

Tiered Response to School Refusal

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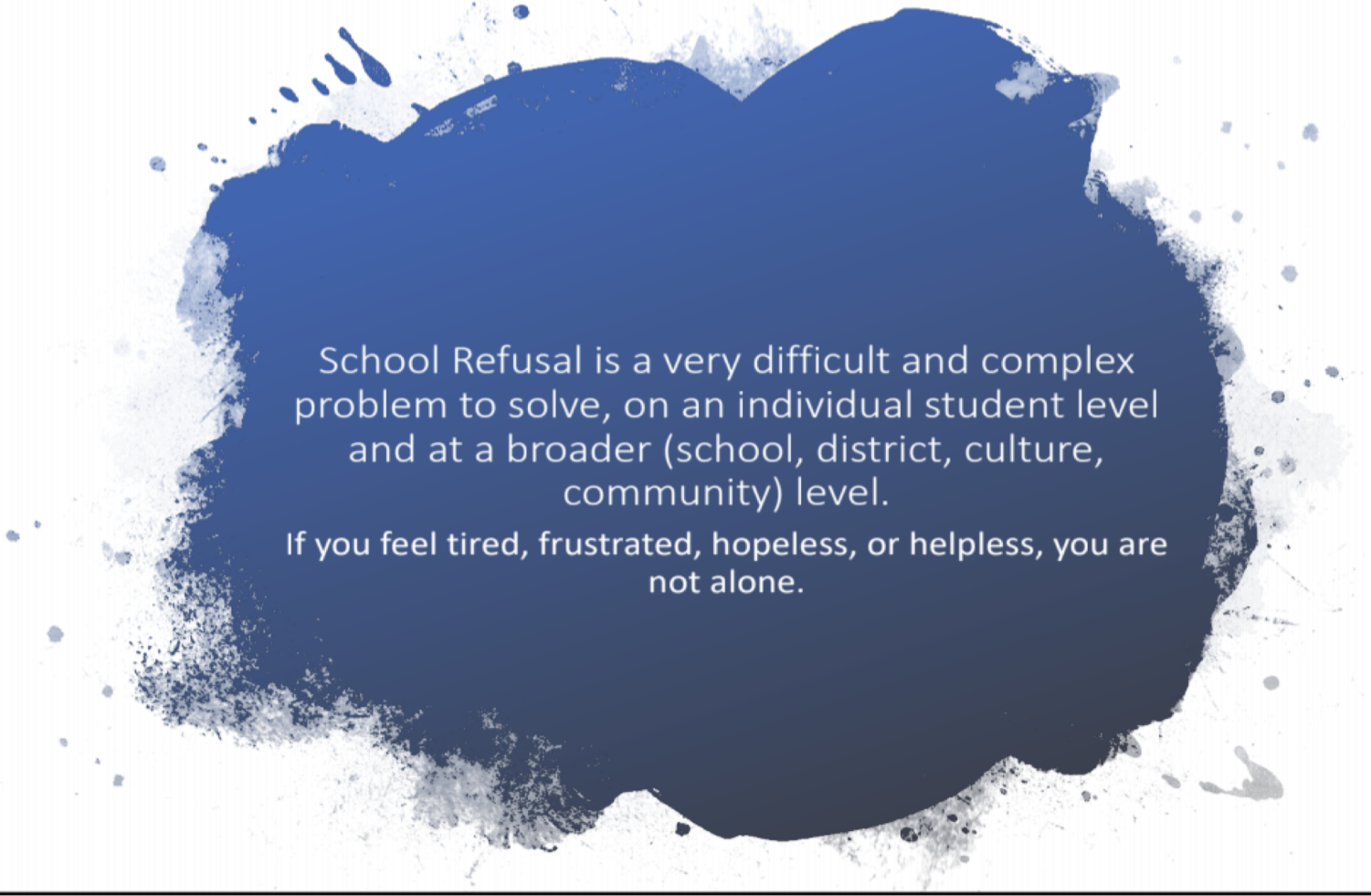
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Agenda

- Triangle of Support
- What is School Refusal Behavior
- Anxiety
- The 4 Functions of School Refusal Behavior
- Tier 1, 2 and 3 Strategies
- Family Engagement
- Common Pitfalls
- Defining Success

I DON'T WANT TO GO TO
SCHOOL! I HATE SCHOOL!
I'D RATHER DO *ANYTHING*
THAN GO TO SCHOOL!





