School Refusal and Anxiety
Information for School Nurses
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Presentation Overview
1. What is school refusal behavior and school anxiety
2. Data
3. Impacts of School Refusal Behavior
4. Responding to School Refusal Behavior: Assessment
5. Responding to School Refusal Behavior: Intervention
6. Role of School Nurses

What is School Avoidance/Refusal?

- Boy age 11 refuses to go to school after his friends unfriended him on Instagram and
- Girl age 16 avoids going to school after she began experiencing panic attacks at her band concert last week
- Girl age 7 refuses to go to school, does not respond to parents, sit quietly and does not move each morning for the past month. Parents leave her home with grandparent for the day

What is School Avoidance/Refusal?

- School Avoidance/Refusal Behavior
  - “Child-motivated refusal to attend school and/or difficulties remaining in classes for an entire day”
  - Unable to maintain age-appropriate functioning with regard to school attendance or coping with school stress
  - Behavior needs to cause significant impairment:
    - Significant # of days missed or significant disruption
    - Poor school and grade performance
    - Interpersonal arguments and conflicts
    - Consequences (detentions, fines, legal action)

- Not a DSM-V Diagnosis
  

What is School Avoidance/Refusal?

- School Avoidance/Refusal Behavior
  - Includes a continuum of school attendance:
    - Absent from school completely
    - Miss some school (come late/leave early, skip days/classes)
    - Chronically late
    - Attend but strongly resist in the morning
    - Attend but are very upset while in school, plea for nonattendance

  Each of these levels can cause significant problems

What is School Avoidance/Refusal?

- School Avoidance/Refusal Behavior
  - Includes a continuum of duration
    - A few days
    - 1 week
    - Multiple weeks
    - 1 month week
    - Multiple months
    - 1 Year
    - Multiple years

  Each of these levels can cause significant problems
What is School Avoidance/ Refusal?

- More narrow terms sometimes used
- Truancy: Delinquent behavior, parents unaware of absence
- School Anxiety: Anxiety based absences: separation, generalized, social
- School Phobia: Specific fear of something at school, less common
- Other reasons children might not attend school (not all school refusal)
  - Legitimate illness (physical, mental)
  - Parent keeps child home
  - Family conditions or other life events (ex. escaping abuse, homelessness, permissive parenting)
  - Avoiding conflicts/ threats/ HIB

School Refusal Behavior - Data

- Up to 28% of students refuse school at some point, with broader inclusive definition
- 5% prevalence rate of school refusal
- No gender difference Boys=Girls
- Change/movements for a student = increased risk
  - Change to new school KG, 5th,6th,7th, 9th
  - Ages 5-6, 10-13 (most), 14-15
  - Increased age onset

Chronic Absenteeism Data

- Defined chronic student absenteeism as: absent 15 or more school days during the year
- 14% of all students in US
- 11% Elementary, 12.5% Middle, 19% HS

Source: https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf

Chronic Absenteeism Data cont..

- Percentage chronically absent

School Refusal Behavior - Factors

- Hallmark of school refusal: Heterogeneity many different behaviors related to it
  - Internalizing problems:
    - 
    - 
  - Externalizing problems:
    - 
    - 

School Refusal Behavior - Factors

- Social Anxiety Disorder
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder
- Separation Anxiety Disorder
- Panic Disorder and Agoraphobia
- Specific Phobia (Vomiting is very common)
- OCD, Tics
- Mood Disorders (Depression, BiPolar)
- ADHD/ Oppositional Defiant, Conduct Disorder
- Trauma/ HIB/ other conditions
School Refusal Behavior - Impact

- One of the most disruptive problem behaviors
- Disrupts child, school, family life/operations/sense of normalcy
  - Missing school, parents miss work, patience wears thin
- Can happen fast, be traumatic, chaotic, confusing
  - In some cases normal life changed in less than a week
- Reactions vary from concern, to anger, to resentment, agreement/disagreement
  - For all stakeholders: Child, parents, siblings, friends, school personnel

School Refusal Behavior - Impact

- Short term consequences for child:
  - Missed class time, not seeing friends, school work, grades, credit, tests, meetings at the school
  - Legal (truancy officer), child care
  - Experiences family stress daily routines, stress, arguments, siblings
  - Exposure to many school resources (admin, counselors, nurse, CST), special treatment/accommodations
- Long term consequences for child
  - Family problems
  - Chronic mental health difficulties
  - Adulthood: unstable employment, school dropout, unstable adult relationships, having children with same difficulties

Responding to School Refusal - Assessment - Why is this happening?

