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# SCHOOL REFUSAL: INFORMATION FOR EDUCATORS

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Perhaps one of the more challenging scenarios for teachers and parents is when, for emotional reasons, a child refuses to come to school. In the past, the term *school phobia* was used to describe these children. Today, the broader term, *school refusal*, is used and recognizes the fact that children have significant problems attending school for many reasons that are not necessarily the expression of a true phobia, such as separation or social anxiety.

Just as there are many reasons why children refuse school, there is considerable variation in the severity of the behavior. Severity of school refusal ranges from frequent complaints about school attendance to part or full day absence from school. For some children absences may last for entire weeks of school or more. School refusal occurs in approximately 2% of school-age children although some estimates are as high as 5%.

## Development of School Refusal

School refusal may be a child's response to anxiety over separation from a parent, anxiety about performance situations such as taking tests or giving speeches, social anxiety, or other stressful situations at school or home. These students show extreme distress about attending school, including high rates of physical complaints (stomachaches, headaches). Their parents have knowledge of the absences.

Those students who are *truant*, in contrast to school refusal students, generally hide their absences from their parents, may be involved in antisocial activities, and typically do not show emotional distress about attending or missing school.

School refusal occurs at all ages but has been found to occur more frequently during major changes in children's lives such as entrance to kindergarten or the change from elementary to middle school. School refusal also tends to occur with greater frequency following vacations and weekends. Stressful events that may trigger school refusal include a move, changing schools, the death of a loved one, or parental divorce or even academic difficulties for some children.

When left untreated, school refusal causes significant stress for parents. Potential consequences of prolonged school refusal are severe, from lack of academic progress, failure to develop satisfactory social relationships, and significant family conflict to adult emotional disorders.

## Characteristics of Students With School Refusal

Common characteristics and features of students who refuse school owing to emotional reasons are varied, and include the following:

**Separation anxiety.** Students who refuse school because of separation anxiety may be worried about the safety of a caregiver or other loved one and fear something bad will happen to that individual. It is common for these children to complain about going to school and engage in morning battles before school that may involve crying, yelling, kicking, or running away. While many young children experience separation anxiety in preschool or before going to kindergarten, the behavior is more serious when separation anxiety is so extreme that it results in *refusal* to attend school.

**Performance anxiety.** Some students have extreme anxiety about taking tests, giving speeches, or athletic competition in physical education class. Those who have anxiety about these types of performance situations worry about being embarrassed or humiliated in front of their peers.

**Social anxiety.** Some students may feel social anxiety or worry about social interactions with peers and/or teachers. They are uncomfortable in social situations and may dread socializing with classmates.

**Generalized anxiety.** Some students have a tendency to perceive the world as threatening and have general worries about something bad happening. These children may also have specific fears of disastrous events like tornadoes or war.

**Depression.** Some students experience depression or both anxiety and depression, and the symptoms include sadness, lack of interest in activities, failure to make expected weight gains, sleep difficulties, feeling tired, feeling worthless, feelings of guilt, and irritability. A very serious symptom of depression is suicidal ideation. A child who is talking about harming himself or herself should be referred to a mental health professional in order to ensure his or her safety.

**Bullying.** Some students fear being bullied. These children want to avoid school because of very real situations in which they are physically threatened, teased, or left out by other children.

**Health-related concerns.** Some students tend to have high rates of physical complaints. Physicians and the school nurse can assist parents and school staff in determining whether a child has a legitimate physical problem or if physical complaints are related to anxiety.

School refusal may also develop after a student has been home sick with an actual illness. In these situations the child refuses to go to school even after recovering physically. The child's physician can communicate with school officials regarding when the child who has been ill can return to school or whether there are any restrictions for the child at school. If there is no medical reason for staying home, the child should be at school.

## Warning Signs of School Refusal

School personnel need to recognize the following warning signs of school refusal:

- Frequent complaints about attending school
- Frequent tardiness or unexcused absences
- Absences on significant days (tests, speeches, physical education class)
- Frequent requests to call or go home
- Excessive worrying about a parent when in school
- Frequent requests to go to the nurse's office because of physical complaints
- Crying about wanting to go home

When a teacher sees any of these signs it may be a good idea to speak to the school psychologist or other school support staff and the child's parents. It is important to develop an intervention plan as quickly as possible when these warning signs occur, because a quick response has been found to increase the probability of successful outcomes.

## Assessing School Refusal

Because school refusal may be the result of many factors, assessment should involve a variety of methods and sources and should include information gathered across more than one setting, such as interviews, observation of the child, and a review of academic records and attendance history. Questionnaires completed by teachers, parents, and the student can provide additional information about the child's developmental, social, and emotional status. Academic achievement testing may be needed, particularly if there are academic difficulties contributing to the school refusal.

