

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

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Illinois School Code

105 ILCS 5/26-1) (from Ch. 122, par. 26-1)

Sec. 26-1. Compulsory school age-Exemptions. Whoever has custody or control of any child between the ages of 7 and 17 years (unless the child has already graduated from high school) shall cause such child to attend some public school in the district wherein the child resides the entire time it is in session during the regular school term, except as provided in Section 10-19.1, and during a required summer school program established under Section 10-22.33B

"Chronic or habitual truant" shall be defined as a child who is subject to compulsory school attendance and who is absent without valid cause from such attendance for 5% or more of the previous 180 regular attendance days.

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)

Domain 1:

Avoidance of Negative Affect

Traits:

- Anxiety symptoms, difficulty advocating for self, inability to self sooth
- Depressive symptoms, low tolerance for managing distress
- This student commonly presents with a lot of somatic complaints

Domain 1:

Avoidance of Negative Affect

Interventions:

- Provide education about anxiety and effective response techniques
- Recognize patterns of behavior
- Teach ways to manage physical/somatic symptoms
- Develop anxiety/avoidance hierarchy and work on exposure situations
- Gradual re-exposure to school setting

Domain 2:

Escape from Evaluative or Social Situations

Traits:

- Isolation and/or decrease of social activities
- Difficulty managing social situations
- Perfectionism/Fear of Failure
- Black and White Thinking
- Perseverates/obsesses on thoughts

Domain 2:

Escape from Evaluative or Social Situations

Interventions:

- Psycho-education
- Anxiety/avoidance hierarchy
- Modeling and role-play
- Cognitive restructuring
- Gradual re-exposure to school setting

Domain 3:

Attention Seeking Behavior

Traits:

- Seeks reassurance from parent
- Separation anxiety
- Poor boundaries/high enmeshment
- Parents may be overly sensitive and reactive to somatic complaints

Domain 3:

Attention Seeking Behavior

Interventions:

Intense Parent training that includes:

- Structure and routine
- Clear expectations
- Altered use of language with child
- No options regarding school attendance

Domain 4:

Pursuit of Tangible Reinforcers

Traits:

- Poor sleep hygiene/patterns (i.e. student stays up late and sleeps during the day)
- Access to privileges without meeting expectations
- Lacks motivations to attend school
- Possible drug use and/or internet, gaming addiction
- Struggles with limits and resists authority

Domain 4:

Pursuit of Tangible Reinforcers

Interventions:

- Family based treatment
- Contingency contracting
- Communication skills
- Peer refusal skills training
- Holding child accountable
- Escorting child to class
- Rule out addictive disorders and seek alternative treatment when necessary

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
- Legal consequences
- Develop a relationship with truancy officers

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)

- Hold students and parents accountable for attendance policy and truancy policy
- 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
- 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

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

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)

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)

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