

School Refusal Behavior:
Characteristics, Assessment, and
Intervention

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Case One

Reggie has missed the last week of school and cannot seem to get out of bed in the morning. He often cries about having to go to school and seems quite unhappy when there. Reggie mopes around on school nights, especially Sunday nights, and always seems to have stomachaches and headaches before school.

Case Two

Madison only attends school following a battle with her parents in the morning. She says she does not like school and the people there. Madison complains of having to perform before others at school, such as in gym class, and has skipped several classes this semester that involved a test or presentation.

Case Three

Brett clings to his mother in the morning before school and refuses to enter the school building. He has run away from school twice in an attempt to get home. On days he is at school, he constantly asks to call his parents. Brett asks the same questions over and over and has pleaded for home schooling.

Case Four

Gisela has been missing most of school this year. She often skips out after lunch or does not attend school at all. She is not particularly anxious about school but says school is boring and that she would rather be with her friends. Gisela has been fighting a lot with her parents about this issue and is in danger of failing her grade.

Key terms

- School absenteeism
 - excused and unexcused
- School withdrawal
- Truancy
- Psychoneurotic truancy
- School refusal
- School phobia/Separation anxiety
- School dropout

Current state of terminology

- A fractured state of terminology
- Poorly defined terms
- Poor coverage and discriminant validity
- Research split across disciplines
- Use of terminology implying the entire population is being studied
- Little consensus regarding assessment and treatment strategies for all youths with school refusal behavior

Approaching consensus

- First suggestion: Distinguish nonproblematic from problematic absenteeism
- Nonproblematic absenteeism may be any formal school absence agreed on by parents and school officials as legitimate and not involving detriment to the child
- Problematic absenteeism may refer to youths who have missed most school time for at least two weeks or whose behavior significantly interferes with daily functioning

Approaching consensus

- Second suggestion: Use common terms for child-motivated problematic absenteeism
- School refusal behavior may refer to child-motivated refusal to attend school or difficulty remaining in classes for an entire day
- Relies on a continuum of school attendance that includes complete absence, periodic absences, tardiness, morning misbehaviors to avoid school, and school attendance under duress
- Each point on the continuum may be described as acute or chronic

Approaching consensus

- Third suggestion: A functional approach for child-motivated problematic absenteeism
- Avoidance of school-related stimuli that provoke a general sense of anxiety and depression
- Escape from aversive social and/or evaluative situations
- Pursuit of attention from significant others
- Pursuit of tangible rewards outside of school

Approaching consensus

- Fourth suggestion: Develop a common assessment approach for this population
- Consider using a pool of common, standardized instruments during assessment
- Child self-report measures and daily ratings
- Parent and teacher measures
- School records and reports
- Medical assessment
- Develop new measures for this population

Approaching consensus

- Fifth suggestion: Develop strategies to treat all youths with problematic absenteeism
- Child-, parent-, and family-focused treatments for school refusal behavior
- Youths who attend school under duress: Psychoeducation, somatic control exercises, self-monitoring, cognitive restructuring, exposure-based practices with an emphasis on gradual reintroduction to school

Approaching consensus

- Youths who show misbehaviors to miss school or who are chronically tardy: Contingency management, rewards and disincentives, establishing routines, altering parent commands, forced school attendance
- Youths who skip classes and miss considerable periods of time in school: Contingency contracting, communication skills training, peer refusal skills training, escorting from class to class, increased supervision of the child

Approaching consensus

- Sixth suggestion: Develop methods to gather professionals who address this population
- Pursue interdisciplinary work among professionals in psychology, education, social work, medicine, sociology, criminal justice, and other fields
- Develop specific interest groups, web sites, linkages to national associations, and collaboration on grant proposals

School refusal behavior in youth

- Definition: Child-motivated refusal to attend school and/or difficulties remaining in classes for an entire day
- Consists of youth who are completely or partially absent from school, who show morning misbehaviors to avoid school, and/or attend school under significant distress
- Prevalence of 5-28% (8.2%) and seen equally in boys and girls; most common age is 10-13 years
- Internalizing and externalizing symptoms

