SCHOOL REFUSAL: ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION

STEPHANIE D. ST. JOSEPH, SEAN C. AUSTIN, KATHLEEN STRICKLAND-COHEN, WENDY MACHALICEK, & KENT MCINTOSH

## April 2022

School Refusal: Assessment and Intervention

Authors
Stephanie D. St. Joseph
Sean C. Austin
Kathleen Strickland-Cohen

Wendy Machalicek
Kent McIntosh

Introduction

This brief provides an overview of how to identify and determine why a student may be avoiding or refusing to attend school, and ways that schoolwide positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) teams can help to assess and address school refusal. We will introduce a research-based framework to engage in problem-solving to better support students who exhibit school refusal that can supplement more detailed reviews of assessment and intervention (e.g., Kearney, 2007).

Big ideas:

- School refusal is a complex behavior that can lead to serious consequences.

- Identifying the function of school refusal is critical because it will lead to the selection of an appropriate intervention.
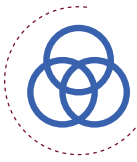
Defining School Refusal

School refusal is a broad term that could include chronic absenteeism, truancy, and school hesitancy. To support prevention and intervention, we define school refusal as a child-motivated school attendance problem with various underlying setting events, antecedents, and maintaining consequences or functions of behavior unique to the student, school, and family context. The continuum of observable behaviors included in school refusal is broad and may include one or more of the following:

- Emotional requests to parent/guardian to stay home instead of going to school

- Repeated challenging behavior in the morning to avoid or delay for the morning routine or leaving for school

- Repeated tardiness in the morning or part of day to avoid going to school or specific classes

- Periodic or repeated unexcused absences or skipping classes

- Complete absence from school for an extended period of time

School refusal can be a formidable obstacle for students, their families, and school staff and contributes to long-term negative consequences for students such as academic disengagement and failure (Hancock et al., 2013). A pattern of school refusal can also predict school drop-out and unemployment (Heyne et al., 2020). The increase in remote instruction as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated school refusal for some students with avoidance of school appearing within the virtual classroom, and as students have transitioned back to in-person learning, student avoidance of school is a high-priority intervention need (Pincus, 2020).

Assessment of School Refusal

Understanding Student Motivation

A behavior that a person engages in repeatedly serves a function, or purpose, for them (O'Neill, et al 1997). The word "repeatedly" is used because people engage in all kinds of behaviors and responses, but unless a behavior serves a particular function for them (i.e., receives a consequence that the person values), the behavior doesn't keep happening. The "function" of a behavior means "why" the behavior is occurring. To effectively intervene with school refusal, school teams need to investigate to understand why the student may be avoiding or no longer attending school. The
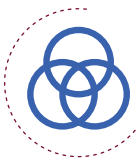
primary social functions of school refusal are the same for all behavior:

- Avoidance of or escape from undesired situations (e.g., academic demands, social interactions, anxious feelings)

- Access to more desirable situations (e.g., attention from parents, access to video games)

A behavior can serve more than one function, such as when the same behavior allows the person to access attention and escape from a demanding situation. For example, a student could refuse school to avoid giving a speech in front of the classroom, which temporarily decreases anxiety, while also getting to access social media at home.

ESCAPE AND AVOIDANCE

School refusal may happen because the student is avoiding feelings of dread or thoughts, feelings, and symptoms associated with anxiety or depression. These students may show heightened anxiety in relation to one class or specific day of the week (such as a day where there is a test or music class). Students who are academically struggling may avoid school to avoid demanding academic tasks and feelings of failure.

Students may engage in school refusal to avoid situations that increase anxiety, such as the following:

- Separation from a caregiver

- Loud bus rides or assemblies

- Unstructured social situations occurring in gymnasiums, playgrounds, and hallways

- Tasks that must be completed in front of others

### ACCESS TO REWARDING ACTIVITIES

Other students may not be avoiding something specific at school but are motivated to stay at home because home is experienced as more enjoyable and rewarding than school. Students may refuse school as a means of accessing preferred items and activities only available at home, such as watching television, playing video games, or sleeping.