School Refusal is a very difficult and complex problem to solve, on an individual student level and at a broader (school, district, culture, community) level.

If you feel tired, frustrated, hopeless, or helpless, you are not alone.

~Brooks/Powers Group

Support Team

SCHOOL

RELATIONSHIP

RELATIONSHIP



STUDENT

COMMUNITY
SUPPORTS/ M.H.
PROVIDER/MENTOR
CAREGIVER SUPPORT

RELATIONSHIP

FAMILY/
FAMILIES

So what are we talking about?



School Refusal Behavior substantial child-motivated refusal to attend school and/or difficulties remaining in class for an entire day

Refusal behavior is on a continuum and describes students who...

- miss school continuously, absent all the time
- attend school initially but leave during the school day
- go to school following crying, tantrums, other intense behaviors
- have atypical distress during day and plead with caregiver for future absences

Warning signs of refusal behavior...

Frequent unexcused absences

Frequent excused absences (though not clustered and usually with physical symptom excuses-cold, headache, stomachache)

Frequent tardiness

Absences on significant days (tests, performances, timed runs in PE)

Frequent requests to see the nurse

Frequent requests to call home or go home

May start with skipping a class, arriving late and then skipping school

IT'S NOT FAIR!



Different degrees of refusal

Initial refusal: may resolve without intervention

Substantial refusal: minimum of two weeks

Acute refusal: usually a consistent issue lasting between two weeks to one year

Chronic refusal: interferes with two or more school years

Anxiety

- Doubling of hospital admissions for suicidal teenagers over the last 10 years, with the highest rates occurring soon after they return to school each fall
- It's estimated that nearly $\frac{2}{3}$ of students who are refusing school have an underlying anxiety disorder

“Research shows once anxiety becomes problematic, most kids do not grow out of it on their own. Left untreated, anxiety can result in problematic long-term consequences that impact academic achievement, employment, substance use, and development of additional psychological disorders, such as depression.”

Four main functions of school refusing behaviors

1. Refusing school to avoid school related situations (bullying or a phobia)
2. Refusing school to escape aversive social and/or evaluative situations (performance anxiety, social anxiety, undiagnosed learning disorder)
3. Refusing school to gain attention from parents and others
4. Refusing school to pursue tangible rewards outside of school (sleep late, video games...)

Avoid and Escape (functions 1&2)

Typically observed behaviors...(can be internalizing or externalizing)

- Excessive crying or tearfulness
- Vague physical complaints such as a stomachache, headaches and feeling tired
- Feigned illness to be sent to the nurse
- Irritability, general anxiety or nervousness
- Fatigue
- Disruptive behavior and/or non compliance to be sent home
- Ongoing pleas to parents to homeschool
- Reassurance seeking and clinging
- Ongoing verbal statements about “hating” school
- Withdrawal from peers and teachers
- Difficulty with interactions with others and performance before others, such as PE class, music and math class.
- Frequent requests for schedule changes, homework exceptions



Attention and Rewards (function 3&4)

- Refusing school for caregiver attention typically in younger students, 5-10
 - Behaviors include non compliance and defiance, tantrums, manipulative and oppositional behaviors, stubbornness and resistance and guilt inducing behaviors.
 - Physical includes headaches and stomachaches
 - Intense morning misbehaviors
 - Chronic tardiness
 - Some force their parents to stay home or take them to work
-
- Refusing school for tangible rewards typically in older students, 11-17 yrs
 - Exhibit many of the behaviors above but would prefer caregivers to be out of the house
 - May start to skip a class or half a day
 - Likely continues to be social with friends but not engaged in class/academics



Tier 1 Strategies

Researchers have found SCHOOL CLIMATE to be significantly related to school attendance and lower school dropout.

If a school has a significant population of these students, special attention should be paid to SCHOOL CLIMATE.



SCHOOL CLIMATE - generally refers to a student feelings of connectedness to their school and degree of support a student feels for academic and other needs

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Tier 2 Strategies

For students with substantial (2 weeks) to acute (up to one year) school refusal

Schedule an **initial meeting** with caregiver, student and school staff.

Purpose of initial meeting is to gather information and establish family/school agreements

- Conduct assessments (when possible)
- Create agreements
- Provide referrals

Information gathering...