School refusal behavior in youth

- Problematic absenteeism more common among diverse students (Native Americans), students with disabilities, and students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch
- Status dropout rate is 10.3% among 16-24-year-olds; higher for males (11.6%), Hispanics (23.8%), youths in low-income families (17.7%), employed youths (53.0%), and those who have completed 11-12 years of education (40.3%)

School refusal behavior in youth

- Common comorbid psychiatric conditions: No diagnosis, separation anxiety disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, depression, specific phobia, social anxiety disorder, conduct disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, panic disorder, enuresis, posttraumatic stress disorder, agoraphobia, and sleep terror disorder

School refusal behavior in youth

- Common comorbid medical conditions: Allergic rhinitis, cancer, chronic fatigue syndrome, chronic illness and pain, epilepsy, headache, head lice, hemophilia, HIV/AIDS, influenza, irritable bowel syndrome, menstrual complaints, minor injury, obesity, orodental disease, orthopedic injury, rheumatic fever, sickle cell anemia, sleep disorder, type I diabetes

School refusal behavior in youth

- Short-term consequences
- Long-term consequences
- Medical problems
- Intelligence and academic achievement
- Family dynamic patterns: healthy, enmeshed, conflictive, detached, isolated, and mixed
- Precipitating events

Contextual factors - child

- Extensive work hours outside of school
- Functions of SRB/psychopathology
- Grade retention/poor school commitment
- Poor health or academic proficiency
- Pregnancy
- Problematic relationships with authority figures/history of absenteeism
- Maltreatment or other trauma
- Underdeveloped social/academic skills

Contextual factors - parent

- Problematic parenting skills or styles
- Low expectations of school attendance
- Poor communication with school officials
- Poor involvement and supervision
- Psychopathology
- School dropout among relatives
- School withdrawal
- Single parent

Contextual factors - family

- Enmeshment/intense conflict or chaos
- Poor cohesion and expressiveness
- Homelessness/poverty
- Large family size
- Poor access to educational aids
- Resistance to acculturation/ethnic differences from school personnel
- Stressful family transitions
- Transportation problems

Contextual factors - peers

- Participation in gang-related activity
- Poor participation in extracurricular activities
- Pressure to conform to group demands for absenteeism or other delinquent acts
- Proximity to deviant peers
- Support for alluring activities outside of school such as drug use
- Victimization from bullies or otherwise

Contextual factors - school

- Dangerousness/poor school climate
- Frequent teacher absences
- High systemic levels of grade retention
- Highly punitive or legal means to address all cases of problematic absenteeism
- Inadequate, irrelevant, or tedious curricula
- Inadequate praise for student achievement and attendance
- Inadequate responsiveness to diversity issues
- Poor monitoring of, or consequences for, absenteeism
- Poor student-teacher relationships

Contextual factors - community

- Disorganized/unsafe neighborhood
- Economic pull factors such as plentiful, well-paying jobs requiring little formal education
- Geographical cultural and subcultural values
- High gang-related activity
- Interracial tension
- Lack of social and educational support services
- School district policies and legal statutes regarding absenteeism

Assessment of school refusal behavior

- What is the behavior problem?
- What is the function of the behavior problem (what use does it have for the child)?
- What is the best response or treatment of the behavior problem?

