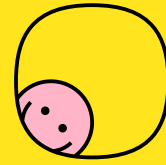


Senate inquiry into the national trend of school refusal and related matters



Australian
Children's
Television
Foundation

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Little Lunch
Gristmill

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School refusal – or school can't – is a complex issue for young people and their families. There are no quick fix, or one-size-fits-all solutions. Quality children's screen content, which is relatable and situates children in their own culture, can support children by alleviating stresses around school and normalising the school experience, particularly following the COVID pandemic when many children have experienced disruptions to their school experience.

About the Australian Children's Television Foundation

We are a non-profit company funded by the Commonwealth Government and the governments of all States and Territories of Australia. We invest in the development and production of children's content, nurture and scaffold new producers, distribute children's screen content all over the world and develop ancillary education resources to support the use of ACTF supported programs in the classroom.

School refusal following COVID and how representation in media helps to bring the outside world into children's lives

When Australian children see their lives reflected on screen, they experience recognition and affirmation, with characters and stories that help them imagine all the possibilities for someone like them. Children's screen content is both a mirror and a window in a child's life, with the capacity to influence in profound and positive ways – to bolster a child's own sense of identity, as well as to encourage them to walk in someone else's shoes.

Australian children's television programs have educational, social and cultural value for our young people. In portraying recognisable and relatable characters, settings and events, these programs reflect the shared experiences of many school-aged children. This is affirming for children and fosters a sense of belonging. This is particularly pertinent given the remote learning and lockdowns of the COVID pandemic, and the isolation many children may have felt from the school experience during these times.

Academics have long pointed out the importance for children of all walks of life seeing themselves positively represented on screen and how children's self-esteem can be impacted if it is not done appropriately: "There's a relationship between low self-esteem and negative media portrayals of racial groups, in addition to an association between poor self-esteem and the paucity of portrayals of a particular group. Others have found that media misrepresentations of ethnic groups can cause confusion about aspects of their identity among children of these groups."¹

Positive portrayals, on the other hand, in programs that represent young people navigating school routines, environments and interactions can be particularly powerful for the child audience. Recognising this, the Australian Council for Educational Research, together with the Australian Children's Television Foundation and others, invested in four series of the early years program, *Little J & Big Cuz*. This series aims to support school transition for children, in particular First Nations children, by depicting school as a welcoming place, and modelling the daily routines of a primary classroom.

¹ Julie Dobrow, Calvin Gidney, Jennifer Burton 'Why it's so important for kids to see diverse TV and movie characters' The Conversation (8 March 2018) at <https://theconversation.com/why-its-so-important-for-kids-to-see-diverse-tv-and-movie-characters-92576>.

We still have a long way to go but I believe a cartoon series like *Little J & Big Cuz* will benefit children and teachers alike. The fact that every episode has free downloadable resources for teachers is perfect. Let's be honest, it is hard for some teachers to teach Indigenous Studies, especially if they had the same school education as me. Many are afraid so they avoid it. This series is a supportive way for them to educate children about school life, culture, community and country.²

Little J & Big Cuz is set in a remote Australian community which will look familiar to many rural and remote children and their families and depicts First Nations children participating at school in an authentic way: "Little J, Big Cuz and their classmates 'code switch' – speaking mainstream English in the classroom. When they're with Nanna and on Country, they speak more Aboriginal English. The differences are subtle, but it's an additional element of authenticity".³ Positive representation in shows like *Little J & Big Cuz* therefore celebrate and strengthen the sense of identity of First Nations children and support all learners' emotional wellbeing.⁴

*"Guided by their wise and wonderful Nanna, their enthusiastic teacher Ms Chen, and accompanied by their Old Dog, Little J and his Big Cuz navigate lessons of bravado and humility, impulsiveness and patience, shame and confidence, selfhood and empathy...themes that are common to childhood everywhere."*⁵



Little J & Big Cuz
Old Dog Pictures, Ned Lander Media

² Shelley Ware 'I never saw myself represented on TV growing up. But my kids do now' Mamamia (15 May 2017) at <https://www.mamamia.com.au/role-models-for-indigenous-children/>.

³ Clare Madsen 'Little J & Big Cuz Press Kit' (2017) page 13 at https://www.littlejandbigcuz.com.au/uploads/files/littlej_presskit.pdf.

⁴ Moyle, K. 'Final report and case studies – Little J & Big Cuz: A school readiness initiative' (2019) Camberwell, Australia: Australian Council for Educational Research page 31 at <https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=littlejbigcuz>.

⁵ David Knox 'Airdate: Little J and Big Cuz NITV will premiere Australian TV's first contemporary children's animation series with an Indigenous perspective.' TV Tonight (24 April 2017) at <https://tvtonight.com.au/2017/04/airdate-little-j-and-big-cuz.html>.

