

Understanding and Dealing with Children who Avoid School: A Cognitive-Behavioral Approach

Meir Flanbaum, PsyD
Licensed Psychologist
Center for Cognitive Behavior Therapy
(732) 994-3456
meir@CenterForCBT.org
www.CenterForCBT.org

Clinical Assistant Professor
Coordinator, Cognitive Behavior Therapy Training
Department of Child Psychiatry
Rutgers – Robert Wood Johnson Medical School

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Overview

- Overview of school refusal behavior
- Understanding children who refuse to attend
- Addressing anxiety-based school refusal
- General accommodations to consider



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The problem

- Jon is 11 years old
- Each morning, he complains of stomach pain and says he does not want to go to school
- When Jon does go to school, he is anxious about failing and uncomfortable around others; he sweats and his heart beats quickly
- Jon is behind on his work and extremely worried about how he will ever catch up
- Jon would like to go to school but he just can't seem to get himself there



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What's in a name?

- School Refusal: Poorly named, but well defined
 - Child-motivated absenteeism from school
 - Chronic tardiness or leaving school early
 - Tantrums/complaints before finally going to school
 - Extreme distress when at school
- An umbrella term for chronic absenteeism
 - School phobia, separation anxiety, and truancy
- Not a formal diagnosis

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Absenteeism is only the tip of the iceberg
Prevalence of psychiatric diagnoses among youth with school attendance problems

Disorder	%
No diagnosis	32.9
Separation anxiety disorder	22.4
Generalized anxiety disorder	10.5
Oppositional defiant disorder	8.4
Major depression	4.9
Specific phobia	4.2
Social anxiety disorder	3.5
Conduct disorder	2.8

Kearney and Albano, 2004

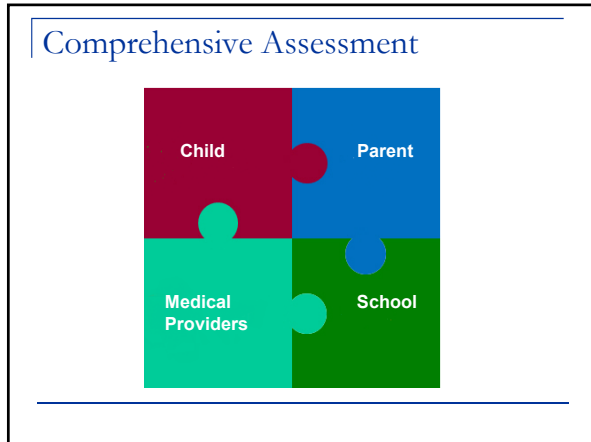
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Why target school refusal?

- Short term consequences
 - Poor academic performance
 - Impaired social development
 - Depression and suicide ideation
- Long term consequences
 - Criminal behavior
 - Marital problems and social isolation
 - Difficulty maintaining employment
 - Psychiatric problems

Kearney & Tollotson, 1998; Kearney, 2006

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- ### Clinical Interviews
- Student's interests and goals
 - Differential diagnosis interview, especially anxiety disorders, depression, suicide
 - Home environment, including parent attitude, discipline style, and stressors
 - School view of the challenging behaviors
 - Understand nature of school avoidance and possible legitimate factors that may contribute to it (e.g., medical condition)

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- ### Questionnaires
- School Refusal Assessment Scale – Revised; parent and child versions
 - Screen for Child Anxiety Related Disorders (SCARED); parent and child versions
 - Child Depression Inventory (CDI)

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Getting to the root of the problem

Access	Avoidance
Tangible rewards: Sleeping late, TV, friends, delinquency, substance use	Objects or people: Alarms, playgrounds, crowded hallways, buses, teachers, peers,
Attention from parents or significant other: non-compliance, tantrums, clinging	Performance/evaluative situations: tests, recitals, public speaking

Understanding what maintains school refusal is the key to its effective treatment