Concerns when assessing school refusal behavior

- Difficulty defining the components of the problem (physiological, cognitive, behavioral)
- Some "problems" may be developmentally normal or common (shyness, adjustment)
- Parents often focus on the most urgent symptoms
- Youth are sometimes reluctant to discuss anxiety-related and other sensitive issues
- Child and parent characteristics to consider

Concerns when assessing youth with school refusal behavior

- Interview multiple sources
- Develop extensive rapport
- Watch nonverbal behaviors closely
- Think about possible comorbid conditions and contextual factors
- Assess child and parent goals
- Provide reassurance the child's anxiety is not unique

Interviewing youth with school refusal behavior

- What are the child's specific forms of absenteeism, and how do these forms change daily?
- How did the child's school refusal behavior develop over time?
- What is the child's degree of anxiety or misbehavior upon entering school or in the morning before school?
- What specific school-related stimuli are provoking the child's concern about going to school?
- Is the child's refusal to attend school legitimate or understandable in some way?
- What family disruption or conflict has occurred as a result of a child's school refusal behavior?
- What is the child's academic status? (review academic and attendance records)

Interviewing youth with school refusal behavior

- Have recent or traumatic home or school events occurred to influence a child's school refusal behavior?
- Are symptoms of school refusal behavior evident on weekends and holidays?
- Are there any non-school situations where anxiety or attention-seeking behavior occurs?
- What specific social and/or evaluative situations at school are avoided?
- Is the child willing to attend school if a parent accompanied him or her?
- What specific tangible rewards does the child pursue outside of school that causes him or her to miss school?
- Is the child willing to attend school if incentives were provided for attendance?

Interviewing youth with school refusal behavior

- Is the child seeing a therapist? (access prior medical and therapeutic records)
- Is the child on, or eligible for, a 504 or individualized education program/plan?
- Assess what the child can or is willing to approach
- Assess influence of all contextual factors that impact problematic absenteeism

Child self-report measures

- Revised Children’s Manifest Anxiety Scale
- State-Trait Anxiety Inventory for Children
- Negative Affectivity Self-Statement Questionnaire
- Multidimensional Anxiety Scale for Children
- Social Anxiety Scale for Children-Revised
- Fear Survey Schedule for Children-Revised
- School Refusal Assessment Scale-Revised

Parent and teacher measures

- Child Behavior Checklist
- Family Environment Scale
- Symptom Checklist 90-Revised
- Teacher Report Form
- Conners Parent and Teacher Rating Scales

Other assessment procedures

- Thought-listing procedures
- Think aloud procedures
- Behavioral observations/BAT
- Role-play tests
- Self-monitoring
- Psychophysiological assessment
- Intelligence, projective, and personality tests

Difficult parents

- Increase contact and emphasize a nondefensive, collaborative approach
- Meet at school or home if possible
- Give information about options
- Simplify treatment procedures and pursue changes a parent can handle
- Explore potential obstacles to a plan
- Explore possible referral for parent psychopathology or marital conflict

General treatment procedures

- Build and maintain rapport
- Outline goals for treatment and provide a rationale
- Psychoeducation
- Homework assignments
- Parent involvement
- Monitor behavior on a daily basis

General treatment procedures

- Improve parent-school official relations
- Decide on the pace of therapy
- Consult with multiple professionals
- Understand the need for innovation

Selected publications - books

- Kearney, C.A. (2008). *Helping school refusing children and their parents: A guide for school-based professionals*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kearney, C.A. (2007). *When children refuse school: A cognitive-behavioral therapy approach (2nd ed.)*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kearney, C.A. (2007). *Getting your child to say "yes" to school: A guide for parents of youth with school refusal behavior*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kearney, C.A. (2001). *School refusal behavior in youth: A functional approach to assessment and treatment*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Selected publications - articles

- Kearney, C.A. (2008). School absenteeism and school refusal behavior in youth: A contemporary review. *Clinical Psychology Review, 28*, 451-471.
- Kearney, C.A. (2008). An interdisciplinary model of school absenteeism in youth to inform professional practice and public policy. *Educational Psychology Review, 20*, 257-282.
- Kearney, C.A. (2007). Forms and functions of school refusal behavior in youth: An empirical analysis of absenteeism severity. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 48*, 53-61.
- Kearney, C.A., & Bensaheb, A. (2006). School absenteeism and school refusal behavior: A review and suggestions for school-based health professionals. *Journal of School Health, 76*, 3-7.
- Kearney, C.A., & Bates, M. (2005). Addressing school refusal behavior: Suggestions for frontline professionals. *Children and Schools, 27*, 207-216.

