



REFUSAL

Reintegreat School Toolkit

Supporting Children with Refusal

Refusal to complete tasks or engage in learning is one of the most challenging behaviours in the classroom. It can feel frustrating, but it is important to remember that refusal is rarely about defiance alone – it is often a **signal of unmet needs, anxiety, or a child's attempt to gain control in a world that feels unpredictable**.

By approaching refusal with empathy, structure, and clear strategies, staff can reframe the behaviour as an opportunity for support rather than a confrontation.

Why Children Refuse

Children may refuse to work for a range of reasons, including:

- **Emotional factors** – worries about home life, bereavement, family breakdown, or other stressors.
- **Control and autonomy** – seeking control in areas they feel powerless.
- **Learning challenges** – struggling academically and fearing failure.
- **Relationship breakdowns** – lack of trust or connection with staff.
- **Social dynamics** – peer distractions or feeling isolated.
- **Physical/health issues** – tiredness, illness, or unmet sensory needs.

Key Strategies for Supporting Refusal

1. Pause and Give Time

- Allow a short period for the child to regulate without pressure.
- Use **planned ignoring** for minor behaviours and return after a few minutes.

2. Use Distraction and Redirection

- Talk about something else for a moment before revisiting the task.
- Provide a small movement or sensory break.

3. Offer Choice and Autonomy

- Give **two acceptable options** (e.g., “*Would you like to write in pencil or on the laptop?*”).
- Build in flexibility without reducing expectations.

4. Focus on Relationships

- Prioritise building trust and connection over immediate compliance.
- Use lunchtime chats, check-ins, and positive recognition.

5. Individual Support and Conversations

- Quietly check in at eye level:
“I notice you’re finding this difficult. Can I help?”
- Avoid interrogation – **listen more than you speak.**

6. Break Down the Task

- Chunk learning into smaller steps.
- Write instructions or use visual prompts to reduce overwhelm.
- Praise **small successes** – one completed question is progress.

7. Reasonable Adjustments

- Meet & greet at the school entrance to reduce anxiety.
- Offer brain breaks and access to calm spaces.
- Provide alternative formats (e.g., audio, manipulatives, word banks, laptops).

8. Reflect on Triggers

- Consider your tone, instructions, and classroom dynamics.
- Reflect on whether embarrassment, peer issues, or unclear instructions are contributing.

What to Avoid

- **Punishments** – these increase shame and disconnection.
- **Sending the child out** – this avoids the issue and increases anxiety.
- **Power struggles** – nobody wins, and relationships suffer.
- **Threats** – they can escalate refusal and damage trust.
- **Assuming laziness** – refusal is rarely about being “lazy.”
- **Acting in anger** – remember: *“They’re not giving me a hard time – they’re having a hard time.”*

Practical Classroom Tools

- **Visual Timetables & Task Boards** – increase predictability.
- **Brain Break Menu** – quick regulating activities.
- **Calm Boxes** – sensory or grounding items.
- **Check-In Points** – structured times to express worries.
- **Relationship Building** – staff-led positive moments throughout the day.

Key Takeaway

Refusal is a form of **communication**, not defiance. When staff respond with patience, empathy, and practical strategies, children learn that they are safe, supported, and capable of re-engaging with learning.