



# When school becomes too much

What Irish families told us about why their children cannot get to school, and what the research says.

START HERE

## If your child cannot get to school, you are not the cause

In November 2025 we asked 346 parents and carers of neurodivergent children in Ireland what was happening in their homes. Their answers, and the international research, tell the same story. For most children who miss school, this is not a choice or a discipline problem. It is distress, sitting on top of needs the school day is not meeting.

## WHAT FAMILIES TOLD US

### This is not a small or exceptional group

**92.8%**

had missed school, or could attend only part time

**84.5%**

missed more than 20 days across the last two school years

**90.8%**

of the children unable to attend are neurodivergent

**54%**

are in mainstream schools

85 per cent of parents believed their child is, or may be, PDA (Persistent Drive for Autonomy).

Neurodiversity Ireland survey of 346 parents and carers, November 2025.

## WHY CHILDREN COULD NOT GO

### Burnout comes first. Bullying comes last.

In or near burnout

**67.7%**

Cannot say why, or cannot physically go

**58.1%**

Too tired

**51.6%**

Being bullied

**16.1%**

Bullying is the reason most often assumed to be the main one. It came last. What came first was burnout, exhaustion, and children who could not say why, or could not physically get through the door. In the same follow-up, 88.0 per cent of parents said their school would benefit from training in PDA.

Neurodiversity Ireland follow-up survey on reasons for non-attendance, December 2025.

## THE INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH

### The same picture, at a much larger scale

A 2023 study of 1,121 parents, the biggest of its kind, found that among children struggling to attend, 92.1 per cent were neurodivergent and 83.4 per cent were Autistic. Autistic children had 46.61 times greater odds of school distress. Difficulties in a child who was not neurodivergent were rare, at 6.17 per cent. Distress began at a mean age of 7.89 years and had lasted 3.99 years on average, yet 32.8 per cent of the children were getting no support at all from their school.

In 2025, researchers asked 30 neurodivergent young people aged 11 to 16 to describe it in their own words. They did not describe a reluctance to learn. They described a school day that builds up on them: sensory demands, social demands, uncertainty, and not being understood. One described it as flammable petrol placed in an oven and slowly heated until it ignites.

*"I don't think there really is anything that can make school easier for me. Just not going."*

Young person, aged 11 to 16, Fielding et al., 2025

They wanted to attend. They wanted to learn. They could not see an option that felt possible.

Connolly, Constable and Mullally, *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 22 September 2023. Fielding, Streeter, Riby and Hanley, *Neurodiversity*, 2025.

## WHAT YOU CAN TAKE FROM THIS

### Four things worth holding onto

- Your child's absence is far more likely to be distress than defiance. Irish families and international research agree.
- Burnout and exhaustion come first, long before the reasons schools most often assume.
- Researchers now say school distress, not school refusal: a child who cannot, not a child who will not.
- Nothing in this evidence supports rewards for attendance or consequences for absence for a distressed child.

## You do not have to work this out on your own



### **Guides for families**

Plain language guides and leaflets on burnout, PDA, school distress and attendance.



### **Training for schools**

Training for teachers and school staff on neurodivergent nervous systems, and what helps.



### **Advocacy**

We put families' evidence in front of Government, Departments and State agencies.



### **Community**

A community of families across Ireland who recognise exactly what you are living with.

## Two things that help, today

### Bring this to your child's school

Share these findings, ask what supports are being put in place, and ask for the answer in writing.

### Come to us

Get our guides, join the community, and add your family's experience to the evidence we bring to Government.

**If your child talks about self-harm or not wanting to be here**, take this seriously and seek help urgently. Contact CAMHS, your CDNT (Children's Disability Network Team), Primary Care, or your GP.

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### Celebrating diversity and unique thinking

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Sources: Neurodiversity Ireland surveys of parents and carers, November and December 2025. Connolly et al. (2023), *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 14:1237052. Fielding et al. (2025), *Neurodiversity*, vol. 3.

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