# Highland Council criticised over autism school refusal support as families face crisis



Ariana Stewart, a nine-year-old girl from Roybridge, has faced significant hurdles in her education, attending school just five times since November. Diagnosed with autism at the age of three, Ariana's struggles are emblematic of a broader problem facing children with special needs, particularly those who are classified as school refusers—a group often overlooked in discussions about educational access and support.

Ariana's mother, Sarahjayne, is desperately advocating for her daughter’s educational needs amidst a growing crisis. Despite acknowledging that her daughter's needs differ from those accommodated by mainstream schooling, Highland Council maintains that traditional schooling is suitable for Ariana. This parental struggle highlights a common disconnect between families and educational authorities regarding the unique requirements of children with autism and other special educational needs.

The issue of school refusal is not solely confined to Ariana's experience. Research has demonstrated that children with autism spectrum disorders are more likely to experience school refusal at an earlier age than their neurotypical peers. Factors contributing to this phenomenon often include bullying, social anxiety, and academic pressures. A recent study noted that both boys and girls with ASD face heightened risks of school refusal, underscoring the urgent need for early intervention strategies.

Integral to understanding Ariana's plight is her diagnosis of pathological demand avoidance (PDA), a condition that complicates her relationship with school and authority. This controversial diagnosis reflects the reality of many autistic children, who may struggle with tasks that, under normal circumstances, they might wish to undertake. The school refusal phenomenon typically manifests as extreme distress about attending school, often rooted in emotional or sensory challenges that can render conventional educational environments overwhelming.

As Sarahjayne describes, her daughter has exhibited increasing anxiety surrounding school. Ariana's comments about preferring not to “be in this world” if forced into an environment where she feels uncomfortable showcase the deep emotional toll that these experiences can demand. Elevated levels of distress in school refusal illustrate a need for tailored approaches that prioritize the child's mental health and well-being, moving beyond traditional educational frameworks.

The options for Ariana's future education remain bleak. The family's search for alternative provisions has led them to consider a residential school located 100 miles away in Auchterarder; however, logistical and financial constraints complicate this choice. The local authority’s insistence on keeping her in mainstream education raises questions about the adequacy of support provided to families navigating similar challenges. Sarahjayne's fears about her daughter being left without appropriate educational opportunities—that could potentially jeopardise Ariana's future—emphasize the wider implications of insufficient support structures.

Indeed, the additional burdens placed on parents attempting to advocate for their children's needs in a rigid educational system often lead to feelings of isolation and despair. The systemic issues surrounding autism education are further compounded by inadequate recognition of the specific challenges that autistic children face in traditional school settings. Schools must be equipped to offer sensory-friendly environments, responsive adjustments to academic pressures, and compassionate educators trained to understand and cater to diverse needs.

Highland Council, while expressing a commitment to working collaboratively with families to support children with additional needs, faces criticism that it does not adequately translate these policies into practice. Families like Sarahjayne’s often find themselves in a frustrating limbo, as bureaucratic processes and policy limitations prevent the necessary changes that could enhance educational experiences and outcomes for their children.

As Sarahjayne prepares to take her concerns to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman, her hope is to raise awareness not only for Ariana but for all families fighting similar battles. The call for easier access to appropriate educational resources is critical, and stories like Ariana's can galvanise public attention on an issue that requires immediate action. The path forward necessitates a paradigm shift in how educational systems interact with, support, and ultimately advocate for children with special needs, ensuring that no child is left in isolation, confined to their bedroom, while the world outside continues to move forward.

In a society that professes to value inclusivity, the need for compassionate, informed approaches to special education remains one of the most pressing challenges. The journey towards achieving an educational landscape that truly accommodates the needs of all children is vital—one that must be forged with urgency, compassion, and commitment.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
2. Paragraphs 2, 4
3. Paragraphs 4, 5
4. Paragraphs 4, 5
5. Paragraphs 4, 5
6. Paragraph 5
7. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 5

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/education/schools/6733259/mum-of-school-refuser-with-autism-in-desperate-fight-for-help/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32419839/> - This study examines school refusal in children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), highlighting that school refusal occurs significantly earlier in children with ASD compared to those without. The research identifies bullying as a major contributing factor to school refusal in both boys and girls with ASD, emphasizing the need for early monitoring and intervention to address this issue.
3. <https://www.autismawareness.com.au/navigating-autism/autism-and-school-refusal> - Autism Awareness Australia discusses the various challenges autistic children face in school environments, leading to school refusal. Factors include academic pressures, social skills difficulties, and sensory sensitivities. The article emphasizes the importance of understanding these triggers and implementing strategies such as creating a sensory-friendly environment and adjusting academic expectations to support autistic students effectively.
4. <https://lighthouseautismcenter.com/blog/autistic-child-school-refusal/> - Lighthouse Autism Center explores the phenomenon of school refusal in autistic children, noting that it can range from reluctance to outright avoidance of school. The article outlines potential causes, including social anxiety, academic challenges, and sensory sensitivities. It also provides strategies for parents and educators to address school refusal, such as creating a supportive school environment and collaborating with parents and caregivers.
5. <https://raisingchildren.net.au/autism/school-play-work/school/school-refusal-autistic-children-and-teenagers> - Raising Children Network defines school refusal as when children and teenagers experience extreme distress at the thought of going to school, leading to avoidance behaviors. The article outlines signs and symptoms, causes, and strategies to support autistic children and teenagers facing school refusal, emphasizing the importance of understanding and addressing the underlying issues contributing to the behavior.
6. <https://www.outofyourordinary.com/blog/addressing-school-refusal-in-autistic-students-practical-tips-for-parents> - Out Of Your Ordinary provides practical tips for parents addressing school refusal in autistic students. The article emphasizes creating a safe space for open communication, collaborating with school staff, establishing a predictable routine, and implementing gradual exposure to school. It also highlights the importance of positive reinforcement and seeking professional guidance when necessary.
7. <https://www.leicspart.nhs.uk/autism-space/education/support-when-an-autistic-child-finds-it-too-difficult-to-attend-school/> - Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust discusses the challenges autistic children may face in attending school, leading to school avoidance or refusal. The article outlines common situations contributing to school refusal, such as inadequate support, bullying, and changes in routine. It emphasizes the importance of understanding the underlying causes and working collaboratively with parents and educators to support the child effectively.