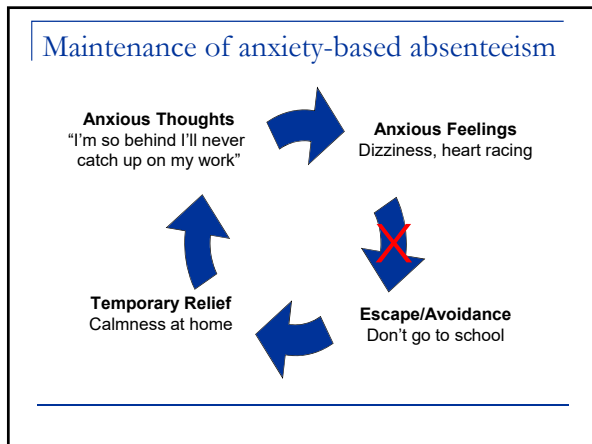
Kearney & Albano, 2007

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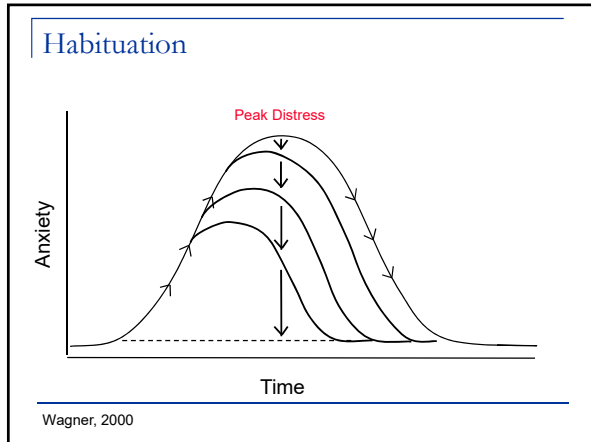
Reasons for School Refusal: Trends

- Children ages 5-11
 - Avoid objects/people that evoke negative affect
 - Receive attention
- Children ages 12-17
 - Escape social or evaluative situations
 - Obtain tangible rewards

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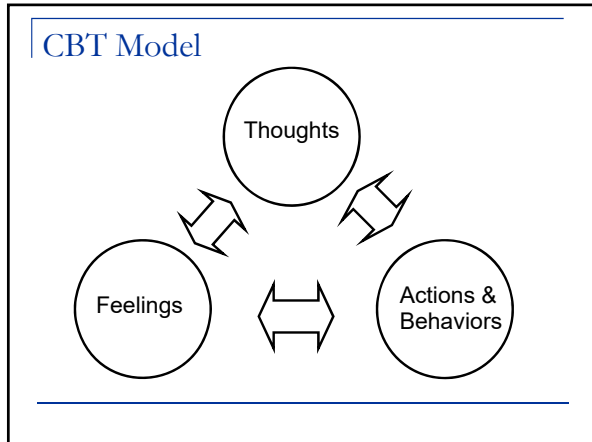
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- ### Strategies for parents, teachers & counselors
- Externalize
 - Separate the child from his behavior
 - Avoid "blaming" the child or assuming manipulation
 - Empathize
 - Listen and acknowledge
 - Label triggers, thoughts, and feelings
 - Encourage
 - Cheerlead and provide labeled praise
 - Problem solve with the child
 - Prompt use of coping strategies
 - Don't enable avoidance or be overly reassuring

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- ### Typical interventions for children
- Anxiety education
 - Cycle of anxiety and the 'false alarm'
 - Thoughts-Feelings-Actions education
 - What we think impacts how we feel
 - Cognitive restructuring
 - Is this a 'false alarm'? Thought challenging and coping talk
 - Relaxation training
 - Can be helpful, or problematic if not used correctly
 - Problem solving
 - What can I say or do to make the situation less fearful?
 - Creating a fear hierarchy/bravery mountain
 - Graded exposure/practice
 - Contingency management

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The Fear Plan

- F**eeling frightened?
- E**xpecting bad things to happen?
- A**ttitudes and actions to help
- R**eview and Reward

Kendall & Hedtke, 2006

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School Accommodations to consider

- Teacher education about school refusal
- Increased developmentally appropriate labeled praise
- Prompting use of coping strategies
- "Break pass" to speak with trusted adult or counselor
- Call home
- Additional time in preferred activity (e.g., club)
- Jobs around the school (e.g., library or computer room)
- Modified assignments or testing conditions
- Modified schedule (e.g., attend only certain classes)
- Alternative classroom setting

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A comment about accommodations

- Determined based on what is maintaining the school refusal behavior
- Are viewed as temporary and should be faded with progress

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School-Family Partnership

- Assessment and plan creation with joint input
- Communicate on a regular basis
 - Jointly develop and regularly review the hierarchy, use of coping skills, and progress with exposure
 - Avoid blaming language
- Work together to decrease parent factors that are maintaining school avoidance
- Praise successes
- Determine reasonable and appropriate accommodations (Consider 504 or IEP)
- As needed, collaborate with an outside expert in school avoidance to assist in assessment and treatment

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Center for Cognitive Behavior Therapy

- **Expertise in the following clinical areas:**
 - Tics and Tourette syndrome
 - Trichotillomania and skin picking
 - Anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorders
 - Attention deficit hyperactivity and disruptive behavior disorders
 - Depression, cutting, suicide, and mood dysregulation
- **Clinical and consultation services include:**
 - Cognitive behavior therapy for children and adolescents
 - Behavioral parent coaching and support
 - School-based consultation and behavior plan development
 - Workshops for parents, educators, and mental health professionals
- **To make a referral, schedule an in-service, or learn more:**
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