School Refusal: Helping Handout for School and Home

GRETCHEN GIMPEL PEACOCK, KERRY PROUT, & TRISHA CHASE

INTRODUCTION

School refusal refers to a variety of behaviors, including extended periods of absence due to refusal to attend school, frequent tardiness, behavioral difficulties in the morning aimed to prevent attending school, or student distress and requests to not attend school (Kearney & Silverman, 1996). Child-motivated school refusal is different from legitimate excused absences for medical and other reasons as well as from school withdrawal, in which parents prevent their children from attending school. Although estimates vary based on how absenteeism from school is defined, a reasonable estimate of how many students engage in school refusal behavior is likely about 10% (Egger, Costello, & Angold, 2003). The U.S. Department of Education (2016) estimates that almost 20% of high school students are chronically absent—meaning they miss 15 or more days of school in one school year.

School refusal behavior can cause significant disruption in a child’s daily life, both at school and at home. It can create conflicts with parents about attending school as well as issues related to missed academic work at school. In addition, students with school refusal behaviors often have co-occurring problems, including internalizing problems such as depression and anxiety, as well as externalizing problems such as conduct problems and defiance (Kearney, 2008).

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING INTERVENTIONS

Function

To select the most effective intervention, it is important to identify the function or the reason a student is refusing school. Four functions are common (Kearney & Sheldon, 2017):

- **Avoidance.** Students refuse school to avoid feeling anxiety or other unpleasant emotions that they experience while at school.
- **Escape.** Students refuse school to escape from unpleasant situations, such as taking a test or being teased by classmates.
- **Attention.** Students refuse school to gain the attention of parents or other significant people in their lives.
- **External reinforcement.** Students refuse school to participate in more appealing activities at home, such as playing video games.

The function of school refusal behavior is also associated with specific diagnoses, which may help in the selection of an intervention. For example, avoidance of negative thoughts and emotions and escape from unpleasant situations are associated with general anxiety disorders, whereas attention-seeking behavior often is associated with separation anxiety disorder (Kearney & Albano, 2004). Interventions for students with anxiety should emphasize education about anxiety and school refusal as well as anxiety-reduction training (Kearney & Bensaheb, 2006). School refusal behavior to access tangible rewards is associated with oppositional or defiant problems and conduct problems (Kearney & Albano, 2004). For these students, interventions focused on changes in the environment and consequences for behavior at home are most beneficial (Kearney & Bensaheb, 2006). For example, parents could reward their student for attending school by providing access to preferred activities, while limiting access to preferred activities.
when their student does not attend school. Importantly, the function behind school refusal behavior remains relatively constant, even if the behavior itself changes (e.g., missing an entire day of school one day, being tardy another day; Kearney, 2007).

**Chronicity and Severity**
School refusal behavior is described as acute when it lasts from several weeks up to one calendar year; when it lasts for more than one calendar year, it is considered chronic. Interventions for acute school refusal will likely be briefer and less intensive than interventions for chronic school refusal. In addition, school refusal behaviors can vary in severity, and the intensity of the intervention should match the severity of the school refusal behavior. For example, students who express distress about going to school but attend anyway may require less intensive interventions than students who are refusing to attend school. Additionally, some students may refuse only at certain times of the day or engage in behaviors that make them late to school, whereas other students will not attend school at all. The amount of involvement in the intervention from school personnel and parents will vary depending on these issues.

**Contextual Considerations**
Selection of effective interventions for school refusal depends on contextual variables that are affecting the student, such as the student’s age or the school environment. Students younger than 12 are more likely to refuse to attend school to avoid negative emotions or seek attention, whereas students older than 12 are more likely to refuse school to escape unpleasant situations and access external rewards (Kearney & Albano, 2004). Also, older students tend to have a poorer response to intervention for school refusal than do younger students. Interventions tend to be least successful with students over age 14; thus, resolving school refusal behavior while the student is young is essential (Heyne, Sauter, Olendick, Van Widenfelt, & Westenberg, 2014). Additionally, environmental variables may contribute to or maintain a student’s school refusal behavior and thus must be considered when selecting interventions. For example, students facing bullying or safety issues at school may engage in more school refusal behavior. Students who feel disconnected from or experience their school’s environment as unsupportive may also be more likely to refuse school (Havik, Bru, & Ertesvåg, 2015).

