



In sickness and in health™

Intervention Strategies to Engage Students and Parents Struggling with School Anxiety School Refusal

Jackie Rhew MA, CADAC, LCPC

School Anxiety / School Refusal Program
Alexian Brothers Behavioral Health Hospital

Identifying a Student at Risk

Absences from school

- Excessive excused and unexcused absences
- Increase in truancies
- Avoids portion of school day (e.g. gym class, particular teacher{s} or period{s} of school)

Increase in somatic symptoms

- Exhibits stomach aches, headaches, nausea, vomiting, etc. especially on school days
- Frequent visits to doctors or specialized medical attention

Identifying a Student at Risk (cont'd)

Change in grades or academic achievements

- Avoids or struggles to complete academic tasks
- Missing assignments or incomplete assignments
- Pattern of academic failure
- Decreased motivation associated with increased negative feelings towards school
- Easily overwhelmed with school and home expectations and/or assignments

Identifying a Student at Risk (cont'd)

Marked change in attitudes or behaviors

- Distressed about school more often than peers their age
- Feelings and attitudes towards school have negatively changed
- Behavior patterns only occur on school days
- Pattern of negative peer relationships
- Avoidance of school-related activities
- Difficulties with social skills and peer relationships

Factors that Contribute to School Refusal

- Difficulties with...
 - Managing feelings of discomfort
 - Experiencing disappointment
 - Applying conflict resolution skills
 - Communicating needs effectively to parents, peers, and/or school staff

When we are Uncomfortable or Anxious

- Our Fight – or – Flight system gets activated by the perception of threat/danger
- The perceived fear is greater than the actual threat/danger
- Everyday occurrences become overwhelming
- Behaviors interfere with daily functioning

Maladaptive Coping (Avoidance)

- Based on misappraisal of the threat
- Intention is to avoid fear stimulus or the danger it signals
- Coping patterns develop as a way to create immediate relief and avoid experience of discomfort

Distress Tolerance

- Lack of crisis survival strategies
- Underdeveloped skills to manage feelings such as disappointment, anger, and sadness
- Difficulty applying coping strategies to stressors

Emotional Regulation

- Difficulty managing emotions
- Lack of self soothing techniques
- Poor impulse control

Functions of School Refusal Behavior (Kearney)-4 Domains

Domain 1:

- Avoidance of Negative Affect (somatic complaints, sadness, general anxiety)

Domain 2:

- Escape from Evaluative or Social Situations (social phobia, OCD perfectionism)

Domain 3:

- Attention Seeking Behavior (separation anxiety, sympathy from family, high enmeshment)

Domain 4:

- Pursuit of Tangible Reinforcers (video games, internet, sleep, drug use)

Strategies and Interventions

Absence Policy

- Clear and enforceable attendance policies will help motivate students
- Count all absences rather than differentiating between excused and unexcused
- Require a physician note for all absences

Communication

- Maintain consistent dialogue between school personnel and parents on student's progress and expectations (i.e. weekly contact with parent)
- Creating rapport between student and staff helps the student to experience a connection with the school

Strategies and Interventions (cont'd)

- **School Wide Interventions**
- Peer helpers/call or contact from peer when absent from school
- Incentive program (gift card, etc)
- Automatic or personal phone call to student in the morning
- Encourage positive praise for accomplishments
- Establish connections with school staff/teachers
- Identify patterns of utilizing supports (limitation on time spent in social worker and/or nurse office)

Strategies and Interventions (cont'd)

- Screening in Middle School
- Provide accommodations in a supportive school environment
- Set clear expectations and follow through
- Academic failure may indicate the need for
 - Psychological/neuro-cognitive assessment
 - Emotional, behavioral, or academic accommodations

Strategies and Interventions (cont'd)

- **Classroom Assistance/Teacher Interventions**
- Have preplan strategies with student that identify coping skills and supports that can be utilized in class
- Periodic check in with students during class
- Organization of materials (color code notebooks, folders, etc)
- Prevent feelings of being overwhelmed
 - breaking assignments down
 - Photocopy pages of novel instead giving entire reading assignment/book
 - Simplify and differentiate content being taught
 - Highlight important due dates on syllabus/calendar – visual cues

Strategies and Interventions (cont'd)

- Location of student's desk, proximity helpful
- Establish a “safe zone” in the classroom
- Daily Routines
- Write class objectives and classroom schedule on board
- Set time limits
- Utilize peers in groups to help student to increase connection in classroom
- Discuss with student what are they doing tonight
- Plan for transitions

Strategies and Interventions (cont'd)

