent support to my child. She needs support during break times, as the distress she experiences during unstructured breaks is one of the root causes or her school can't. I accept that teachers must have uninterrupted breaks to allow them to teach effectively and fulfill their duties as educators, but with all the new mental health funding that seems to be available, it is imperative this funding is allocated to more targeted resourcing, including dedicated support staff whose role it is to support students during lunch and break times. PARENT QUOTE*

Many *school can't* students and their families have also indicated that they would benefit from a more flexible approach to the way they participate in school and access learning. Measures to support neurodivergent *school can't* students to attend school in a flexible manner: for example scheduled breaks, home-based/online learning options, being able to opt out of particular classes, or tailored participation for these classes, should be the minimum expected level of support. This is an integral part of providing reasonable accommodations and adjustments for students with disability, as clearly stated in the Disability Standards for Education.

*"The idea that "if we allow one student flexibility, then all students will want to do that..." is a very outdated and damaging approach. Most children work well within the confines of the daily schedule and expectations and this is wonderful. Many students do not need or want accommodations. However, for these "missing" students it is well worthwhile to deliver flexibility if it means they will be better able to attend school." PARENT QUOTE*

*If a child needs to rest for a short period during the day they are not "abusing" the system, instead they are often fatigued or in need of a sensory break. If a student is struggling with a certain class that requires something that is triggering for them (such as public speaking or PE class where students are put into a competitive environment or may be asked to perform one-by-one), they should not be forced to attend this class. This can actually cause some students to avoid the entire week. Accommodating their individual need for a break from this class is a basic requirement. When the pressure is taken off, they may then complete the work in other ways." PARENT QUOTE*

This flexibility also needs to extend to expectations about homework in primary school. Many autistic students use all their energy to get to school and survive the school day. What they need when they get home is reduced demands and downtime to recover. To be expected to complete homework is demoralising, frequently leads to afterschool meltdowns and shutdowns and is often a





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key contributor to the cycle of *school can't*. Typically anxious students are very much aware of where the system deems them to be “failing” and this should not be reinforced. Opting out of homework tasks, with no shame attached and no further explanation necessary, should be a standard accommodation for neurodivergent students.

**Recommendation 9:** Establish better and more cohesive school-based support systems for *school can't* students and their families – for example, Student Mental Health Support Plans.

**Recommendation 10:** Increase funding and availability of school-based psychology services

Student Mental Health Support Plans or similar formalised plans may be one mechanism for helping to outline HOW the school will support a *school can't* child to return to school, and also provide a framework for accepting that this may be a slow and iterative process. This process also needs to acknowledge the impact on families and students, by ensuring that staff are in contact with the student and family, to let them know that they are supported and wanted at school when the child feels ready to return. Parents often feel an overwhelming sense of shame and defeat when they are simply unable to help change the pattern of school refusal/phobia and get no proactive support from school.

Increased availability of school-based psychology services can be an effective protective measure for *school can't* students. They provide an opportunity to better support students and families within the school setting before the issue becomes chronic. For those students who do experience chronic *school can't*, the system also needs to be open to more flexible methods of outreach. Telehealth/online psychology services have already proven very effective during COVID lockdowns, and can be applied in the school setting too, as an effective method of reaching *school can't* students who are otherwise disengaged and isolated from the school setting.

**Recommendation 11:** A cultural shift is needed urgently, to stop blaming *school can't* on students and parents.

There are many systemic issues to do with accessing education that must be addressed in order to improve school accessibility and inclusivity (and therefore attendance) for all *school can't* students, including the many autistic girls and gender diverse students for whom *school can't* is a chronic and long-term experience.

Underlying this, a cultural shift is needed urgently to stop shaming and placing the blame on the children and families who are grappling with *school can't*. Often children and families are desperate to participate in school, but due to chronic stress and lack of safety at school, many are simply unable to attend regularly or at all. Typically, students who are unable to attend school feel intense shame. Many of these students already have complex mental health issues, trauma and often disabilities and chronic illnesses. This is a systemic and cultural failure that we hope will be addressed comprehensively by the Inquiry.