For older students, staying home from school can also mean limited adult supervision associated with misuse of substances (e.g., alcohol, recreational drugs) and engaging in sexual behavior with peers as well as the previously mentioned behaviors.

Methods of Assessment

Just as identifying the function of behavior leads to selection of an appropriate intervention when a student is in school, the same is true for identifying the function of school refusal. Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) is an information gathering process focused on understanding the purpose or "function" behavior serves for a student. FBA To understand why a student engages in school refusal behavior (e.g., to avoid feelings of anxiety associated with school) a team lead by an individual with expertise in providing individualized behavior support would gather FBA from a number of sources such as:

- Interviews with those who know the student and their behavior best (e.g., teachers, parents or guardians, the student)

- Student records (e.g., attendance data, nurse records, academic scores, behavior history)
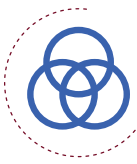
- Rating scales

- Direct observations of the behavior in context.

For more information related to specific FBA procedures, see the following resources from the Center on PBIS:

- Tier 3 Brief Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) Guide[1]

- Tier 3 Comprehensive Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) Guide[2]

In addition to the general FBA measures described above, there are several validated tools for assessing student motivation specifically focused on understanding school refusal behavior that teams can use. The first two scales are available using the links and the last two scales are available by contacting the first author:

- School Refusal Assessment Scale for Children[3] (SRAS-C; Kearney, 1993)

- School Anxiety Scale- Teacher Report[4] (Lyneham et al., 2008)

- School Anxiety Inventory (Garcia-Fernandez et al., 2011)

- School Refusal Evaluation Scale (Galle-Tessoneau et al., 2019)

Such assessments can provide specific insight to determine if a student's unwillingness to attend school could be due to a response to negative reactions to elements of school, a fear of potentially negative situations, a reluctance to leave home, ora perception that other settings are more rewarding than school

Physical Complaints

When school refusal includes behaviors such as frequent requests to visit the school nurse, complaints of headaches or stomach aches, changes in academic performance, persistent elevated sadness or irritability, withdrawal from social interaction, changes in sleep, change in eating patterns, self-harm or self-harm talk, it is also important to work with family members and outside experts to rule out any medical or mental health issues that the student may be experiencing.

Function-based Interventions to Address Anxiety

Avoidance and Escape

When school refusal is motivated by avoidance and escape, interventions are often designed to address students' feelings of anxiety related to school or returning to school. Some interventions to address these feelings are listed below:

- Normalizing anxiety

- Learning progressive relaxation

- Limiting exposure to anxiety-producing events

- Using subjective units of distress scales (SUDS; e.g., emotional thermometers) to self-monitor feelings and engage in coping strategies that decrease distress

SOCIAL SKILLS TRAINING

Social skills training is a therapeutic approach focused on verbal and nonverbal behaviors common in social

relationships used to improve those relationships. Social skills trainings may be used to address social-related difficulties related to school refusal, such as difficulty forming friendships, social anxiety related to relationships with peers, or teachers, social anxiety answering questions or participating in school activities, learning how to speak up for themselves, and being assertive while verbalizing their thoughts and feelings.

Behavior contracts. Behavior contracts can be used for students to agree to attend school for mutually agreed upon rewards. The following recommendations can make behavior contracts more effective:

- Provide high quality attention contingent on decreased school refusal

- Include parent/guardian communication and involvement

- Provide choices and incorporate the student's preferences in activities during the day (e.g., if the student avoids writing, the writing task can be given about the student's preferred interest and the student may be given a choice of typing or handwriting)

CURRICULAR MODIFICATION

Some school refusal may be due to a fear of difficult academic work or academic tests. Naylor et al. (1994) found that impaired academic performance and frustration from learning difficulties contributes to school refusal in some students. Adjusting the curriculum and modifying assignments or tests may be helpful.