- Assess the reason for the school refusal behavior: Function
  - School refusal behavior can be caused by many different factors (equifinality) so instead of focusing on just the symptoms, assess by determining the function of the behavior:
    - Must ask:
      - Why is the child refusing school?
      - What motivates the child to refuse school?
      - What maintains the refusal behavior?

Responding to School Refusal - Assessment

- Assessment must be comprehensive and multi-component
- In-direct data collection
  - Rating scales (Parent, teacher, child),
  - Records: school, legal, health records (attendance, grades, evaluations, police reports),
  - Interviews (parent, teachers, child, others),
  - Communication with outside treating doctors/clinicians
  - School Refusal Assessment Scale
- Direct data collection
  - Observations of child

Responding to School Refusal - Assessment

- Tillotson & Kearney (1998) 4 Functions behind School Refusal

  1. Avoidance of Negative Affectivity (33.7% of cases)
    - Avoid stimuli that provoke negative emotions, experience general symptoms of anxiety, sadness, & somatic complaints, general misery and emotional/psychological vulnerability

  2. Avoidance of Social Evaluation (7.8% of cases)
    - Escape aversive social or evaluative situations; public speaking, social interactions, walking in hallways, tests, performance situations

  3. Attention Seeking Behavior (23.5% of cases)
    - Receive intangible rewards at home: attention or sympathy from parents/others. Results in tantrums, screaming, clinging, reassurance-seeking

  4. Pursuit of Tangible Rewards (34.9% of cases)
    - Skip school or classes to pursue reinforcers more powerful than school. TV, video games, sports, friends, Internet, sleeping etc...
Responding to School Refusal - Assessment

- Many children (up to 33%): more than one of the functions are at play
- Helpful to use Kearny and Albano’s (2007) school refusal assessment scale to determine how much each of the four functions are playing a role.
  - (used to help create hypothesis, not final say)

Responding to School Refusal - Intervention

Ultimate goal of intervention is for child to return to school and go to all classes with no problems

Responding to School Refusal - Intervention

1. Immediate response to early signs
2. Apply assessment information (function, consider other factors) to guide intervention plan
3. Utilize evidenced based cognitive behavioral therapy interventions
4. Involve the child, parents/family, and school
5. Medical interventions: In some cases psychiatric and medical conditions need to be treated first, and/or in conjunction with a home/school plan

Responding to School Refusal - Intervention – Immediate Response

- If school refusal just started: Address it right away
  - Get child back/ keep them in school right away
  - Can get worse and hard to treat very fast
  - Slippery slope
  - “Nip it in the bud”

Responding to School Refusal - Intervention – Immediate Response

- At first sign: Treat as a potential developing crisis
- Stabilize immediate situation - Help relax, reassure
  - If child is panicking, overwhelmed, refusing/avoiding
  - Parents upset
- Get counselors and admin in the loop right away
- Initial assessment: See if there is a reason the child is showing refusal behaviors (did anything happen recently?)
- Advise for child to stay in school to the greatest extent possible
  - Try to make it through the day with supports
  - If must leave the first day, come back tomorrow
  - Show that school is supportive, flexible and caring

Responding to School Refusal - Intervention – Immediate Response

- In most cases strongly advise parents:
  - What ever you need to do just bring your child to school
  - Just get them in the building
- Respond as if it could quickly turn into a “crisis”
  - Do not wait, or gets much much harder to resolve quickly
Responding to School Refusal - Intervention - Immediate response

- Example of how the problem can grow quickly:
  - Student, with no prior history of this behavior, comes to nurses office complaining of feeling out of breath, and like she is having a panic attack
  - Students asks to go home
  - Parents are contacted and pick up child
  - Child leaves school early and goes home with parents
  - Next morning child gives parents a very hard time about going to school

  - What could the nurse do in this situation?
  - What could the parents do in this situation?

Responding to School Refusal - Intervention - Apply assessment info

- If school refusal does not resolve right away:
  - Conduct assessment (as described earlier)
  - Use that info to develop an intervention plan

Responding to School Refusal - Intervention - Apply assessment info

- First step: Where do stakeholders stand?
  - Are parents on board? How much are they willing to push their child?
  - Is the admin on board? How much are they willing to work with family, be flexible? What are their limits/rules?
  - What is the child’s current condition? Do they want to return? What are they saying?
    - Psychiatric/medical/ or family concerns to consider?