- **Classroom and Student Interventions**
 - Write out what is making anxious/upset and have a brief response to student
 - 2 minute break(s)
 - Use skills that increase self soothing
 - Stress Ball
 - Mindfulness and grounding techniques
 - Square or triangle breathing techniques
 - Journal or drawing for limited amount of time (example 2 minute)
 - Writing down the facts
 - Hierarchy or Anxiety thermometer

Strategies and Interventions (cont'd)

Social

- Encouragement of extracurricular activities and student participation can decrease anxiety, foster independence and increase connections in the school setting
- Address negative peer relationships in the school environment, such as bullying, teasing, etc.
- Social skill development may be necessary to promote change
- School social workers, counselors, psychologists, teachers and peer groups are resources for intervention

Family Engagement Strategies

- Develop connections by establishing rapport with parents or guardians to form relationships and define mutual goals
- Help parents identify obstacles and goals (Hierarchy)
- It is important to initiate and maintain communication between school personnel and parents on the student's progress and expectations. Sending a written weekly report home to parents provides consistent dialogue between home and school of the student's progress.
- Provide resources for family (community resource packet with therapist, adolescent groups, community mental health center, etc.)
- List of how to respond when child is struggling (i.e. less talking, clearly defined expectations, etc)

Family Therapy Overview

- Family Systems Perspective
- Purposeful parenting vs. emotional reactive parenting
- Goals for parenting that are aligned with family values
- Healthy and unhealthy patterns of communication
- Language development

Family Therapy Interventions

- Create realistic family contract
- Identify patterns of behavior
- Identify and strategize obstacles to following family contract
- Evaluate progress and obstacles regularly
- Aligned parenting creates expectations that increase consistency and structure

Strategies and Interventions (cont'd)

- BE AWARE and manage frustration and emotional reactions to parents and students involved in truancy situations
- BE AWARE of mental illness and emotional functioning of students and family members when creating interventions

Sample Family Contract

Expectations

1. Attend School
2. Be ready at 7:00
3. Chores
4. Homework
5. Extracurricular Activities

Privileges

- 2 hours of screen time
- Go out on Friday night
- Allowance
- Cell phone privilege
- Video games, lab top

Strategies for Parents

- Increase self awareness
- Avoid enabling your child
- Create home environment that fosters structure and consistency
- Communicate effectively
- Recognize patterns that contribute to child's anxiety

Emotional and Cognitive Development

- Assessing discrepancy between emotional and cognitive levels of development
- Understanding different stages of emotional development
- Considering emotional development when formulating expectations
- Fostering emotional maturity

Verbal Communication

- Provide child with choices
- Language such as “It is your choice” vs. “You have to”
- “What do you think you could do” vs. “you’ll be ok”
- Look for teaching opportunities that work towards goal attainment
- Use language that is purposeful

Therapeutic Treatments for School Refusal

- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Exposure/Response Prevention
- Skill building: Communication, Conflict Resolution, Study/organization, Self esteem and Social Skills
- Intensive individual therapy, family therapy and parent education
- Collaboration with school support staff

Exposure and Response Prevention Treatment for School Anxiety

- Make a list of feared stimuli/situations
- Arrange stimuli in hierarchical fashion
- Use the hierarchy to develop and implement plan of systematic exposure to stimuli/situations that trigger anxiety
- Goal: to experience the fear and correct faulty beliefs to create adaptive patterns of anxiety
- The exposure is assisted by the therapist and is never forced on the patient

Exposure and Response Prevention Treatment for School Anxiety

- Therapeutic anxiety prevention relies on the experience of short term discomfort and interrupting patterns of avoidance
- The maladaptive anxiety is corrected by the awareness gained during the exposure (i.e. there are no long term negative effects by the experience)

Suggestions for Providers

- Build rapport and trust with family members
- Empathy
- Teach skills and tools that may be useful
- Avoid judgments and channel frustrations
- Provide resources

Suggestions for Providers (cont'd)

- Work with parents to set realistic expectations
- Understand resources and limitations when forming expectations
- Meet parents where they are
- Provide support where needed

Suggestions for Providers (cont'd)

- Work with parents to set goals for their child based on family values
- Goals should be both long and short term
- Goals should be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely (SMART)
- The expectations should be clear and consistent
- Avoid power struggles

Contact

Jackie Rhew MA, CADDC, LCPC

Assistant Director of School Anxiety and Refusal Program

Clinical Liaison

847.303.4980

Jackie.Rhew@amitahealth.org

Alexian Brothers Behavioral Health Hospital

1650 Moon Lake Boulevard

Hoffman Estates, IL. 60169

(847)882-1600