> **Family Involvement**
>
> Family involvement is vital. It is difficult to overstate the importance of partnering early with families to ensure that approaches are consistent and effective. Meaningful inclusion of families means pulling them in as experts on their student in the team decision-making process.
>
> Having a cohesive team approach that includes family and school personnel is more likely to lead to positive outcomes.

Attention

When school refusal is motivated by attention, interventions are often designed to address students' feelings of desire to be acknowledged by others. Some interventions to address the desire for attention include supportive teacher-student relationships that might protect against negative emotions for students, thus supporting efforts of school personnel to foster stronger relationships with students. Some common interventions are as follows:

- Positive greetings at arrival[5]

- Adapting the Check-in Check-Out (CICO; Hawken et al., 2020) intervention to target attendance

Obtain Items or Activities External to School

Some children may feel disengaged from school, making them more likely to seek rewards outside of school. Unfortunately, these rewards may be more engaging but could also be detrimental to wellbeing, such as drug and alcohol use. Providing rewards at

school could incentivize students to come to school. The student should be involved in selecting the rewards to increase their potential value. Using peers for group contingency can address school attendance as well as social needs. Other interventions include the following:

- Engaging instruction (Chaparro et al., 2015).

- Acknowledgement of desired behavior[6]

## Adaptation, Sustainability, and Fading

Although the ultimate goal of any intervention plan for school refusal is student independence in attendance, it is important to consider sustainability of plans, even if intended to only be short-term. The time and supports needed for each student to overcome their individual challenges can vary significantly for students, with most interventions studied taking place from 4 to 12 weeks (Maynard et al., 2018). For this reason, school staff, families, and additional providers can benefit from planning supports (e.g., reinforcement schedules, therapy sessions, transportation) that they know to be sustainable for at least a few months.

As with most behavior plans, a careful fade can foster student independence while gradually reducing facets of support like the frequency of praise from adults or use of external rewards (Estrapala et al., 2018). Planning for a fade can be done in a variety of ways but setting data-based criteria offers the most consistent and student-centered approach.

Conclusion

School refusal is a complex behavior that requires careful assessment. School refusal can have serious consequences for youth development, such as a negative impact on academic achievement, and negative social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes. Identifying the function of the school refusal is critical to select the most effective intervention. School personnel and families are encouraged to collaborate with students themselves to improve academic and social engagement and decrease avoidance of school.
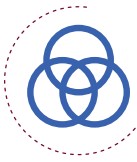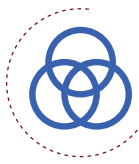
Additional Resources

1. [Improving Attendance and Reducing Chronic Absenteeism](7)[7]

2. [Cultivating Positive Student-Teacher Relationships](8)[8]

3. [Positive Greetings at the Door](9)[9]

4. [Teaching Social-Emotional Competencies within a PBIS Framework](10)[10]

Embedded Hyperlinks

1. https://www.pbis.org/resource/tier-3-brief-functional-behavior-assessment-fba-guide

2. https://www.pbis.org/resource/tier-3-comprehensive-functional-behavior-assessment-fba-guide

3. https://www.oxfordclinicalpsych.com/view/10.1093/med:psych/9780195308297.001.0001/med-9780195308297-interactive-pdf-003.pdf

4. https://www.mq.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0019/117730/SAS_TR_copyright_2015.pdf

5. https://www.pbis.org/resource/positive-greetings-at-the-door

6. https://www.pbis.org/resource/supporting-and-responding-to-behavior-evidence-based-classroom-strategies-for-teachers

7. https://www.pbis.org/resource/improving-attendance-and-reducing-chronic-absenteeism

8. https://www.pbis.org/resource/cultivating-positive-student-teacher-relationships

9. https://www.pbis.org/resource/positive-greetings-at-the-door

10. https://www.pbis.org/resource/teaching-social-emotional-competencies-within-a-pbis-framework

References

Beck, J.S. (2011). *Cognitive Behavior Therapy, Basics and Beyond* (2nd ed.). The Guilford Press.

