

School Avoidance

What is it?

When a student is refusing to attend all or part of the school day and is accumulating multiple unexcused absences.

Signs and symptoms

- Separation Anxiety
- Irritability
- Difficulty getting out of bed in the morning
- Physical Symptoms (headaches, stomach aches)
- Frequent visits to the nurse
- Tardiness/unexcused absences
- Symptoms tend to dissipate when student learns he or she does not have to go to school and reappear the night before or morning of a school day

Possible Causes

1. Cultural factors
Language barriers, unsafe school environment, student's culture is different from most other students.
2. Family factors:
Family doesn't value education, allows student to stay home, home is a more fun place to be, unstable home environment, trauma, changes in family structure (divorce, death of a family member, new sibling, sick parent), moving
3. Peer/School factors
Bullying, lack of friendships, curriculum too difficult/expectations too high.
4. Neuropsychiatric factors: Anxiety Disorder, ADD/ADHD, Learning Disability, Mood Disorder, Post Concussion Syndrome, Social Phobia, Panic Disorder, Depression, Health problems.

Treatment

1. Individual and/or family therapy
Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT), Medication if appropriate.
2. Communication between family and school
Try to identify what the root cause of the school refusal behavior is. Once found, create an intervention (address bullying, help student make social connections, screen for learning disability, relaxation strategies around performance anxiety)
3. Teaching coping skills
Breathing, journaling, listening to music, talk to friend or family member, make a plan for how to manage what the most stressful thing about going to school that day is
4. Gradual re-entry plan/flexibility from school/Parent commitment to re-entry plan

For students who have been absent for an extended period of time a gradual return is helpful (start with one class, then two etc.). Once re-entry plan is established it's important for parents to bring the student to school when expected even when the student resists. If student does stay home, parent should take away fun parts of being home (tv, computer, video games, fun activities). ***The longer the student is allowed to stay home the more difficult it is to get them back in school.***

Helpful articles, websites and books

Ending school avoidance (article)

<http://www.nancyrappaport.com/downloads/School%20Avoidance%20Educational%20Leadership%20Rappaport.pdf>

School refusal (article)

<http://www.nasponline.org/resources/principals/School%20Refusal%20April%20NASSP.pdf>

Anxiety and Depression Association of America/ School Refusal (website)

<http://www.adaa.org/living-with-anxiety/children/school-refusal>

Getting your child to say "yes" to school (book)

<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/getting-your-child-to-say-yes-to-school-9780195306309?cc=us&lang=en&#>