Responding to School Refusal - Intervention - Apply assessment info

- Second step: Address obvious child concerns
  - Academic? (Work too hard, difficult, too easy)
  - Recent incident
    - Was upset by something teacher said?
    - Misperception, misunderstanding, something scary happened
  - HIB and social?
  - Recent trauma, crisis, change in life circumstance

Responding to School Refusal - Intervention - Apply assessment info

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reinforcement</th>
<th>Function Type</th>
<th>Intervention focus</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative Reinforcement</td>
<td>Avoidance of Negative Affectivity</td>
<td>Reducing physical/emotional symptoms and avoidance behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Reinforcement</td>
<td>Avoidance of Social Evaluation</td>
<td>Building social/coping skills, reducing social anxiety</td>
</tr>
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<td>Positive Reinforcement</td>
<td>Attention Seeking Behavior</td>
<td>Parent training (communication, discipline), shift attention to school, away from refusal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive Reinforcement</td>
<td>Pursuit of Tangible Rewards</td>
<td>Family problem solving, increase rewards for school attendance, decrease rewards for refusal</td>
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Responding to School Refusal - Intervention - Apply assessment info

- About punishment: (not the same as negative reinforcement!)
- For school refusal cases, punishment (grounding, detention, suspension, retention, taking away privileges, legal)
- Can be counter productive if not used properly
- Schools and families get tested ...
- Need to be consistent
- Extinction burst
- The threat of punitive action can set the limits, help with motivation
- Behavior plans can include a combination of rewards and punishments

Responding to School Refusal - Intervention - Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

- CBT is a structured evidenced based treatment modality
  1. Psychological education
     - Learning about the nature of anxiety and affective states, of relationships between thoughts feelings and actions, physical response to emotions
  2. Cognitive (thought) interventions
     - Address maladaptive thoughts, cognitive restructuring, thought challenging, automatic thoughts, schemas, thought monitoring, problem solving, increasing self awareness, mindfulness, schemas
     - Realistic thinking, self talk

Responding to School Refusal - Intervention - For anxiety based refusal

- For anxiety based school refusal the core treatment is gradual exposure to anxiety (school) which involves:
  - Providing education - Building trust and rapport - Buy in
  - Cognitive restructuring: Rename thoughts, coping thoughts
  - Creating a fear hierarchy with the child
    - Develop different exposure situations and have child rate on a scale of (least scary) 1-10 (most scary)
  - Set up social support and reinforcement for the effort

Responding to School Refusal - Intervention - For anxiety based refusal

- For anxiety based school refusal the core treatment is gradual exposure to anxiety (school) which involves:
  - Gradually exposing the child to anxiety based school situations
    - Goal is for child to stay in tolerable feared situation until they naturally experience a decrease in anxiety
    - Should be done in safe and supportive environment
    - Can do this paired with relaxation (systemic desensitization) to help process, but not needed
Gradual Exposure

The Vicious Cycle of Escape & Avoidance

Responding to School Refusal - Intervention - For anxiety based refusal

Fear hierarchy (aka Fear Ladder) example:
- Go to school with parent and sit in the car on weekend
- Go to school with parent and get out of the car, walk around on weekend
- Go to school on weekend and walk in to school with parent for 15 min
- Go to school on weekend and walk in to school with parent, sit in office for 30 minutes
- Go to school late and complete work for one period in counselor’s office
- Go to school late and complete work for 5 periods in counselor’s office, then go to art class period 6

Responding to School Refusal - Intervention - For anxiety based refusal

Exposures: other points to consider
- Try not to go backwards on fear hierarchy, can stay where they are, but always try to maintain gains
- Consider the educational component while work on exposures
  - Focus on working on the anxiety, flexible with academics if possible
  - Motivation, Social Support and Encouragement

Responding to School Refusal - Intervention - For anxiety based refusal

For flexibility helpful to set up exposure plans with:
- Phases - Flexible time periods when a goal(s) on the fear hierarchy is being worked on
- Phase Steps: Define what each phase entails
  - 1 First go to office, 2 go to class, 3. check in with nurse
- Daily/Weekly Plan: Clarifies what a child needs to do each day
  - Will achieve ____ by the end of the day

Responding to School Refusal - Intervention - For anxiety based refusal

Evidence based treatments anxiety treatments that have these components (can find on amazon):
- Coping Cat
- C.A.T. Project
- Riding the Wave (teens)
Responding to School Refusal - Intervention

For anxiety based refusal

- Case example
- 15 year old boy stopped attending school one week after witnessing a classmate vomit in class

For non-anxiety based refusal

- When kids refuse for attention or to get other tangible reinforcements
- Parent training - work on how to respond/talk to child
  - Shift attention away from refusal to attendance
- Structured problem solving, establish routines
- Contracting and plan making (Rewards, punishments)
- Clearly outlining rules, privileges, and expectations
- Getting buy-in
- Consequences and options should be made clear

