

# School Avoidance and Refusal

Supporting Students, Families, and School Teams

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# Evidence Based Assessment Scale Reasons Correspond to the Parent Friendly Language in Knowing Note (in same order)

**ANA = Avoid** stimuli that provoke negative affectivity

**ESE = Escape** aversive social and evaluative situations

**AGA = Attention** getting behavior

**PTR = Pursuit** of tangible reinforcement outside of school

# Parent Friendly Language

- Avoid **negative** feelings
- Avoid **social** problems
- Bring **attention** to a problem
- Enjoy **time away** from responsibility

# Where Do We Focus Intervention?

## Child

- Avoid **negative** feelings
- Avoid **social** problems

## Family

- Bring **attention** to a problem
- Enjoy **time away** from responsibility

# Resources to Guide Discussions

## Two Knowing Notes

- “Understanding Your Child’s Reasons”
- “Helping Your Child with School Avoidance”

## School Refusal Assessment Scale

Developed by Christopher Kearney

- Confirms your observations
- Provides documentation to family

# Reason #1 (Knowing Note)

## To Avoid Negative Feelings

- Your child may not know how to solve a problem at school
- Children can be upset about school work, tests, friends, gym, and expectations

**\*\*Therapy will help your child's independence and self-confidence.\*\***

# Avoiding Negative Feelings

## Student Tendencies

- Avoid acknowledging the “real” reason
- Offer “contrived” reasons
  - Somatic complaints / other explanations
- Adaptation struggles
- Sometimes considered “over-protected”, “very capable”

# Avoiding Negative Feelings

## Intervention Focus

- Increase skills related to:
  - Confidence for problem situation
  - Age-appropriate responsibility
  - Independence and maturity
  - Problem-solving (instead of avoiding)



# Reason #2 (Knowing Note)

## To Avoid Social Problems

- Your child may feel judged by self and others
- Children may feel confused about their ability to make or keep friends

**\*\*Therapy will help your child's social abilities and self-esteem.\*\***

# Avoiding Social Problems

## Student Tendencies

- Real or perceived ideas about self/bullies
- Undeveloped social skills
- Negative comments about self/others
  - “Nobody likes me, everybody thinks I’m weird”
  - “I don’t fit in, I don’t have the right \_\_\_\_\_”
  - “They think they’re wonderful, but I think \_\_\_\_\_”
  - “I don’t have any friends”

# Avoiding Social Problems

## Intervention Focus

- Increase skills related to:
  - Social confidence and ability
  - Realistic self-perceptions
  - Accuracy in social observations
  - Self-esteem and emotional growth

# Reason #3 (Knowing Note)

## To Bring Attention to a Problem

- Your child may be asking for help through behaviors that cause attention
- Children may be upset about family, school, or friend problems
- Children may be expressing concern about their family's future
- Children may be trying to keep their family healthy, happy, and together

**\*\*Therapy will help your family deal with problems that are upsetting your child.\*\***

# Bring Attention to a Problem

## Family Tendencies

- Adults are pre-occupied with “other” problems
  - Illness or special ability in sibling or parent
  - Divorce or strained parental relationships
  - Parentified child now “requests” help
- Adults acquiesce to child’s behavior
  - Parental control problems / imbalance
  - Enmeshed relationships

# Bring Attention to a Problem

## Intervention

- Address family problems that upset child
- Help adults understand:
  - Child's behavior is a signal
  - Parent's response influences child
- Restore parent-child power imbalance
- Encourage family (therapeutic) growth

# Reason #4 (Knowing Note)

## To Enjoy Time Away from Responsibility

- Your child may experience more rewards by staying home
- Children may want to stay home to sleep, use electronic devices, eat snacks, or dress differently
- Children may believe that adults will excuse assignments and responsibilities for absent students

**\*\*Therapy will help your family organize expectations for your child.\*\***

# Enjoying Time Away

## Student Tendencies

- Not anxious, avoiding, or escaping school
- Circumvent parental “hopes and plans”
- Experience a sense of power and fun in school refusal
- Enjoy electronics, food, sleep, relaxed dress
- Cope well with expectations when accountability is enforced



# Enjoying Time Away From

## Family Tendencies

- Members in conflict, antagonistic to each other
- Adults are pre-occupied with problems unrelated to child
  - Work, finances, marriage/romantic partner, parent's education
- Adults model/possess poor problem-solving abilities
- Parental-power and control problems