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## APPENDIX A

### Yellow Ladybugs Survey on School Refusal / School Can't Nov 2022

#### 155 votes

- 66% school refusal well before covid
- 19% post covid times – linked to lockdowns and the covid school experience
- 16% post covid times – not linked directly to do with covid/lockdowns

#### Yellow Ladybugs Survey Comments:

- Child was definitely school can't before covid, but found home schooling intolerable and really couldn't engage with it at all. Unable to do really home schooling. Not sure if it is school or the school work.
  - Sometimes it is more about the way the tasks are being presented. Often by presenting tasks as a choice rather than a demand my child will usually do them.
  - Many YLB students found it so much easier at home and we had the opposite when it felt like it should have been a relief not to go.
- My bug started prep in 2020 so this is the first full year, and it has been the year that school can't began, but its hard to know if its related to covid at all. I could see it being that its only surfaced this year because its the first time that full time school has lasted so long in the year and that was exhausting, or maybe its just because as you get in higher grades the demands and expectations increase and that is why its become harder.
  - Same experience – it has been a very exhausting year for my child (actually for all of us)
- I feel like a lot has been blamed on covid. And people assume my daughter struggles as a result of covid, when actually her sensory and social overwhelm from navigating school as ASD are far bigger factors.
- Adult bug here - been working full time or almost full time (4 days a week) since 2010. I'm still mainly working from home - and rarely go into the office for meetings that are in person only, etc. But I find each time I go into the office, I end up with a bad headache from sensory overload that wipes me out at least for the next day. So I'm reluctant to go in unless it's a Thursday (end of my working week). So sensory is a huge thing for me. The Excellence Awards at work are this coming Monday afternoon - in person only. I really want to hear the guest speaker (Brett Sutton!) but in person only & being in the ground floor conference rooms where there are super bright lights [see photo] means I'm unlikely to go. And this is aside from the fact that mandatory isolation has been dropped = need to wear a mask on the train & in the room for safety...
- I chose Post covid times (not linked to lockdowns) but her school can't journey started immediately after having Covid (2022) and a month off school due to illness and school holidays.



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So maybe it is linked to her required isolation for Covid though not the main community level lockdowns.

- My daughter started school in 2020, so it's impossible to differentiate, she has only known school in covid times.
- I'm wondering if kids got a break and did better for it, and if they did, was it harder to go back to school?
- My kid has had issues since grade 1 or 2. Turned 18 just before Christmas last year, so well before covid times. Ended up bedbound in 2019, so before covid!
  - I was listening to a discussion about this that blamed lockdowns. I wonder how many kids wanted to 'can't' pre-covid but didn't know they could, or see an alternative, found remote learning easier on them for various reasons and saw an alternative & do...
- It was the transition from grade 6 to year 7 that triggered it for my daughter. \*edited to add: she thrived with remote learning, it showed her there were different schooling options to better suit her.
- My daughter was a little school can't before covid but once she realised the reality of an OPTION to stay home and never leave, it blew up into complete school can't and then also a fear of outdoors. We are working on this in therapy.
- Child was unable to make the transition to high school
- My daughter was lucky to start prep the year before Covid. I'm glad she had a "normal" first year. In saying that, she has had issues with school refusal from 4 year kindergarten.
- Covid lockdowns were bliss for her. She was so happy being home
- Some of these issues began \*during\* lockdowns, we had so many. This was certainly a huge escalation for my YLB, from rare school can't to FT school can't
- Mine started prep in 2019 and attended full time. She did like school back then with minimal issues, I feel it's hard to really know if things would be different as grade one and two were obsolete. She's done grade 3 this year at a new school and hates it
- One of my children thrived during the home learning and has struggled with school refusal since returning to the classroom and this has gotten significantly worse as the year 2022 has worn on. The paed talked about "deconditioning" of students/humans while being at home for so long and I do think this is a factor. Also for some kids with significant allergies it seems like being at home in a bubble for 2 years has now made her allergies worse (the physical reactions pollen/asthma) out in the real world. During remote learning she organically improved academically (which has never been our focus) with far far less concentrated working/learning hours. I think part of her internal thought process is that 5 full days of school is not needed and a waste of her energy when it is possible to learn other ways.



