

Psych Savvy

ANCHORAGE SCHOOL DISTRICT PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENT

Available at <http://www.asdk12.org/depts/sped/savvy.asp>

Diane Poage, Director

Erik Viste, Editor

Working Through School Refusal

September 2011

By Chris Walick, NCSP, ASD School Psychologist

A student's refusal to attend school can quickly become a stressful experience for everyone involved. As such, understanding the causes of school refusal and the knowledge of the steps to take to problem-solve this issue is critical in order to identify an effective solution. What is school refusal? It is defined as a student consistently missing all or part of the school day as a result of an emotionally-based refusal to attend school (Plante, 2007).

Signs of school refusal may include the student complaining of somatic symptoms or perceived physical ailments not caused by an injury or illness (Plante, 2007). These may show as headaches, stomachaches, nausea, sweating, dizziness, or pain in the limbs or joints. The student may exhibit increased periods of crying, verbalize that he or she is sick, become anxious or depressed, be quick to anger or bargain to stay home (Wimmer, 2004).

Behaviors related to school refusal may occur at any age regardless of race or gender (Wimmer, 2004). However, they occur more often during transition ages (4-6, 11-12, 14-15), when a student begins school for the first time, moves to a new school or experiences a major life change. The behaviors in question may be acute, occurring in the short term, or chronic, happening consistently. Some researchers have found that students with academic or learning difficulties have a higher rate of refusal behaviors. Higher incidence of refusal behaviors may also be found in children who have difficulty separating from their parents, may be members of a family experiencing a high number of conflicts or who may be experiencing some isolation from society, be enrolled in a school with a large class size and/or a school with a high number of disruptions and behavior problems. When surveyed, principals around the United States have reported school refusal behaviors occurring in anywhere from 0.4% to 28% of their students (Wimmer, 2004).

Kearney (2007) has identified four of the most common reasons behind school refusal.

- **Avoidance:** The student wants to avoid a situation or person(s) causing him or her to experience negative physical or emotional reactions. A common cause of this is the desire not to be separated from a parent. When the

student removes themselves from the situation, thereby eliminating negative feelings, the refusal behavior is reinforced.

- **Escape:** The student is physically separating themselves from anxiety-inducing events. These students may be experiencing anxiety caused by social interactions, testing, or public speaking situations.
- **Attention:** Attention being given by parents, teachers, and/or peers when the student is refusing to be in school becomes desirable to the individual. This often occurs in younger students. The desire to avoid or escape a situation is reinforced by certain reactions by the school or the family.
- **Reinforcement:** The student is seeking out and obtaining reinforcement outside of school (i.e. drugs, sleep) that he or she views as desirable. This category is different from the others because the refusal behaviors typically are not rooted in an emotional cause like anxiety or depression. These students are more likely to be older and to display outwardly disruptive behaviors such as destruction of property.

Researchers have found that among students experiencing school refusal, a large number often exhibit behaviors that may also be found in certain psychological disorders (Wimmer, 2004). The disorders that may occur alongside school refusal are generalized anxiety disorder, separation anxiety disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, major depressive disorder, specific phobia, panic disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, and social anxiety. However, it is important to note that a significant number of students who experience school refusal behavior may not have a clinical diagnosis. Even if the student does receive a diagnosis, it is only one piece of the puzzle. It is crucial to consider all the factors that can contribute to the development of school refusal (Kearney, 2007).

When a student exhibits school refusal behaviors, it is necessary for the school-based team to collaborate in order to problem-solve the causes of the behavior and the function that it may be serving for the student. The school-based team may consist of any number of people involved such as the student, school psychologist, school counselor, principal, teacher, nurse, parent, and anyone else that may be able to provide valuable information. Should a parent notice that their child is exhibiting school refusal behaviors, they may contact any of the school-based staff referenced above to share their concerns and begin working on an effective plan to assist the student.

Once the team is established, information is gathered across settings and in a variety of ways (Wimmer, 2004). Information can be obtained through a review of the student's records with focus on such factors as attendance, academics, and medical information. Relevant information can be acquired through interviews with the teacher and parents. Questions may include: does the student have significant difficulties separating from the parent even when he or she is not at school? Have there been any recent major changes in the student's life? The team will likely conduct observations of the student in school making sure to include those situations where the behavior occurs. A functional behavior assessment may be conducted to identify what happens before, during, and after the student's behavior

occurs and to determine what function the behavior may be serving for the student. Parent and teacher behavior rating scales may also be administered to allow for more in-depth assessment information. Interviews and behavior assessments with the student may also occur as these often provide the most valid, reliable, and detailed information about the problem at hand (Wimmer, 2004).

Once the information is gathered, the team should consider all of the presenting data and formulate a plan. This plan should include a way to measure the frequency of the behavior, its intensity and the effectiveness of the developed interventions. It is important to note that for students experiencing school refusal, there is not one magical intervention that will solve the problem. However, some interventions that have often found to be effective with school refusal behaviors include (Plante, 2007; Wimmer, 2004):

- Teach the student self-monitoring and relaxation skills. Focus on recognizing what it feels like when anxious behaviors occur and practice muscle relaxation and deep breathing techniques.
- Assist the student in reentering school by having him/her come to school with a parent when school is out of session for the day. Then, gradually fade back this support.
- Utilize emotive imagery. Have the student picture situations when he or she experiences negative reactions and help the student apply coping skills to each situation.
- Provide social skills training or academic interventions if a lack of skills is identified as a cause of the school refusal.
- Help the student problem-solve the underlying thought processes regarding why they are refusing school and assist them in forming a new way of thinking about school.

When beginning to address the problem of school refusal, we must be very aware of our own biases and not assume we automatically know the reason behind the refusal. Behaviors associated with school refusal are often quite complex. As such, a successful resolution requires time, patience, teamwork, and understanding.

If you become aware of a student that is exhibiting school refusal behaviors, there are a variety of school-based teams that can provide assistance. The building-based student assistance team is available to assist with reviewing concerns and developing a plan to support the student in decreasing refusal behaviors. For those students that are eligible or may be eligible for special education or 504 services, the Individual Education Program (IEP) team or 504 Team can work together to assist the student. In order to request a team meeting, you may contact the student's classroom teacher or special education teacher, school administrator, school counselor or school psychologist and begin the collaborative problem solving process.

References

Kearney, C. A. (2007). Forms and functions of school refusal behavior in youth: an empirical analysis of absenteeism severity. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 48(1), 53-61.

Plante, W. A. (2007). The role of parenting: anxiety, somatic symptoms and school refusal in children and adolescents. *The Brown University Child and Adolescent Behavior Letter*, 23(12), 1-6.

Wimmer, M. B. (2004). *School refusal: assessment and intervention within school settings*. National Association of School Psychologists: Maryland.

Websites:

E-Medicine Health -

http://www.emedicinehealth.com/school_refusal/article_em.htm

NYU Child Study Center -

http://www.aboutourkids.org/articles/understanding_school_refusal

National Association of School Psychologists – <http://www.nasponline.org>