Forced School Attendance

- Physically bringing child into school
- For child refusing school only for attention and without significant anxiety
- Use caution: Stop process if unbearable for parents, child is over anxious, just carrying child no physical harm
- May work well for younger children (under 11), or those who just started to refuse
- Does not work well for older children/teens and those with chronic attendance problems
- Only to be used with parent support, school support, and the ability for strong follow-through/persistence

School Nurses - School Refusal

- Often one of the first school faculty members to discover this problem
  - Child complaining of being sick, avoiding class, wants to go home, very anxious
  - Parent calls child out of school

- Member of response team
  - Could be part of the intervention plan development, immediate response, parent support, liaison between parents and admin
  - Might help with exposures or other behavior plans
  - Help to coordinate if medical intervention
  - Remember to recommend child stay in school, or return as soon as possible when problem starts!!

School Nurses - School Refusal

- 20% of students receive some type of school MH services
- Almost all schools have at least one staff responsible for providing MH services
- Most Common type of MH providers were:
  - 1. School counselors
  - **2. SCHOOL NURSES**
  - 3. School psychologists

School Nurses - School Refusal

- Considered by most schools to be MH providers
- The most common school staffing combination for handling mental health was:
  - School counselor + school nurse + school psychologist
- Percentage of time a school nurse spends providing MH services:
  - Elementary: 31%, Middle: 30%, High School: 37.57%
- High case loads, MH services tend to be more informal than traditional counseling
- More training & research on SN’s role with MH in schools
School Nurses - School Refusal

- A few strategies nurses can use when responding to students anxious at school in their office:
- Assessing why the child is anxious - key questions
- Relaxation
  - Deep breathing
  - Progressive muscle relaxation
  - Combined Deep breathing/PMR/Visualization
- Identifying and challenging automatic thoughts

School Nurses - Anxious student

Questions to ask about school based anxiety

- What are you worried about?
- Where and when does it occur?
  - Just before school? The night before? Morning? Bus? Group work, w/ certain students?
  - Before, during and/or after test?
- How frequent and intense is the anxiety?
- What does it look like?
  - Thoughts, Feelings, Behavioral symptoms,
  - Panic, Somatic, OCD?
- How long does it last?

Questions cont...

- How often does it occur? How disruptive is it?
- How does it affect school performance?
- How have you coped with it? Have those strategies helped?
- Did anyone tease you or bother you?

Strategies for School Anxiety - Relaxation

- Relaxation strategies for mild-moderate
- Deep Breathing: (practice, practice, practice...)
  - Breathe in for 5 seconds, hold for 2 seconds, breathe out for 5 seconds
  - Continue breathing until you feel your body relax (1-10 minutes)
  - Breathe through your stomach, making it rise and fall with each breath
- A meditative version:
  - Take deep breaths while slowly counting to 10. Each breath in is an odd number (1,3,5,7,9) and each breath out is an even number (2,4,6,8,10)
  - Try to keep your mind focused only on numbers & breathing

Strategies for School Anxiety - Relaxation

- Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)
  - Progressive muscle relaxation involves tensing and relaxing the muscles throughout your body.
    - Tense and hold muscles for 5-8 seconds then release muscles and feel your muscles relaxed for several seconds.
    - Start at the bottom of your body and move up your body.
    - Order for tensing/relaxing: Toes, Legs, Stomach, Back, Shoulders, Arms/Hands, Jaw, Nose, Eyes
  - You can use a script and audio (youtube/CD/MP3) to help guide you.
  - While performing you can tense and relax muscles that others can’t see very well (toes, hands, stomach, mouth).

Strategies for School Anxiety - Relaxation

- Deep Breathing/PMR/Visualization combination:
  - It is helpful to combine deep breathing, muscle relaxation and visualizing yourself in a relaxing place (beach, countryside, etc...): youtube video or mp3 for this
**Strategies for School Anxiety - Thought Challenging**

- Identify automatic worry thoughts?
- How they make you feel, and behavior?
- Challenge them: What is worst case, best case, most realistic case scenario?
- Coping thoughts: I can handle this, this will pass.

**Strategies for for test anxiety**

- Focus only on what student can control:
- Before test: Preparing/studying
- During test: Give best effort
- After test: focus on positives and ways to improve, don’t dwell on negative
- Decrease pressure on student to get a “perfect” score (particularly if it is highly unlikely)
- Practice and use relaxation techniques

**Comments Questions?**

- Thank you

**Contact information**
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**Resources -**