Understanding School Refusal Behaviors: Strategies for School-Based Staff & Parents

Who Am I?

Daniel Chorney, Ph.D.
- Registered Clinical Psychologist
- Owner/Psychologist @ Dr. Daniel Chorney & Associates
- Dr. Jason Chatman, Dr. Alissa Pencer, Dr. Tricia Beattie, Dr. Lindsay Uman
- Former IWK Anxiety Team Leader & Community Mental Health staff psychologist
- Previous research in anxiety development and expression across the lifespan

Education:
- B.A. Psychology - UBC 2004
- M.A. Psychology - West Virginia University 2006
- Ph.D. Psychology - West Virginia University 2009
- Clinical Internship - Brown University 2009

Goals

1. Basic understanding of what constitutes school refusal (aside from the obvious!)
2. Ability to identify why a child is avoiding school
3. Ability to develop a basic school-based behavioral plan to help reduce non-attendance
4. Ability to identify & refer complex/severe situations to appropriate services

What IS Anxiety?

"a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease about something with an uncertain outcome" - Oxford English

Disclaimer!

- Not all school refusal is due to anxiety.
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- Definitely not all school refusal is due to anxiety

- Anxiety sometimes becomes the 'default' when no one knows what to do
Definitions

- “School Refusal Behavior(s)”
  - Child-motivated refusal to attend school and/or problems remaining in class for an entire day
  - Refers to a continuum of behaviors (next slide)

- An umbrella term that subsumes constructs such as:
  - Tresancy (unexcused, non-anxiety based absence)
  - School refusal (anxiety-based due to separation, social, or generalized anxiety)
  - School phobia (older term rarely used now)

How Common Is It?

- If including all behaviors from previous graphics, prevalence can be as high as 28% (Kearney, 2001)
  - Difficult to quantify due to heterogeneous nature (some children miss some school, some drop out entirely, etc)

- Community studies suggest approximately 0.2%
  - School refusal and truancy, not including those who attended with distress

- School refusal behavior not closely linked to gender, race, or socioeconomic status
  - Typical age of onset is between ages 10-13 (middle school entry)

- Dropout rates are more common in:
  - Males
  - Ethnic minorities
  - Children/families of lower socioeconomic status
  - Children with disabilities

Function Junction

Four Primary Reasons (“Functions”) Children Refuse School

1. Avoid School-Related Stimuli That Provokes Negative Affectivity
2. Escape Aversive Social and/or Evaluative Situations
3. For Attention (Positive and/or Negative)
4. Tangible Rewards Outside of School

#1 – Refusal Due to Anxiety

- To avoid school-related school-related stress or stimuli that provoke negative affectivity (symptoms of dread, anxiety, depression, and somatic complaints that are negatively reinforced)
  - Translation: “Something at school makes them mad, sad, scared, or upset”
  - Examples: buses, fire alarms, gymnasium, playgrounds, hallways, classroom items, learning/academic issues
Characteristics #1
- Most often younger children (5-10 years old)
- Often display difficulty with transitions due to fear
- Can relax once in a place for extended time
- Difficulty articulating what the source of fear is
- "Something bad" will happen
- Source is not actual/legitimate or reaction is excessive
- E.g., they are not avoiding due to true bullying or true threat
- More concerned with NOT being in school than being at home (Function #4)

Characteristics #2
- Typically slightly older (11-17 years old)
- May show heightened anxiety in relation to one class or section of the school day
- E.g., changing in front of others in PE, music class, drama, skips class on test/performance days, or when something is due
- May have difficulty handing in assignments despite completing them
- Pattern is often one of avoiding interactions with others
- Eating lunch alone, escaping crowded places quickly, trying not to get called on in class (even if they know the answer)
- Similar to Function 1 - goal is to get away from something distressing at school
- Different from following functions (3/4) where goal is to get something positive outside of school

Characteristics #3
- Typically younger (5-10 years of age)
- Defiance re: school in the AM (often tantrums or just verbal statements re: wanting to stay home)
- Stubborn, willful, manipulative, or guilt-inducing behaviors to try to stay home
- Commonly seen behaviors:
  - Frequent calls home during the day
  - Denies lie parents to attend school with the child or eat lunch with them (or at home)
  - Constant questions re: when pickup time is in after school
  - Reassurance seeking behaviors (hear something bad may happen to parents when separated)
  - Running away from school to get home
- May not "hate school" → more so concerned about being with parents