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## APPENDIX B

### Yellow Ladybugs Survey Nov 2022 – Has your child experienced any of the following:

398 responses:

A. Mild school can't	23%
B. Moderate school cant'	25%
C. Severe school can't	45%
D. None at all	7%

A staggering 93% of respondents' children have experienced school refusal/can't

70% of respondents' children experienced moderate to Severe school refusal/can't. We take this to mean missing large periods of the school year weeks, months at a time. Or ongoing missing days for many years, or for some students missing years

### Yellow Ladybugs Survey Comments:

- So severe the child avoided school full time for 4 years. Now as an adult there is no support for barriers to further study/employment. We just keep being told I need to practice 'tough love' and they will "figure it out by themselves". Trauma from the way child was treated in various schools.
- Such a large portion of this group has experienced this – it triggers me when I have to log a late start and they tell me to pick 'parent choice'.... I pick 'medical' every time
- I refuse to log days off now, by doing that the school finally took thing seriously. School seemed supportive of my daughter (14) before she left because they saw physical results of the anxiety (weight loss), but with my son (12) at the beginning they just saw him as being naughty, and when he was showing up for school he would end up suspended for not sitting still in class. He is now in an outreach program for students who refuse school and is now getting more support in class & play time. Since that school has been a mostly positive experience for him recently, but I worry about the high school transition next year.
- Daughter missed about 7 months off mainstream school while dealing with severe anxiety & acute ARFID. Happy returned to online at VSV and is thriving with that option now.
- I experienced this at various levels throughout school for many reasons to the point I was asked to leave in year 10 (with no alternative, this was a loophole to not record an expulsion). I tried TAFE after that and the experience was a lot better aside from struggling to finish much still for various reasons.
- My 15 year old has been a total of 2 days this term, each day for under 2 hours. Really the last 3 years her attendance is at about 10%. Definitely not refusal, she wants to go.
- Not attending school months now
- My eldest has been to school 16 days this year



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## APPENDIX C

### Individual story: Name Withheld

#### Neurodivergent mother with autistic daughter Experience with long-term School phobia/school can't

The impact of school phobia and lack of supports for children and families can be devastating. There is a distinct shame attached to being unable to participate in school when you are considered by observers to be “healthy and well”. Invisible disabilities and mental illness by their nature can not necessarily be “observed” by others. Observers start to assume that the child is being deliberately disobedient. Frustration turns to ambivalence. Children can lose years of learning and feeling valued by the world outside.

Many children begin showing signs early in their education journey with extreme separation anxiety. Our experience (and many others) is that we get told, especially mothers, that we just aren't being “tough enough” by responding to a child's emotional distress when they are attending an education setting. We get told for years and years - if you as the parent are stronger that the child will follow with confidence. There is rarely ever any discussion about how to support anxious children in those pre-school years. Children learn quickly that the goodbye is coming no matter how traumatic. In my experience it is clear that some children are simply different when it comes feeling safe or unsafe outside the home environment in a world that is largely designed for neurotypical people. Whether a child has a diagnosis or not, if they are presenting with symptoms of anxiety then the child needs compassion and support as does the family. It is not pandering to the child to allow space for their emotional distress. The child is not deliberately manipulating the adults. The child is not simply “trying to get their own way” – the child is distressed and anxious and is unable to regulate their emotions without clear and consistent support. These children need to trust that they have a voice.

**We have faced extreme separation anxiety every single day for now 7 years. This has built over time into mild school refusal and left without support over many years has finally turned into extreme school refusal.** She has now missed approximately 3 months of school in the final 2 terms of school this year. Every night she is distressed about school. In the morning she will lie on the floor and not move. She will cry and be unable to speak or get dressed as the family moves around her and the other 2 children get ready and leave for school.