Data to examine:

Student academic history (state test scores, grades)

Student attendance and discipline history

Behavior in class and at school (seek teacher input)

Ask Family about: Night and morning routines

Behavior at home (night vs morning, weekday vs weekend)

Activities at home when student refuses school

School Refusal Assessment Scale (SRAS)

Please circle the answer that best fits the following questions:

1. How often do you have bad feelings about going to school because you are afraid of something related to school (for example, tests, school bus, teacher, fire alarm)?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

2. How often do you stay away from school because it is hard to speak with the other kids at school?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

3. How often do you feel you would rather be with your parents than go to school?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

4. When you are not in school during the week (Monday to Friday), how often do you leave the house and do something fun?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

5. How often do you stay away from school because you will feel sad or depressed if you go?

24. Would you rather be doing fun things outside of school more than most kids your age?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

Do not write below this line

1. _____	2. _____	3. _____	4. _____
5. _____	6. _____	7. _____	8. _____
9. _____	10. _____	11. _____	12. _____
13. _____	14. _____	15. _____	16. _____
17. _____	18. _____	19. _____	20. _____
21. _____	22. _____	23. _____	24. _____

Total
Score = _____

Mean
Score = _____

Relative
Ranking
= _____

Agreements



Agreements

Attendance

Schedule - share school-based agreements with all teachers and staff

Homework

Home Routines

Electronics

Rewards/Consequences

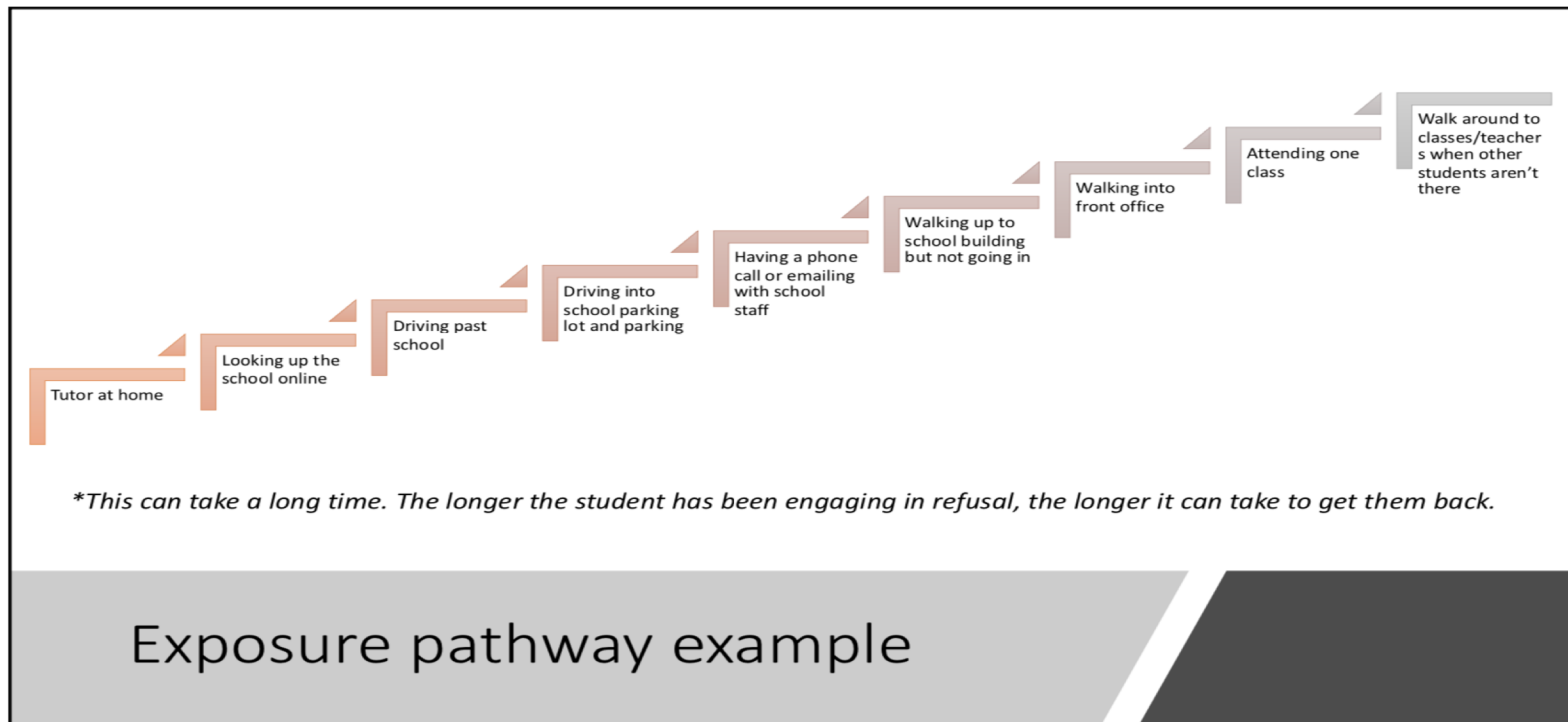
6 "C"s - Car, Cash, Clothes, Curfew, Cell phone, Computer