# Enjoying Time Away

## Intervention Focus

- Teach parents to enforce rules and expectations
  - Natural consequences to match maturity
    - Electronics & perks are earned
  - No attendance= no electronics & perks
    - Expect “up the ante”/escalation behaviors
    - Plan “If ..., then...” responses
- Improve parental power imbalance
- Address adult pre-occupations

# Individualized Intervention Strategies

# My Trouble Spots (Step 1 = List)

Activity	Reason
Math Class	I don't know how to do math
Lunch	I don't know where to sit
Riding Bus	I don't have anyone to talk to
Changing classes	Someone might make fun of me

# My Trouble Spots (Step 2 = Prioritize)

Rank	Activity	Reason
4	Math Class	I don't know how to do math
1	Lunch	I don't know where to sit
3	Riding Bus	I don't have anyone to talk to
2	Changing classes	Someone might make fun of me

# Student Log

“Detective work” for self-awareness, fact-finding, problem-solving...

Time	I feel...	My location is...	I expect...	I think...
10 am	Sick & Headache	Going to math	I'll be embarrassed	Teacher expects me to have my homework & know ALL the answers
Lunch	Dizzy	Hallway	No one will want to sit with me.  I won't know where to sit	Kids will think I am weird. Nobody likes me.

# List small steps as script to practice

## Getting into my Classroom

Getting out of car

Walking into building

Saying "Hi" to Ms. Office Lady

Walking down the hall

Walking into my classroom

Smiling or saying "Hi" to one classmate

Sitting in my seat

Taking out my work

Starting my work

# Increase Familiarity with Building

## Detective/Reporter

- Which classmates smile a lot, help others?
- How do other kids handle conflict, difficult work, etc.?

## Scavenger Hunt

- Go into important rooms, learn details about school
- List of questions student can ask specific staff

## Helper Role

- Gain a sense of belonging / responsibility
- Help younger students, tutor, pet care, office/teacher/library, team, club, errand assistant



# Care for Deficits

## Social Skills (Facilitated Groups)

- Led by caring staff member, counselor, professional
- “Lunch Bunch Group” or before/after school
- Referral to professional skills group

## Academic Skills (Support Ideas)

- Before/during/after school
- Peer-to-peer tutor
- Upper grade student tutor (benefit: role model)
- Professional tutoring

# Expand thinking patterns

## Build Accuracy in Perceptions

- How can you truly tell what others are thinking?
- How can you be 100% sure this [event] will happen?

## Challenge Tendency to Catastrophize

- Potential negative events
- Beliefs others “could” have about them

## Remind: As Catastrophizing Increases

- Student becomes increasingly overwhelmed
- Anxiety about negative evaluation worsens
- Student uses school avoidance tactics

# Family Intervention Strategies

# Supporting Parents/Guardians

## Appeal to parent's goals for child's future:

- Life, work, responsibilities, independence
- Ability to:
  - Problem-solve
  - Meet obstacles
  - Compete in work force
  - Become effective future parent

## Speak to the bigger idea:

- The “School of Life”

# Prepare Parents/Guardians to:

## Anticipate emotional response

- Expect child to mourn or increase behaviors (due to sense of loss as parents regain control)

## Be prepared with planned responses

- If..., then.... scenarios

# Coach Parents/Guardians for Home

- Simplify routines (morning & evening)
- Use neutral voice with simple directions
- Avoid stalling conversations
- Normalize natural consequences
  - Accustomed privileges become incentives
  - Inexpensive activities can be incentives
- Plan follow-up for incentives/enforcement

# School Intervention Strategies

# School Supports

- Parent to use car drop-off circle
- Staff go to car
- Peer goes to car or meets at school door
- Check-in &/or check-out with specific staff
- Specific morning “helper task-job”
- Complete school work in office/resource area
- If office privileges overused: proactive schedule
- Enlist parent as volunteer in another area



# School Supports

- Creative scheduling for day, week, year
- Long term make-up plan
  - Explain credit status, grade rubrics, GPA
- Collaborative attendance plan
  - Family must bring student to school
  - School nurse can assess for illness
- Truancy provides boundary

# Thoughts and Questions?



# References

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# For Additional Information

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