Chaparro, E., Neese, R.N.T., & McIntosh, K. (2015). *Examples of engaging instruction to increase equity in education.* OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.

Dube, S.R., & Orpinas, P. (2009). Understanding excessive absenteeism as school refusal behavior. *Children & Schools, 31* (2), 87-95. https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/31.2.87

Elliot, J.G., & Place, M. (2019). Practitioner review: School Refusal: developments in conceptualization and treatment since 2000. *The Journal of Child Psychologist and Psychiatry, 60* (1), 4-15. https:// https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cbpra.2018.12.003

Estrapala, S., Rila, A., & Bruhn, A. L. (2018). Don't quit cold turkey: Systematic fading to promote sustained behavioral change. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 51*(1), 54-61. https://doi:10.1177/0040059918790567

Galle-Tessoneau, M. & Gana, K. (2019). Development and validation of the school refusal evaluation scale for adolescents. *Journal of Pediatric Pscyhology, 44,* 153-163. https://doi.org/10.1093/jpepsy/jsy061

Garcia-Fernandez, J.M., Ingles, C.J., Marzo, J.C., & Martinez-Monteaugado, M.C. (2014). Psychometric properties of the School Anxiety Inventory-Short Version in secondary education students. *Psicothema, 26,* 286-292. https:// doi: 10.7334/psicothema2013.288

Hancock, K.J., Shepherd, C.C.J., Lawrence, D., & Zubrick, S.R. (2013). *Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts.* Canberra: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

Hawken, L. S., Crone, D. A., Bundock, K., & Horner, R. H. (2020). *Responding to problem behavior in schools: The check-in, check-out intervention* (3rd ed.). Guilford.

Heyne, D., Strombeck, J., Alanko, K., Bergstrom, M., & Ulriksen, R. (2020). A scoping review of constructs measured following intervention for school refusal: Are we measuring up? *Frontiers in Psychology, 11,* 1-20. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01744

Ingul, J.M., Havik, T., & Heyne, D. (2019). Emerging school refusal: A school-based framework for identifying early signs and risk factors. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice, 26,* 46-62. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cbpra.2018.03.005

Kearney, C.A. & Albano, A.M. (2007). *When children refuse school: A cognitive-behavioral therapy approach, Therapist guide* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Last, C.G. (1993). Therapist treatment manual for NIMH school phobia study: Exposure therapy program. American *Journal of Psychiatry, 144,* 653-657.

Lyneham, H.J., Street, A.K., Abbott, M.J., & Rapee, R.M. (2008). Psychometric properties of the School Anxiety Scale- Teacher Report (SAS-TR). *Journal of Anxiety Disorders, 22,* 292-300. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.janxdis.2007.02.001

Maynard, B. R., Heyne, D., Brendel, K. E., Bulanda, J. J., Thompson, A. M., & Pigott, T. D. (2018). Treatment for school refusal among children and adolescents: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Research on Social Work Practice, 28*(1), 56-67. https:// doi:10.1177/1049731515598619

Naylor, M.W., Staskowski, M., Kenney, M.C., & King, C.A. (1994). Language disorders and learning disabilities in school refusing adolescents. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 33,* 1331-1337. https://doi.org/10.1097/00004583-199411000-00016

Pincus R, Hannor-Walker T, Wright L, Justice J. *COVID-19's Effect on Students: How School Counselors Rise to the Rescue. NASSP Bulletin.* 2020;104(4):241-256. doi:10.1177/0192636520975866

Place, M., Hulsmeier, J., Davis, S., & Taylor, E. (2000). School refusal: A changing problem which requires a change of approach? *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 5*, 345-355. https:// doi:10.1177/1359104500005003005

Tolin, D.F., Whiting, S., Maltby, N., Diefenbach, G.J., Lothstein, M.A., Hardcastle, S., & Gray, K. (2009). Intensive (daily) behavior therapy for school refusal: A multiple baseline case series. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice, 16*, 332-344. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cbpra.2009.02.003