#2 - Refusal Due to Anxiety
- To escape aversive social and/or evaluative situations at school (negatively reinforced)
- Translation: "Feeling judged, evaluated, or put in front of an audience or peers makes them excessively shy/anxious"
- Examples: Interactions with teachers, principals, and verbally or physically aggressive peers, tests, recitals, athletic performances, speaking or writing in front of others, or walking into class with others present

#3 - Refusal Due to Rewards
- To pursue attention from significant others
- Translation: "The commotion involved in missing school or just staying home is fun/exciting/rewarding/stimulating/enjoyable OR I have hard being away from my parents"
- Examples:
  - Attention from parents, extended family, overt noncompliance and defiance, tantrums, manipulative and oppositional behavior, stubbornness and resistance, guilt-inducing behaviors, physical symptom complaints still present, refusal to get ready/leave house in the AM.
Characteristics #3 Cont’d

- Other separation difficulties may be present (sleepovers, birthday parties, baby sitters, etc)
- Attendance pattern is typically tardiness/absence in the AM (due to difficulties mentioned)
- Worry can form a component of behavior
  - “Something bad will happen to parents or me
  - “What if my parents are in an accident
  - Can occur following major changes at home (hospitalization, moves, fighting, divorce, traffic accident, etc.)
  - Frequent feeling/desire to “check-in” with parents
  - Fear of being kidnapped at school or parents will forget them
- Distress is focused on separation from parents, less about school
  - WILL become defiant and oppositional in their behavior to succeed at staying home with parents

#4 - Refusal Due to Rewards

- Tangible rewards outside of school
  - Translation: “It’s more fun to be outside of school than in”
  - Examples: Enjoys sleeping in late, watching TV, playing Xbox/PS3, internet use (FB, etc.), working at a job, getting into legal trouble, drug usage, sexual activity

Characteristics #4

- Typically age 11-17
- Attendance pattern = skipping individual classes, half-days, or full-days depending on severity
  - Often with friends who encourage the behavior
  - Boredom at school or lack of motivation (or learning issue?)
  - May frequently bring up dropping out or getting a job
  - Often will sleep in or stay home altogether with little regard for consequences

Treatment Approaches

Medical First

- Physical complaints are often real (esp in the anxiety cases) and should ALWAYS be checked medically first
- Asthma/respiratory illness
- Allergies or irritable bowl/Crohn’s/celiac
- Cancer/tumor
- Sleep problems
- Pain/discomfort during menstrual period
- Diabetes

Medical First

- Things to never ignore → ensure these are checked:
  - A temperature of 100 degrees or more
  - Frequent vomiting
  - Bleeding
  - Lice
  - Severe diarrhea
  - Severe flu-like symptoms
  - Intense chronic pain, sharp pain, etc
  - In some cases these would not necessarily mean non-attendance
  - E.g., mild nausea and diarrhea or vomiting in the morning
Accommodation Gone Awry

- Modifying the environment is never a problem in moderation
  
  Many kids may require 1-2 changes to assist with achieving optimum academic output
  
  E.g. 5 minutes to relax before a test, option to visit counselor 1-2x week

- When accommodation(s) no longer help, are never enough, or only seem to make matters worse (for child and teaching staff)
  
  E.g., doctors notes for missed exams, requiring presentations to be done in private, multiple daily trips to nurse/guidance/etc.

Identifying the Chain of Behaviors

Order of Operations

- Understanding the initial trigger/event/emotion can help identify a starting point

- For many mental health concerns, increased awareness/education is a strong starting point

- In some cases, children (and even adults!) are just acting on what makes sense given what their body and/or minds are telling them

Physical

- I'm shaking/angry
  
- Crying
  
- Tantrum
  
- Not getting on bus/out of door

Behavioral

- I hate school!
  
- I don't want to go!
  
- 'NO!'
  
- They can't make me!

