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

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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
  o Psychological/neuro-cognitive assessment
  o 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectations</th>
<th>Privileges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attend School</td>
<td>2 hours of screen time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be ready at 7:00</td>
<td>Go out on Friday night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chores</td>
<td>Allowance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>Cell phone privilege</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extracurricular Activities</td>
<td>Video games, lab top</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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