An assessment of the reasons for the school refusal behavior also involves determining the antecedents and consequences of the child's behavior. Frequent reasons or causes include escape from anxiety-provoking situations or to gain attention from a parent or other caregiver. Alternately, some students may avoid school in order to engage in a desired activity at home (watching television, playing video games). Determining the payoff for school refusal can help in determining the source of the problem.

## Suggestions for Teachers and Other School Personnel

- *Be alert for signs of school refusal:* Speak with parents about strategies to intervene early. For example, reinforce positive behaviors (participation, effort) and ignore negative behaviors (crying, whining).
- *Welcome separation-anxious children when they arrive at school:* Help them to become involved in getting organized for the day, performing special jobs such as handing out papers or collecting books, or in socializing with other students. Assure parents that school personnel can support a child who is anxious about separation.
- *Help children who have anxiety about giving speeches or other performance situations to feel more comfortable:* For example, include modifying requirements for public performance, such as reading silently and answering questions rather than reading aloud in class. Students with test anxiety may benefit from having a quiet place to take tests as well as some low-key practice with sample test items. Brainstorm strategies to help students feel more comfortable if they are avoiding school because of the locker room or because of anxiety about athletic competition in physical education class.
- *Assign a peer buddy at recess or lunchtime to help socially anxious children feel more at ease:* Some

schools issue personal invitations to events and activities to help students feel welcome.

- *If academic difficulties are present, adjust assignments to the child's level:* Provide tutoring and/or request evaluation to determine if there is a learning problem or disability requiring other services.
- *Provide a quiet and safe area in the school for a child to go to when feeling stressed:* This may be the school psychologist's or guidance counselor's office or another place that feels safe and comfortable to the child.
- *Ensure that the child feels safe at school:* When a child feels threatened about going to school because of bullying or a chaotic, unsafe school environment, steps need to be taken to make the child feel safe at school. Many schools have anti-bullying programs that teach children how to handle themselves when they feel threatened.

## Mental Health Support

School refusal may involve significant levels of anxiety and/or depression that will need to be assessed and addressed by a mental health professional who will then select intervention strategies tailored to the individual child's issues. Some strategies include relaxation training, social skills training, setting up rewards or contingencies based on school attendance, goal-setting, and teaching children to use helpful thoughts and actions when they are worried or fearful.

Parent training may be needed to help develop smooth morning and evening routines and to provide attention to positive behaviors and while ignoring negative behaviors and physical complaints that have no medical basis. It is important to emphasize to parents that they should not reinforce the school refusal behavior by providing an environment at home that is more desirable than school, such as letting the child watch television, play video games, or engage in other fun activities when he or she is at home during school hours.

For a child who has experienced the death of a loved one or whose parents are going through a divorce, supportive counseling may be needed.

## Re-Entry Strategies

For children and adolescents who have been completely absent from school, a plan will need to be developed for school re-entry. A gradual school re-entry plan is often used for those children who are extremely anxious about attending school. Interventions such as teaching coping strategies, as well as many of the suggestions listed above for parents and teachers, are best used in conjunction with a team working together

(e.g., teacher, school psychologist, principal, physician, social worker, guidance counselor, and parents).

## Resources

- Children's Hospital of the King's Daughters. (2003). *School refusal*. Available: [www.chkd.com/Growth/sr.asp](http://www.chkd.com/Growth/sr.asp)
- Kearney, C. A. (2001). *School refusal behavior in youth: A functional approach to assessment and treatment*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association. ISBN: 1557986991.
- King, N. J., Ollendick, T. H., & Tonge, B. J. (1995). *School refusal: Assessment and treatment*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon. ASIN: 0205160719.
- Paige, L. Z. (1997). School phobia, school refusal, and school avoidance. In G. G. Bear, K. M. Minke, & A. Thomas (Eds.), *Children's needs II: Development, problems, and alternatives* (pp. 339–347). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists. ISBN: 0932955967.
- Setzer, N., & Salzhauer, S. (2001). *Understanding school refusal*. Available: [www.aboutourkids.org/articles/refusal.html](http://www.aboutourkids.org/articles/refusal.html)
- Wimmer, M. B. (2003). *School refusal: Assessment and intervention within school settings*. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists. ISBN: 0-932955-81-9.

## Websites

- About Our Kids—[www.aboutourkids.org](http://www.aboutourkids.org)
- The Children's Hospital of the King's Daughters—[www.chkd.com](http://www.chkd.com)

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