HELPING ADOLESCENTS WHO REFUSE SCHOOL

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TERMINOLOGY RELATED TO PROBLEMATIC SCHOOL ABSENTEEISM

- Absenteeism
- School dropout
- School phobia
- School refusal
- School refusal behavior
- School withdrawal
- Separation Anxiety
- Truancy
SPECTRUM OF SCHOOL REFUSAL BEHAVIOR

- School attendance with stress and pleas for nonattendance
- Repeated misbehaviors in the morning to avoid school
- Repeated tardiness in the morning followed by attendance
- Periodic absences or skipping of classes mixed with attendance
- Repeated absences or skipping classes mixed with attendance
- Complete absence from school during a certain period of time
- Complete absence from school during an extended period of time
CHARACTERISTICS OF ADOLESCENTS WITH SCHOOL REFUSAL BEHAVIOR

- Covert Behavior Problems
  - General anxiety; social anxiety
  - Worry, fear, panic
  - Sadness
  - Fatigue
  - Self-consciousness
  - Somatic complaints

- Overt Behavior Problems
  - Noncompliance, defiance
  - Running away from home or school
  - Aggression, lying
  - Clinginess, crying, hiding
  - Temper tantrums, refusal to move, dawdling
  - Reassurance seeking
  - Asking the same questions, making the same statements repeatedly
A FUNCTIONAL MODEL OF SCHOOL REFUSAL BEHAVIOR

- To avoid general school-related stress caused by known or unknown factors.
- To escape aversive social and/or evaluative situations at school.
- To pursue attention from significant others, such as parents.
- To pursue tangible rewards outside of school.
Typically applies to younger children ages 5-10.
Many have difficulty with transitions.
Often cannot identify a specific stressor.
However, example stressors might include the school bus, a fire alarm, a classroom animal.
Refers to children not distressed by an actual school-based threat or other legitimate reason*.
More concerned about not being in school than being home.
SEQUENCE OF SCHOOL-RELATED STRESS BEGINNING WITH A PHYSICAL COMPONENT

Physical Component
I feel sick that I have to go to school soon. My head hurts.

Cognitive Component
I will be embarrassed. I am going to vomit at school. I don’t want to go!

Behavioral Component
Tantrum, crying, refusal to move, running away
SEQUENCE OF SCHOOL-RELATED STRESS BEGINNING WITH A COGNITIVE COMPONENT

Cognitive Component
- I hate school!
- I don’t want to go!
- I refuse!
- No.

Physical Component
- See, I feel so bad!
- My stomach hurts.
- I’m shaking!
- I have to use the bathroom.

Behavioral Component
- Crying, hiding, tantrum, not getting on the bus.
SEQUENCE OF SCHOOL-RELATED STRESS
BEGINNING WITH A BEHAVIORAL COMPONENT

**Behavioral Component**
- Crying, whining, trouble getting out of bed

**Cognitive Component**
- I don’t want to go to school!
- Please don’t make me go!
- I want to stay home!

**Physical Component**
- Diarrhea on the way to school, feeling sick and nauseous
Typically applies to older children and adolescents ages 11-17.
Typically can identify a specific stressor.
Often anxious when attending school.
Often skip particular classes, avoid situations where others are present, request schedule changes or other exemptions, may not turn in homework that’s not perfect.
Refuse school for negative reinforcement.
Not concerned with being home or with friends outside of school.

FUNCTION: TO ESCAPE FROM AVERSIVE SOCIAL AND/OR EVALUATIVE SITUATIONS
FUNCTION: TO SEEK ATTENTION FROM SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

- Typically applies to younger children ages 5-10.
- Main function or reward is time spent with a parent or significant other.
- Not particularly anxious or distressed about school.
- Attend just fine as long as significant other attends with them.
- Otherwise seek to go home or to parents’ workplace.
- Can be quite manipulative or display inappropriate in-school behaviors when away from significant others.
- Seek positive reinforcement that usually has nothing to do with school.
Typically applies to older children and adolescents ages 11-17.
They have more fun outside of school.
Not particularly anxious about school; many claim boredom.
Typical truancy cases; not necessarily delinquent.
Special attention to the school climate and general student complaints is important.
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Inadequate parenting skills
Low expectations for child
Maltreatment
Problematic parenting styles
Poor communication with school

Poor involvement and supervision
Psychopathology
School dropout among relatives
School withdrawal
Single parent

PARENT-BASED CONTEXTUAL VARIABLES
FAMILY-BASED CONTEXTUAL VARIABLES

- Enmeshment
- Ethnic differences from school staff
- Homelessness
- Significant conflict and chaos
- Large family size

- Poor access to educational aids
- Poor cohesion and expressiveness
- Poverty
- Resistance to acculturation
- Stressful family transitions
- Transportation problems
Gang participation and gang-related activity
Poor participation in extracurricular activities
Peer pressure to conform to group demands
Proximity to deviant peers
Support for alluring activities outside of school
Victimization from bullying
Inhospitable school climate
- Frequent teacher absences
- Grade retention practices
- Highly punitive attendance measures
- Inadequate, irrelevant, or tedious curricula