Cognitive

- I have to use the bathroom
  
- Now my stomach hurts and I feel sick!

Physical

- I feel sick that I have to go to school
  
- My head/stomach hurts

Behavioral

- I will be embarrassed
  
- I am going to vomit at school

Cognitive

- I don't want to go

Behavioral

- Tantrum
  
- Crying
  
- Refusal to move
  
- Running away
  
- General avoidance

Cognitive

- I have to use the bathroom
  
- Now my stomach hurts and I feel sick!
Behaviors

- Slow, consistent, planned exposures
  - If a child can attend AM only, attend AM!
  - Build on 100 small successes instead of 2 hits, 1 miss
  - Don’t allow backslides or “all or nothing” approaches
  - If the child refuses to enter building, have them stand outside until anxiety subsides
- Forward or Backward based approaches
  - Attending first classes then leaving after set time (adding time forwards)
  - Attending last class and leaving when school ends (adding time backwards)

Cognitive

- STOP Plan (Silverman & Kurtines, 1996)
  - S: Am I scared or nervous about a certain social or performance situation?
  - T: What thoughts am I having in this situation?
  - O: What other, more realistic thoughts can I have instead?
  - P: Praise myself for thinking more realistic thoughts.
- Use “Coping Cards” (reminder cards) for frequently encountered situations

Physical

- Daily practice of relaxation techniques
  - Remind children that no one can tell when they’re slowing their breathing – it’s private
  - Practice 3x daily - morning, school, evening
- Remind everyone involved to NOT attend to external physical signs of anxiety
  - Crying, whining, etc will resolve by itself
  - Reassurance only provides attention to the anxiety and increases physical arousal
  - If it’s resulted, the problem should be gone by now!
  - If it’s ongoing, quiet ignoring. Think away entirely

Anxiety Based Treatment

- Creating Fear Stepladder
- Graduated exposure
- Reduce reassurance
- Realistic Thinking
- Coping Cards

Cognitive

- Calm Breathing
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation

The Other Side

- School is not the only place for intervention
  - Parents and families can and need to play a huge part in helping overcome school refusal, regardless of the function
- Anxiety Based
  - Focus on less protectiveness, reassurance, and allowing avoidance/escape behaviors to continue
- Reward Based
  - Implementing a consistent behavioral plan to manage noncompliance/defiance and discontinue rewards for nonattendance (while rewarding attendance)

School is not the only place for intervention.

Parents and families can and need to play a huge part in helping overcome school refusal, regardless of the function.

Anxiety Based

Focus on less protectiveness, reassurance, and allowing avoidance/escape behaviors to continue.

Reward Based

Implementing a consistent behavioral plan to manage noncompliance/defiance and discontinue rewards for nonattendance (while rewarding attendance).

www.anxietybc.com for detailed handouts

0 Slow, consistent, planned exposures
0 Build on 100 small successes instead of 2 hits, 1 miss
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0 If the child refuses to enter building, have them stand outside until anxiety subsides
0 Attending first classes then leaving after set time (adding time forwards)
0 Attending last class and leaving when school ends (adding time backwards)
0 Am I scared or nervous about a certain social or performance situation?
0 What thoughts am I having in this situation?
0 What other, more realistic thoughts can I have instead?
0 Praise myself for thinking more realistic thoughts.
0 Use “Coping Cards” (reminder cards) for frequently encountered situations
0 Crying, whining, etc will resolve by itself
0 If it’s resulted, the problem should be gone by now!
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Helping Parents Help Kids

1. Attend any/all orientation or welcome sessions held at the school before the start of the school year (bring the child as well so they hear first hand)

2. Purchase all necessary school supplies and needs at least 1-2 weeks beforehand to avoid a last minute rush/panic

3. Go through any school bus routine if applicable (number of stops, times, what to do if missed, etc.)

4. Take the child to the school 1-2 weeks beforehand to become familiar with the school layout. Point out relevant classrooms, cafeteria, gym, library, playground, main office and guidance offices. Ask the child if they have questions re: how to get from A to B, and offer to practice getting from place to place and who can help if they get lost.

5. Arrange for a meeting with school guidance staff/teachers if possible, even a brief meet and greet so they know you’re available and where you are.