Treatment for function one

- Breathing retraining
- Relaxation training/tension-release model
- Hypnosis or meditation
- Pharmacotherapy (tricyclic antidepressants (imipramine), SSRIs, benzodiazepines, buspirone, beta-blockers (propranolol), antiepileptics (gabapentin))

Treatment for function one

- Gradual exposure to school setting
 - Morning
 - Afternoon
 - Lunch
 - Favorite time of day
 - Attending school but outside the classroom

Special topics for function one

- Medication
- Home schooling
- When to keep a child home from school
- Child will not ride the school bus
- Sunday evening blues

Treatment for function two

Overall models:

- FEAR model: Feeling frightened?
Expecting bad things to happen?
Attitudes and actions that will help?
Results and rewards?
- STOP model: Are you feeling scared?
What are you thinking? Other helpful
thoughts? Praise yourself for using these
steps, and plan for next time

Cognitive treatment procedures

Major cognitive therapy techniques:

- "What is the evidence?"
- "What if?"
- Examining the alternatives
- Decentering
- Hypothesis testing
- Soften all-or-none language

Cognitive treatment procedures

Dispute handles:

- Am I 100% sure that this will happen?
- Can I really know what that person
thinks of me?
- What is the worst thing that can really
happen?
- Have I ever been in this situation before,
and was it really that bad?

Cognitive treatment procedures

Dispute handles:

- How many times has this terrible thing actually happened?
- So what if I don't get a perfect grade on this test?
- Am I the only person that has ever had to deal with this situation?
- Is there any alternative explanation?

Common exposures for function one and two

Riding alone on a school bus, entering a classroom by oneself, being in class without one's parents, being in school without calling parents, transitions between classes, unpredictable circumstances, speaking before others, starting or maintaining conversations, going to gym class, eating with friends, asking or answering a question in class, taking tests, walking in hallways at school, performing before others

Special topics for function two

- Social skills training via modeling and role-play
- Panic attacks/safety signals
- Being teased
- Perfectionism
- Gym class
- Extracurricular activities

Treatment for function three

- Restructuring parent commands
- Ignoring simple inappropriate behaviors
- Establishing fixed routines
- Setting up rewards and punishments
- Forced school attendance
- Excessive reassurance-seeking

Special topics for function three

- Returning to school after a break or holiday
- Parents skipping work to go to school with a child
- Child home from school
- Running away from the school building
- Tardiness

Treatment for function four

- Contingency contracting
- Escorting youth to school and classes
- Communication skills training
- Peer refusal skills training
- Increased supervision of the child

Special topics for function four

- Calling the police
- Parents complain nothing motivates a child
- Problems getting out of bed
- 504 plans and IEPs
- Alternative school placements
- Chronic school refusal behavior

Other special topics

- Multiple children refusing school
- Entry into the legal system
- Parents leaving for work before child leaves for school
- Children with developmental disorders
- Adjusting to a new school

Relapse prevention

- Slips versus relapse
- Continue practicing successful methods, even during breaks
- Continue to monitor daily attendance, distress, and morning misbehaviors
- Maintain close parent-school official contact/parent-child meetings at night
- Never take attendance for granted
- Ignore minor complaints
- Expect attendance/no backsliding

Systemic prevention

- Restructuring the homeroom teacher's role
- Peers as monitoring/reinforcing agents
- Maintain a student's peer group in classes
- Encourage communication between teachers and parents
- School-based rewards for attendance
- School-based punishments for absences
- Parent and child support groups
- Educate fellow professionals about SRB
- Teacher support and stress reduction

Systemic intervention

- Summer bridge/transitional programs
- Conflict resolution
- Increase parent-school official cooperation
- Customizing curricula
- Using mentors
- Early education, family, health services
- Court referral and community services
- Police pick-up and return to school
- Triage model

Final comments

- Feel free to consult or ask for resources
- Important work
- Thank you!