Minimal positive reinforcement
- Inadequate responsiveness to diversity
- Inconsistent or minimal consequences for absenteeism
- Poor attendance monitoring
- Poor teacher-student relationships
- School-based racism and discrimination

School-based contextual variables
COMMUNITY-BASED CONTEXTUAL VARIABLES

- Unsafe neighborhood
- Economic pull factors
- Geographical cultural and subcultural factors
- Intense gang-related activity
- Intense interracial tension
- Lack of social and educational support services
- School district policies and legal statutes regarding absenteeism
INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

Tier 1 and Tier 3 Strategies for Problematic Absenteeism
Tier 1 Strategies for School Attendance

- School climate strategies
- Clear policies, rules, and expectations
- Immediate response
- Continuum of consequences
- School-wide recognition
- Parent involvement initiatives

- Safety-oriented strategies
- Health-based strategies
- Mental health programs
- School-based emotional-learning programs
- Maintaining a student’s peer group across homeroom and classes
- District-wide policy
Alternative educational programs and schools
Mentors
Court referral and community services
Team approach
ASSESSING CASES OF SCHOOL REFUSAL BEHAVIOR

Tier 2
LESS TIME INTENSIVE ASSESSMENT METHODS

- Daily monitoring of behavior and attendance
- Assessment Tool
- Interview
MORE TIME INTENSIVE ASSESSMENT METHODS

- Behavioral Observation
- Questionnaires and Checklists
  - CBCL, Conners-3, CASI-5
- Interview
- Reviewing Records
- Formal Testing
- Psychoeducation about the nature of anxiety/distress
- Managing physical feelings of distress
  - Mindful breathing
  - Progressive muscle relaxation
- Cognitive Strategies (STOP)
  - Identifying, challenging, and replacing maladaptive thoughts
- Gradual reintroduction to the school setting
- Entering school and class in the morning and staying for a limited time with gradual increase.
- Entering school near the end of the day with gradual increase.
- Attending school for lunch before being permitted to come home with gradual increase before/after lunch.
- Attending school for favorite class before being permitted to come home with gradual increase before/after class.
- Attending school in a setting other than the classroom with gradual increase to classroom setting.

**GRADUAL REINTRODUCTION**
TIPS FOR REINTRODUCTION

- Expect the child to attend the minimum level they can accomplish.
- Do not allow fun activities during school hours.
- Deliver consequences should they not meet minimum level.
- Reward for appropriate attendance level after school hours.
- Downplay somatic complaints, particularly if pediatrician has ruled out physical causes.
- Anticipate that new problem behaviors may suddenly occur.
Assess school-based situations that cause distress.
Start with lowest-rated item in the hierarchy.
Address the behavioral components.
Practice relaxation strategies.
Use cognitive strategies.
- Managing all three components of anxiety at once in time-limited situations.
- Lack of resources and/or parent support.
- Requiring too much too soon.
- Assuming that, once regular attendance is achieved, the child no longer has anxiety.
TIER 2 INTERVENTIONS FOR POSITIVELY REINFORCED SCHOOL REFUSAL BEHAVIOR
Key interventions focus on parents. Parents must re-establish control.

- Instituting a set morning routine.
  - Predictable but flexible to manage misbehavior or somatic complaints.
- Attend to appropriate behaviors; Ignore inappropriate behaviors.
- Establish formal rewards/consequences contingent on attendance.
- Effective parent commands
- Schedule for responding to excessive reassurance-seeking.
- Address clinginess (next slide)
HOW TO MANAGE CLINGINESS

Parent:

- Ensure the child has all necessary items.
- Arrive consistently ten minutes prior to scheduled entry each school day.
- Walk child to designated location.
- Minimize conversation, ignore minor complaints and misbehavior.
- Say final goodbye quickly and leave rapidly.

School Staff Member:

- School staff should meet parent and child and quickly escort to designated location. Prevent dawdling or allowing parent to take child home.
- Provide feedback to parent later in the day.
SHOULD SCHOOL ATTENDANCE BE FORCED?

- Last resort and, only, if all conditions apply:
  - Child is younger than 10
  - No distress about attending school
  - Refusal is only for attention
  - Child understands consequences
  - Child is missing more days than not
  - Two adults can take the child to school
  - Parents have the energy and no reservations about taking the child to school
  - School staff is involved in the plan
WHEN CHILDREN & ADOLESCENTS REFUSE SCHOOL FOR TANGIBLE REWARDS

- Requires a concerted effort between school officials, parents, and the adolescent.
- Goal: To increase incentives for school attendance and decrease incentives for school absence.
- Negotiation will be involved.
- Commitment to support services is important.
Increased Supervision

- Identifying high-risk times and preventing departure from campus.
- Assign visits with support staff at high risk times of the day.
- Attendance log check-in/check-out.
- Awareness of exactly where the student is when out of school during school hours and returning to school when located.
- Immediate communication between school support staff and parent when student is out of school.