Crisis/Safety plan

Suggestions to Families

- **Make home boring** - if a student chooses to stay home and not follow attendance plan, home should be boring so you're not reinforcing staying at home. This means no access to screens, games, phones, internet, friends.
- If safety concerns, access crisis plan.
- Consider removing bedroom door.
- Continue with caregiver routines as much as possible (e.g. leave for work on time, leave house for errands/commitments as planned)
- Maintain family routines with regular bedtimes (sleep hygiene!), meals and other activities
- Communicate with the school
- Do not excuse absences when they are a result of school refusal
- Beware of over-accommodating.
- Maintain student's access to structured positive peer activities outside school hours (vs unstructured)
- Schedule intentional, consistent, "fun family time"
- Access community resources!
- Consider creating "scripts" or "contracts" with child, with support from outsider provider
- Develop exposure plan **with outside provider, with support from provider.**

Exposure plan



Brooks Power Group

Referrals

Start with Pediatrician/Family Doctor

Counseling

Mentoring

Caregiver Support

Progress Monitoring

Schedule a series of follow up meetings to

- Monitor progress

- Refine agreements/contracts (incorporate assessment results)

- Ask about referrals (and ask for ROIs)

Recommend weekly contact with family

- Electronic/Phone call ok but in person better

- If mostly electronic follow ups strive for monthly in person meeting

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Things to consider in subsequent meetings

SST (or school's system for determining eligibility for evaluation for 504/IEP)

504/IEP review

- may be required depending on how many days absent already

- Determine if qualifying area of 504/IEP is source of refusal behavior

- Determine if 504/IEP adequately meets needs of student or requires amendments

Crisis services

- If student behavior at home is unsafe to self or family

- Remind family to take EVERY statement of self harm or suicide seriously--even if belief is that the statement is made to manipulate

- Call doctor, call therapist, call crisis line/team

Tier 3

**For students with acute (up to one year) to chronic (two or more years) refusal
Truancy**

can be an effective step in addressing school refusing behavior, but should be used intentionally and cautiously

can be a tool to support engagement with community resources

Hospitalization

Alternative Placement

High School Completion Program

Common pitfalls

Not having everyone on the same page
community resources!

Lack of

Sticking with the same plan when it's not immediately working

Lack of school resources!

Inconsistent follow up or follow through (school and/or family)

Rushing the timeline

Allowing the child (or separated households) to triangulate
success

Using grades as a sign of

Over-accommodating (school and/or family)
impacting family

Crisis and hardships

Expecting there to be a quick turn around or complete fix
(sch/fam)

Availability for action

Defining success...

Success is any positive movement towards addressing avoidance behavior

Success is

- **Improved relationships** with parents, teachers and peers
- Engaging in mental health or any other community supports
- Engaging in techniques to change maladaptive behavior. (DBT, CBT, breathing techniques, muscle relaxation, sleep hygiene)

Celebrate progress! Progress might be entering the school building and reading in the office for 20 minutes for the first week. Celebrate the successes no matter how small!

Success is not....an immediate return to a full school schedule- this is rarely realistic.



Resources and citations

Christopher Kearney research and books on School Refusing Behaviors

Brooks Powers Group

School Refusal assessment: <https://www.oxfordclinicalpsych.com/view/10.1093/med-psych/9780190662059.001.0001/med-9780190662059-appendix-2>

KUOW anxiety series: <https://www.kuow.org/series/anxiety>

Seattle Children's Hospital school refusal

<https://pulse.seattlechildrens.org/annie-faces-her-fears-and-conquers-her-anxiety/>

<https://www.seattlechildrens.org/globalassets/documents/for-patients-and-families/pfe/pe1492.pdf>

School Climate Family Friendly Walkthrough:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Pb13Fpu5ggJrWtOqTSX2bjYUzQdJAtrN/view?usp=sharing>