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. **Make sure school is a positive environment.** As noted above, children may avoid school due to negative events at school, such as being bullied or otherwise picked on. Having an effective school-wide positive behavior support system can help prevent issues that may lead to school refusal. Teachers and other school personnel should know how to respond to bullying if it does occur. Parents should feel comfortable communicating with school personnel if they believe there is an issue with bullying or exclusion.

2. **Reinforce positive, school-attending behaviors.** Parents should have a clear expectation of school attendance and a set morning routine that leads to the student going to school. If a student starts to refuse to attend school, parents may work to prevent the behavior from worsening by giving students extra incentives to attend and engage in school. Examples of reinforcement programs include the following:
   - Younger students may earn stickers or points for behaviors such as getting ready in the morning, getting in the car to go to school, attending school for the agreed-upon length of time, and so on. Points can be traded for rewards that the student values.
   - Older students may respond to the use of contracts. For example, the student and parents may agree on activities the student can have access to if the student attends school. Depending on the age of the student, the agreement may include use of a car after school, permission to socialize with friends after school, access to electronics, and so on.
   - Teachers can also reinforce appropriate behaviors in school. The following guidelines may be helpful:
     - At the school-wide level, provide reinforcers such as attendance parties or treats for full attendance during a term. When students require more individual support, reinforce students more frequently for specific behaviors such as arriving on time, completing assignments, and so on.
     - Be creative with reinforcers and vary them often. Teachers should think about special privileges in school that can be used as rewards. For example, privileges may include allowing the student to choose a seat in the
classroom, providing extra computer time or free-reading time, or permitting the student to leave early for lunch or recess. When giving older students access to privileges during the school day, a member of the school staff (e.g., school psychologist, assistant principal, school counselor) should oversee and coordinate the activities.

- As recommended anytime rewards are used, choose rewards that the student truly values and wants to receive. Although some reward programs may be maintained over time (e.g., attendance parties), more individualized reward programs should be tapered off as a student’s school refusal behavior decreases.

3. **Ignore complaints when appropriate.** Students who refuse to attend school may complain about physical illnesses, such as stomachaches or headaches, to avoid attending school or to be sent home from school once there. It is common for students with anxiety concerns to have these somatic complaints, and they really may be feeling queasy or achy. In these situations, parents and teachers should use the following approaches:

- Parents should not keep their child home just because of complaints of illness, and school personnel should not send students home (or otherwise allow them to sit out of class) based solely on these complaints. For students with known school refusal behavior, a general rule of thumb might be that they must attend school unless they are throwing up or have a fever.
- Parents and teachers should not discuss the complaints with the student; for example, avoid asking for specifics on how a student feels or what hurts. Instead, parents and teachers should look for a positive behavior they can reinforce. For example, if a student is making progress getting ready in the morning, even while complaining about feeling sick, the parent can provide attention for the getting-ready behaviors.

4. **Address the underlying anxiety.** When the student shows significant anxiety about attending school or being away from parents, addressing the anxiety is important. The following interventions may be helpful for youth with anxiety:

- Cognitive–behavioral therapy (CBT) is one of the most supported interventions for youth with anxiety. CBT typically includes teaching coping skills and exposing the student to a hierarchy of fears so that coping skills can be practiced in a graduated manner.
- Coping skills can include relaxation as well as more cognitive-based coping skills, such as replacing negative thoughts with positive thoughts. For a student with a high level of anxiety, working through an individualized intervention for anxiety (which typically lasts for 12–20 sessions) may be needed.
- Individual services may be accessed in the school setting if the school psychologist or other school-based mental health professional engages in individual mental health services. If not, parents can look for community-based providers. Websites such as effectivechildtherapy.org provide some referral resources. Parents can also ask the school psychologist or their pediatrician for referrals.