TIER 2 INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILDREN & ADOLESCENTS WHO REFUSE SCHOOL FOR TANGIBLE REWARDS
Contracts

- Must be written.
- Must be time-limited and, preferably, no longer than one-week at a time.
- All parties must be in agreement with the provisions of the contract.
- Contract provisions must align with a family’s value system and be within their resources.
- Contract provisions must be clearly defined.
- Link tangible rewards or privileges to school attendance.
- Keep it simple and short.

TIER 2 INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILDREN & ADOLESCENTS WHO REFUSE SCHOOL FOR TANGIBLE REWARDS
ADDRESSING PROBLEMS GETTING FROM CLASS TO CLASS

- Escorting a student from class to class.
  - Family member, peer monitor, school official, teacher
  - Limit to high-risk times of day, to scale back
- Empower student to refuse offers to miss school.
  - Teach student how to avoid tempting situations
  - Teach student specific statements
Verbal contracts are susceptible to selective “forgetting” and misinterpretation.

Verbal contracts require more follow up.

Daily frequency of meetings to review obstacles, progress, and modifications.

Lack of praise.

Challenges associated with conflict, frustration, and dismissiveness of many parents.
● Slips versus relapse.
● When is the intervention finished?
● Compile a list of the most effective strategies and techniques.
● Active supervision of attendance.
● Active monitoring of anxiety level.
● Continued practice of strategies and techniques.
● Home-school communication to address potential new obstacles.
● Re-evaluate the function of the school refusal behavior, as needed.
Beginning a new school year

- Attend orientation sessions.
- Ensure that all necessary materials/supplies are ready before the start of school.
- Conduct a private tour of the school with attention to potential stressors.
- Educate fully about the bus schedule and contingency plan if the bus is missed.
- Parents and student should resume regular school day morning routine 1-2 weeks prior to first day.
- Encourage parents and student to have a relaxed conversation about concerns and potential obstacles.
- Allow for flexibility in schedule on the first day of school to address obstacles.

RELAPSE PREVENTION
- Booster sessions
- Creative reminders of success
- Encourage participation in structured activities during school breaks.
- Maintaining a positive but firm attitude and expectations.

RELAPSE PREVENTION
Combative, dismissive, or confused parents

- Increased collaborative contact
- Emphasize a non-defensive, collaborative approach
- Emphasize what can be done now
- Designate a school point person
- Meet face-to-face at school or home
- Work closely with other professionals a family is involved with.

HOW TO MANAGE SPECIAL CHALLENGES
HOW TO MANAGE SPECIAL CHALLENGES

- Give information about alternatives
  - Section 504 plan, IEP, vocational education setting, alternative education setting, part-time instruction, partial credit programs, summer/evening courses, credit-by-exam, equivalency diploma, school-based mental health
- Simplify intervention procedures
- Explore and diffuse potential obstacles
- Expand social support network
- Consider the need for referral
- Last resort

Combative, dismissive, or confused parents
HOW TO MANAGE SPECIAL CHALLENGES

- Referral to psychiatry/physician
- Proceed with caution on home schooling
- Problems on the school bus and gradual reintegration
- “Tom Sawyer” syndrome
- Anxiety or panic attacks?
Teach child to ignore or walk away
Relaxation strategy and seek out supportive peers
Inform parents of victim and bully
Increased supervision of victim and bully
Provide a peer mentor
Teach to ignore taunts and threats, as appropriate
Following removal of legitimate threat, address as you would for a child who never faced a threat
Anxiety-based absenteeism

- Practice making mistakes
- Address physical, cognitive, and behavioral components
- Must attend despite the prospect of making a mistake
- Provide feedback to parents with high expectations

HOW TO MANAGE SPECIAL CHALLENGES: PERFECTIONISM
HOW TO MANAGE SPECIAL CHALLENGES: GYM CLASS

- Relaxation and breathing techniques
- Encourage group participation
- Encourage verbal interaction with others
- Speak to P.E. teacher about alternative methods for choosing teams
- Home practice to reduce self-consciousness
- Advance preparation of gym clothes/gear
- Dress out ASAP
HOW TO MANAGE SPECIAL CHALLENGES

- Returning to school after a break
- Parent missing work to attend school
  - Gradual withdrawal
  - Firm boundary
- Multiple children refusing school: Address highest severity first
- Developmental Disabilities: IEP, slower pace, reward-based plan

Attention-based absenteeism
HOW TO MANAGE SPECIAL CHALLENGES

- Calling the police
- School-based rewards and home-based rewards
- Sleep difficulty
- Section 504 plans and IEP’s

Tangible reward-based absenteeism
A resource for parents of children with school refusal behavior is:

A resource for school officials who address children with school refusal behavior is:

Resources for clinicians who address children with school refusal behavior include: