

Supporting Students Experiencing School Avoidance

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School Avoidance vs School Refusal

School Avoidance

- Broader term - means child struggles to attend school due to distress
- Typically child wants to attend school
- Symptoms may include physical complaints and/or emotional symptoms

School Refusal

- Child is able to go to school but doesn't want to
- Strong resistance or refusal to attend for all/part of the day
- May include tantrums, aggression towards caregiver, refusal to leave house or car

NOTE: Schools may use these terms interchangeably.

School Avoidance vs Truancy

School Avoidance

- Absence a result of anxiety or other concern (e.g., reading difficulties)
- Chronic pattern of absences due to avoidance

Truancy

- Unlawful absence from school
- Can be sporadic or chronic
- Could be intentional and/or unauthorized
- Absence is typically a choice
- Could result in legal action

NOTE: Districts have a policy, based on COMAR, regarding truancy.

It Takes a Team

This Work is Not Done Alone:

- The team includes:
 - School staff (e.g., classroom teacher, school counselor, etc.)
 - Parent
 - Child
 - Community provider (as appropriate)
- If child has an IEP or 504 will work with Case Manager and other IEP/504 Team members.



Problem-Solving Model

1. Identify concern and clearly (objectively) define
2. Assess the concern - look for the root/core
3. Analyze the data - look for function of the behavior
4. Together, develop intervention - typically small steps
5. Review data from intervention implementation
6. Re-evaluate concern, as necessary (return to steps 2 & 3)
7. Continue implementation and/or revise intervention
8. Repeat as often as necessary

Early Warning Signs

- Patterns of anxiety and withdrawal from unfamiliar situations, people, or environments - Look fors include:
 - Low voice volume
 - Social avoidance
 - Not raising your hand in class
 - Marked difficulty with substitute teachers
 - Long latency to respond when called on
 - Clinging to a parent at drop-off
- Be on the lookout for subtle ways the student may use avoidance as a coping mechanism.

Increase the student's connectedness to others in school.

Possible Root/Core

- Illness or death of a family member or a pet
- Change of class or school
- Traumatic events at school (e.g., friendship break-up)
- Prolonged absence due to illness
- Academic difficulties
- Falling behind in schoolwork
- Difficulty with homework
- Other

Assess the School Avoidance

Many factors can contribute to school avoidance:

- sensory
- academic
- slow processing speed
- social
- negative reinforcement
- positive reinforcement
- other

The goal of assessment is to determine what the student is avoiding:

- Avoidance is the purest measure of anxiety
- Look for the constellation of fear and avoidance
- Find the **core fear**

Assess (continued)

Sample questions to ask:

- Magic wand question - “If we could change one thing about school that would make it easier for you to come back and stay, what would it be?”
- “I’m afraid people will think of me as....”
- “What is it you wish people knew about you that you think they don’t know?”
- Clarify the emotion (anxious? over-stimulated? overwhelmed?)

Analyze the Data

- Is there an identified concern, such as:
 - Anxiety or other emotional condition
 - Fears and phobias
 - Physical condition
 - Neurodiversity
 - Other
- Describe possible function of avoidance behavior, such as:
 - Pain related to physical condition
 - Fear of abandonment or other actions
 - Difference in processing emotional stimuli and/or situations
 - Fear of being thought of in a certain way (e.g. ugly, stupid)
 - Other

Major Categories of School Avoidance

Anxiety-Based

The treatment is exposure.*

Do NOT accommodate.

Persist through the
discomfort.

Autism Spectrum Disorder Based

The treatment is
accommodation.

Exposure therapy does
not work.

*Typically done with a community provider.

Intervention - School Actions

- Aim for rapid re-entry
 - As much and as quickly as your child can tolerate
 - Gradual re-entry is common (e.g. 1-2 periods at a time)
- Plan for logistics
 - Where child will sit in each class
 - Who will meet/greet child at front door and escort to class
 - Make-up work and missed quizzes/tests
 - Plan for lunch - classmates/friends to sit with
- Plan for barriers
 - Transportation
 - Location for lunch - perhaps in an alternative or smaller room
 - Frequent request for bathroom breaks and/or nurse visits

Intervention - School Actions

- Possible accommodations:
 - Reduce expectations for a period of time
 - Make school low demand, high reward
 - Reduce expectations of work (in or outside of school)
 - Reduce tests, quizzes, or homework for a set period of time
 - Do not call on the student for a set period of time
 - Consider adjusting the student's schedule (remove a class?)
 - Ensure ability to use Flass Pash

Intervention - School Actions

- Possible school-based strategies:
 - Get to know teacher and other school-based staff prior to arrival (e.g., school breaks, after school, etc.)
 - Collaboratively create a “script” to share why they were out of school, if appropriate
 - Engage in preferred activity upon arrival (e.g. run errand)
 - Meet with school counselor to provide psychoeducation, teach self-talk and/or coping strategies, etc.
 - Help arrange activities for social success (e.g. earn a class activity, lunch bunch, preferred extra-curricular activity/club)

Intervention - Parent Actions

- Become familiar with role of anxiety in avoidance (next slide)
- Establish rules for absence (e.g., fever, recovery after wisdom teeth removal, etc.)
- When child is home during school hours there is NO access to fun things such as screens (tablets/phone), time to read favorite books with parent, arts and crafts projects, play at grandparents' house, etc.
- If feeling better work on school work available on Canvas.

SPACE

Supporting Parenting for Anxious Children's Emotions

- Parent education program - empowers parents to change their behavior in ways that will help reduce their child's anxiety.
- HCPSS offers SPACE Groups
 - Provides parents of anxious children with both a forum to connect and share their experiences as well as an opportunity to learn strategies to better support their anxious children.
- Link to book: Breaking Free of Child Anxiety and OCD by Dr. Eli Lebowitz

Intervention - Child Actions

- Practice strategies with parent and/or school staff
 - Self-talk
 - Coping strategies (e.g., count to 10, deep breathing, color/draw, take a break, listen to music, etc.)
- Role-play
 - Gradual steps (e.g., get off bus or out of car, enter front door, walk down hallway, enter classroom, walk to desk, etc.)
 - Write a story about self engaging in the steps and then read it outloud to parent and/or school staff
 - Review the steps verbally

Intervention - Provider Actions

- Secure Release of Records from parent to communicate and collaborate with school staff
- Attend school planning meetings, if possible.
- Share strategies with school team
- Attend follow-up meetings to review intervention data
- Collaborate other ways such as emails or brief phone/virtual calls



Closing Thoughts

- This is hard work and takes perseverance.
- It's better to work as a team than to work in silos.
- Frequent check-ins to review progress.
- Know there will be set backs.
- Pick back up and keep going.
- Lean on each other when needed.
- Celebrate small successes!



