

EXCLUSIVE by MATTHEW YOUNG and SAMANTHA YULE
BRITAIN is at crisis point with millions of children REFUSING to go to class.

Many have not been in education for years, despite desperate parents trying to drag them in and begging schools for help.

More than 3.3million kids have avoided school on more than one occasion in a 12-month period.

And research from Parentkind found ten per cent of those – equivalent to 330,000 – had missed two or more weeks of education, saying they are scared, anxious or being bullied.

Experts have told The Sun on Sunday that refusal is as prominent in high achievers as those struggling academically or who have special Educational Needs.

Card designer Helen Barker, a 51-year-old mum of two from East London, has watched “breaking point” because her son Leo, 11, has not been to school full time for four years.

Problems arose when he started secondary school and struggled with the pressure of homework. By 12, he ran away, then “trashed” the family garden and had a “sort of breakdown”, refusing to go to class.

Helen says: “We tried our best to get him there, even dragging him out of bed, force dressing him and driving him there, chasing him in the car when he ran back out of school.”

“He became a recluse in his room. We tried therapy, but he wouldn’t engage. A school family liaison worker visited us to keep up contact, but that soon stopped because of cost-cutting.”

Leo was once predicted to get grade 9s – the top mark for GCSEs – but his mum now says she will be “happy if he got 1s”. Helen added: “You can only be as happy as your outstretched child. These past few years have been torture.”

“Tsunami of fear”

“Our conscientious, emotionally-sensitive child (exhibits) signs with the stress of class of high school – not allowed to go to the toilet, marked down for forgetting a pen or not returning a book on time to the library. He hated that dominating.”

Eventually, Leo was diagnosed with autism and ADHD, and now has an EHCP – an education, health and care plan – that allows a child to be taught in a more suitable setting. They are trying to arrange one-to-one tutoring.

Another mum, Maria from North London, tells how her 14-year-old daughter started to get headaches due to the “pressure of school”.

Lily had been exceeding expectations in certain areas, so was put on an “advanced pathway” so she could achieve higher grades in challenging subjects.

But she did not reach her new targets and her report card stated she was “below expected level”.

Maria says: “I remember Lily yelling, ‘I cannot go to school, you do not know how hard it is!’”

“It was because of the pressure, expectations from school and unfair treatment if she got something wrong.”

“Initially, the school threatened to call the local authority, but I had to put my foot down.”

If a child accumulates five days of unscheduled absence, a fine of £100 (rising to £160 if unpaid within 30 days) per child, per parent, can be issued. There can escalate up to £1,600 or even lead to three months in prison.

Unlike homeschooling, where parents legally take full responsibility for their child’s education, school refusal is a child’s refusal to attend class.

Department for Education statistics show that 170,900 children were home-educated at some point during the 2024/25 academic year – this includes many families who opt out of the traditional classroom system.

There are no official figures for school refusal, but charity Parentkind found 14 per cent of parents it spoke to have refused or disagreed with their child about going to school at least once a week.

And 50 per cent said their child is “sometimes, rarely or never” happy in class. Meanwhile, 15 per cent said

3.3 million
Children have refused to go to school at least once in 12 months

330,000
Have missed two or more weeks of education

“We tried our best to get him there, even dragging him out of bed, force dressing him and driving him there. We tried therapy but he wouldn’t engage.”
Helen, mum of Leo, 16

£80
Fine if pupil misses five days of school

175,900
Kids were home educated in 2024/25 academic year

“I remember Lily yelling, ‘I cannot go to school, you do not know how hard it is!’ It was because of the pressure and embarrassment if she got something wrong.”
Maria, mum of Lily, 14

20%
Of parents said their child is “sometimes, rarely or never” happy at school

their children were not enjoying school, while 45 per cent pointed to a lack of SEN provision and seven per cent blamed their child’s poor mental health.

The survey asked parents if their child had refused to go to school on more than one occasion in the previous 12 months.

The West Midlands was the area with the most refusals, where 41 per cent said yes, while Birmingham was the top city with 41 per cent.

Parentkind’s chief executive, Frank Young, said: “The fact is that ‘Parents want their kids to go to school, but it can be very difficult when a child says they are miserable.’”

Dr Charlotte Cook, a child, adolescent and parent psychotherapist, says: “It has reached crisis point. Children are anxious

after Covid. They were at home for nearly a year and told they could die if they went out.”

“It was a tsunami of fear, a trauma. A child’s normal, innocent, baby dream where Mum and Dad can sort out everything was stripped away and they weren’t emotionally able to cope.”

“Now, we have eight-year-olds with GCSE. They’re trying to control the world around them to feel safe.”

“These developmental phases were eradicated. Now we are seeing the results. Kids can’t cope with all that coaching up.”

Dr Cook says schools need to become kinder environments, with behavioural policies fitting for modern children. “Anxiety is about loss,” she explains. “For the perfectionist child who didn’t get the grades they

wanted, it’s an overwhelming loss of identity and the world becomes terrifying. I do fear the increase in technology will stop children going through essential developmental milestones in a similar way because they are spending more and more time alone.”

Elizabeth Hollick, 50, a teacher and SEN specialist from Reading, said it’s important that parents get to the bottom of why their child is refusing school.

She said: “Firstly, talk to your child about why they don’t want to attend. There could be a very simple reason, such as the routine of the day or a disagreement with another child, that can be easily resolved.”

“Listen with the school for their take on your child’s non-attendance. It may be that your child needs a reduced school timetable, particularly for children with special educational needs.”

“Keep a diary. Are there particular days your child doesn’t want to go to school? Is there a particular lesson or teacher or pupil they are struggling with?”

“If your child complains of headaches or illness as a reason for non-attendance, I recommend taking advice from your GP surgery.”

Independent social worker Sue Wilson, who has worked in schools for 30 years, has compiled a study into refusals and found that since

Covid, teachers have seen noticeable declines in “resilience, independence and imaginative play” with pupils struggling to tolerate boredom. Failure has led to anxiety and “avoidance behaviours”.

“Social media, smartphones and internet access” have exacerbated the issues, with children having “unrealistic comparisons” and “distorted perceptions”.

Sue said: “Children are becoming statistics at a very young age, becoming burnt out and refusing school.”

In 2023, the Department for Education launched an Online Education Accreditation Scheme for full-time, virtual schooling.

But there are only a few “active schools” accredited

SCHOOL REFUSALS LEAGUE TABLE

Percentage of parents whose child refused to go to school on more than one occasion in last year

West Midlands	42.44%
Scotland	31.51%
Yorkshire and the Humber	31.33%
South East	30.99%
East of England	30.93%
Greater London	30.83%
Northern Ireland	30.00%
North West	29.82%
South West	29.11%
North East	28.95%

Data: PARENTKIND

3.3million kids refuse to go to school

CLASSLESS SOCIETY



CONCERNS
social worker Sue



SUPPORT
Frank Young