6. Start the school “routine” at least two weeks before school starts. This includes night/wake time, breakfast, clothing/eating – everything. This also reduces the stress of Day 1.

7. The night before school starts, have a relaxed conversation with the child about any last minute concerns they may have. Address each concern once, without reinforcing whining/crying/resistance behaviors.

8. Ensure parents plan for flexibility on the first day – not to pick them up, but to ensure they attend, be neutral and firm (yet supportive) when requiring them to attend school.

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**Behavioral Based Treatment**

- **Insert structured morning routine**
  - Ensure ample time to complete all steps without stress
  - List all the steps for all to see, assign estimated time for each step (then +5min, then +buffer time)

- **Focus on praising positives, ignoring negatives**
  - Use attention to increase behaviors you want to see more of – “Thank you for listening!” or “You got ready quickly, I’m so proud of you!”

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**Anxiety**

- Something bad
- Socially anxious

**Rewards**

- Parental Attention
- Fun Stuff at Home

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**Positive Attention Cycle**

- Clear step-by-step morning routine, rules, includes checklists and reminders, praise and formal rewards for getting ready, praising and informal punishments for not getting ready

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**Negative Attention Cycle**

- Screaming, crying, tantrums, physical complaints, creative statements re: staying home, demanding, resistance to school, dawdling, defiance, noncompliance

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**Behavioral Attention Cycle**

- Parent’s expected response to parent behavior
- Child’s expected response to parent behavior

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**Helping Parents Help Kids**

- **Parental Attention to Behavioral Based Treatment: Reinforces Child Behavior**
  - Help Kids
  - Child’s School Refusal Behaviors
  - Parental Attention to Behavioral Based Treatment
  - Response to Child’s School Refusal Behavior

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**Helping Parents Help Kids**

- **Behavioral Attention Cycle**
  - Parent’s expected response to parent behavior
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**Helping Parents Help Kids**

- **Behavioral Attention Cycle**
  - Parent’s expected response to parent behavior
  - Child’s expected response to parent behavior
Behavioral Treatment

- **Formal rewards for attending**
  - Access to friends, privileges, or tangible for attending school or decreasing negative behaviors in AM
  - Signed contracts with explicit expectations can assist with this

- **Formal punishment for negative behaviors**
  - Losing privileges for dawdling, tantrums, etc
  - E.g., losing TV/computer/phone/bedtime if ready for school early, allow the extra time for TV or fun activities

- **Punishment should focus on removing what they want—**
  - Time & more attention for younger kids, removal of time with you

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My Kid is Home – Now What?

- **Goal:** Make home as aversive as possible

- **Child should remain in their room (if it is free of reinforcers) or a dull room for most of the day**
  - School work should be completed, textbooks read, supplemental worksheets/ essays provided.

- **Even after school hours would be done, the child should be restricted from any reinforcers**
  - Household chores completed, staying in room, complete restrictions from Xbox, Facebook, friends, TV time, family time, or anything else that sends the message it’s OK to stay home.

- **Harsh consequences are often necessary to send a clear message**
  - Especially true in cases where the child is not “afraid” to attend school but rather “prefers” to stay at home or with parents
  - Compliment harsh consequences with equally large rewards for attending

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When To Get Help

- **Impairment becomes daily, chronic, or severe –**
  - school, home, friends
  - When a family starts living life AROUND anxiety or behavioral problems

- **The list of “things to avoid” grows,**
  - or the family is constantly on edge

- **School, friends, family start noticing anxiety or noncompliance & defiance is more than “just a phase.”**

- **When you notice there have been multiple treatment providers,**
  - and it’s still an ongoing issue

- **When you’ve been thinking “they’ll grow out of it” for years**

- **When it’s causing the family significant distress (you, your relationship(s), siblings, etc.)**
  - Different families have different tolerance levels for distress

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Review & Summary

- **What is anxiety and what is school refusal behavior?**

- **What are the four primary reasons a child may be avoiding school (multiple functions of a behavior)?**

- **Can I create a basic school-based behavioral plan to help reduce non-attendance?**

- **Do I know where to get assistance in complex/severe situations?**