**Separation anxiety** was experienced through 2 years of kinder and so far 5 years of primary schooling. For our child this only relented during the 2 years of government mandated Covid lockdowns. Our child was much happier in general and more engaged with her learning when she was comfortable at home and was able to rest and not feel overwhelmed with the chaos of school. Upon the snap return to “normal” our child has frozen with fear with respect to onsite schooling. The school environment now appears to be even more of an assault to her senses given the respite of remote learning and there is more anxiety than ever before. Now she knows categorically that she learns better in a less busy less chaotic environment. Our child knows that school means the constant expectation to meet neurotypical standards and social norms. Sadly she expects that school



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is mostly being told what she is not doing right and where she is failing. She is liked by her peers but still incredibly lonely so there is **avoidant behaviour** associated with attending school because she feels sad and exposed at school looking for company at break times. She is selectively mute in class and so her fears around being asked to respond in class or being forced to play competitive sports are huge but are largely unacknowledged by the staff around her.

We appreciate that for many other Neurodivergent children and ND parents that Covid lockdowns has had extreme consequences in that children have refused to re-engage with school work since. For my older autistic child who is in high school we had to simply opt out of remote learning. The work was not engaging despite best efforts – her learning style is to DO with others, and this was impossible online for her.

**Kinder/School transition:** Our child was a quiet, shy, anxious child as a toddler. Most notable was extreme separation anxiety from a young age of about 2.5 years old. She showed repetitive behaviours and sensory sensitivities from an early age. Her kinder teachers were responsive to needs but no extra support was offered or suggested as she appeared on surface to be compliant and well behaved. No assessments or supports were ever offered. I had to advocate hard to be allowed a second year of funded kinder despite severe anxiety and challenges around basic self-care. I believe this sadly began to set us up for a future of school phobia and related challenges. Her anxiety was never acknowledged.

**2018 Prep:** During prep in order to cope with fatigue and anxiety she missed on average one day a week. Teaching staff whilst they wanted to be supportive grew tired of the same conversation. They got frustrated and said they did not see those behaviours at school – the implication always being that the child is fine at school so the anxiety must be driven by the home environment or is being exaggerated by an overly worried parent.

**2019 Grade 1:** After prep summer holiday child was unable to function with transition to back to school. Anxiety and repetitive behaviours were so intense that one some days she was unable to eat or talk. **Regional School psychologist was engaged and they did offer 4-6 sessions. Those sessions themselves were VERY effective but we were told soon after engagement that the wait list is a year long and that they only do 4-6 sessions as a crisis intervention type service.** We got referred to regional mental health service but as they were not used to seeing children under 10 this was not effective and it was counter productive missing school. Child was diagnosed with OCD although as this is not a learning disability no significant supports were offered at school. School staff were considerate but no support beyond that. Child continued to cry and show distress every morning of school and miss approx. 1 day per week all year. I did flag an ASD assessment but the wait for services was about 18 months.

**2020 & 2021 Covid Grade 2-3:** Academically thrived during lockdown. Whilst our family chooses deliberately not to put much emphasis on what is considered traditionally as academic success. We noticed that prior to Melbourne Covid lockdowns our child was somewhat behind in multiple areas of her learning. During remote learning with the very limited school hours and very specific tasks she improved and in fact was ahead of her peers by the end of Grade 3. When anxiety is raised multiple



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references to how the child is well behaved in class. Grade 3 teacher was more naturally the type to make gentle accommodations without a fuss. Not huge adjustments but was aware of the anxious behaviour and did not insist the child seek help if they could see that support was needed. Teacher more flexible and sensitive in approach which led to the child somewhat settling back into onsite learning term 4 of 2021.

**Grade 4 extreme school can't:** As social expectations and curriculum requirements continued to increase my child entered a phase of complete school refusal for many months. During 2022 we finally begun our ASD assessment and she was confirmed to be autistic. She felt great relief but also was in complete autistic burnout after years of trying to fit in and attend school like all the other kids. I am not sure when she will be able to build up her school attendance but we continue to engage with out school and work through options for 2023.