5. **Make a plan for return to school.** It is very important to avoid reinforcing the school refusal behavior. If school refusal is due to anxiety, allowing the student to stay home (and escape or avoid the anxiety-provoking situation) will only increase the school refusal behavior. The following guidelines should be considered when developing the plan:

- The longer the student has stayed out of school, the harder it will be to return to school. Given this, it is critical to address school refusal behavior as soon as possible and to insist on regular school attendance.
- If school refusal behavior has been present for some time, gradual return to school might make sense. Parents and school personnel should work together to determine when the student is expected to be in school. For example, the student may initially return for only part of the day, at a time when experiencing success is most likely (e.g., during a favorite class).
- Knowing what aspects of school the student enjoys and does not enjoy is important. For example, if a student is most anxious at lunch, rather than expecting lunch attendance initially, this expectation could be added later. Conversely, if the student enjoys lunch, this should be part of the initial return-to-school plan.
- Making sure the student has contact with adults at school with whom there is a strong
relationship can help the student feel more connected to the school. Likewise, peers can serve as important sources of support. Structuring the return so that the student is able to interact with supportive peers in class and outside of class may ease the transition back into school.

- As the student experiences success in a limited return, additional time at school can be added so that eventually the student is back in school full-time.

6. **Set up a plan to get the student into the school building.** Parents and teachers may be concerned about how to address the transition from the parents’ car or the school bus to the school. The following approaches are recommended:
  - It may be helpful to have a trusted teacher or administrator meet the student outside the school to escort the student into the building. This can prevent running away after getting to school and prevent a drawn-out goodbye with parents.
  - Typically, it is best if parents do not accompany their student into the school building.
  - For older children who may be more self-sufficient in getting to school, it will still be important to have some check-in method to make sure the student has arrived at school.

7. **Set up a plan to keep the student at school and in the classroom.** Students may attempt to leave the classroom or even to leave the school building. If school personnel consider a student to be a risk for escaping—especially an elementary school child leaving the school grounds—proactive measures such as the following should be put in place to minimize chances of this happening:
  - Such measures might include more frequent rewards for engagement in schoolwork, procedures to allow brief breaks from the classroom if requested appropriately, and monitoring of the student at all times (including adult supervision of trips to the restroom).
  - For older students, increased supervision may be more challenging. It might involve having a trusted peer or adult escort the student between classes and requiring that the student stay on campus for lunch if the school has an open campus.
  - Not inadvertently reinforcing escape behavior is important. For example, if a student leaves the classroom and is then sent to the principal’s office, the behavior may be reinforced because the principal’s office may be seen as less aversive (and more rewarding) than the classroom. Interventions should focus on keeping the student in the classroom.

**RECOMMENDED RESOURCES**

**Websites**

https://adaa.org/living-with-anxiety/children/school-refusal

The Anxiety and Depression Association of America website gives a brief overview of possible reasons that students refuse school and tips to assist parents in responding effectively.

https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/School-Avoidance.aspx

Healthychildren.org is a website sponsored by the American Academy of Pediatrics. The content is geared to parents, with information on how to address problems as well as when to seek help.

**Books**


This book, written for parents, will provide them with practical advice on managing their children’s school refusal behavior before it becomes severe.


This book, written for school personnel, including teachers, principals, and school psychologists, details interventions and other practical suggestions for helping students with school-refusal behavior.

**Related Helping Handouts**

Anxiety: Helping Handout for School and Home

Test and Performance Anxiety: Helping Handout for School and Home

Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home
REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Gretchen Gimpel Peacock, PhD,** is a professor of psychology at Utah State University, where she has been since 1995. She previously directed the school psychology program at USU and remains active in mentoring students.

**Kerry Prout, PhD,** is a pediatric psychologist at St. Louis Children’s Hospital. She completed her doctorate in the Clinical/Counseling/School Psychology program at Utah State University.

**Trisha Chase, EdS,** is a graduate student in the Clinical/Counseling/School Psychology PhD program at Utah State University. She completed her EdS in school psychology and holds her school psychology educator license in Utah.