Watching children in a school setting helps to reduce anxiety around the school experience.

The powerful impact of a positive and authentic portrayal of the school experience was articulated recently in an email received by the producers of *Little Lunch*, a program set in an inner city primary school:

"I wanted to take the time to thank you for creating the wonderful tv program that is *Little Lunch*. We have only discovered it in the last 12 months, and I cannot tell you how much it has changed our lives. My daughter was in grade one last year and struggling with going to school. She had massive anxiety and tears every day and drop off was horrendous for her and so upsetting for us. I wonder if it was due to the previous year (which was her prep year) being mainly remote learning due to the multiple lockdowns in Melbourne; we will never know.

But we discovered *Little Lunch*, and she loved it, found it hilarious, and I think really identified with it and saw herself and her classmates in the program and we have never looked back. *Little Lunch* is the only thing that was different in our life at the time so I 100% attribute the program to her complete 180-degree change in attitude. She doesn't love school now, but she/we no longer have the angst that we once did."

Little Lunch is a comedy series that takes place during morning recess at school. Each episode tackles the big issues in the playground and focuses on six diverse and distinctly identifiable children, and features their patient and much loved teacher Mrs Gonsha.

Television programs including *Little Lunch* and *Little J & Big Cuz* depict our shared experiences of the world, but they also serve the equally important purpose of introducing young people to others in their community, building awareness, empathy and social justice. Additionally it can also assist parents and carers with better understanding their child's world, particularly if they have not experienced the Australian school system before, or did not have positive experiences of school themselves.

"[*Little Lunch*] helps me understand the local culture better, not only Australian culture but Melbourne culture when it comes to kids, and it also helps me understand how the school system works here. We started watching that before [my son] started primary school earlier this year, and of course every country has a different system, but school seemed to be familiar when he started because we had watched that show together." – Interview with César from Victoria (originally from Mexico), two children under seven⁶

⁶ Swinburne University and RMIT, Parents' Perspectives on Australian Children's Television in the Streaming Era' (April 2022), available here: <https://actf.com.au/research>.

Fictional children's series *First Day* presents a nuanced representation of a transgender student experiencing school-based anxiety. *First Day* follows Hannah, a transgender girl, navigating the challenges that come with starting a new school and finding the courage to live as her most authentic self. The second series of *First Day* depicts the physical, social and attitudinal barriers preventing Josh, another student, from attending school, including transphobic microaggressions from his peers and the lack of suitable uniform options for gender diverse students. Classmate Hannah helps Josh return to school with a shortened timetable by removing some barriers at school (e.g. introducing a gender neutral uniform option). One of the key messages of the series is 'not everyone experiences school in the same way'. This helps to normalise the feeling of not quite fitting in.



First Day
Epic Films, KOJO Entertainment

The ACTF does not purport that children's media is the solution to the complex issue of school can't. But the above examples demonstrate the way representative content set in our own culture can help alleviate some stress and assist disengaged children to stay connected to the familiar concept of a school community.

Addressing the school refusal challenge: supporting students and families

During public hearings for the Senate inquiry, the Home Education Network discussed how 'school can't' children are overrepresented in home schooling numbers. The Home Education Network noted about 60% of their members are families who tried mainstream school but children were unable to attend. They also said that between 60%-70% of student members live with a disability.

ACTF supported resources are generally free and accessible to the home school cohort, who often need engaging home school content that doesn't look like 'schoolwork'. Additionally, many ACTF supported programs are available to view for free on the ABC/iview, SBS On Demand and NITV/Jarjums, or through the ACTF YouTube channel Twisted Lunchbox.

Home educated students also join ACTF programs such as the *My Place* Competition and online webinars. The ACTF also receives inquiries from home educating parents about using ACTF resources. Many state and territory education departments drew on ACTF resources at the start of the pandemic, showing how ACTF content and resources are able to support families requiring alternative approaches to education.

Conclusion

Screen content that is developed especially for Australian children is uniquely positioned to portray the highs and lows of growing up and going to school in Australia. This content plays an important role in the social and emotional growth of all children and may help young people experiencing school can't/school refusal to stay vicariously connected to their school community when attendance is not possible. Such programs also provide affirmation for young viewers who see their – positive or negative – experiences of school life reflected on screen, and help viewers learn about the challenges their peers may be facing. These series are often available on free-to-air television and their catch-up services, making them accessible to all Australian families. The ACTF also develops educational resources based on these programs which can be used in the classrooms or by home educators.

'School can't' is a complex issue – one which young people, their families and advocates are best positioned to speak on.

Relevant children's screen content may be one of the options available to support some children and families through the school refusal challenge.