

Collaborating with Caregivers to Address School Refusal Behavior



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Learning Objectives

This presentation will help participants...

- Apply a culturally competent consultation framework to enhance caregiver support and school engagement
- Design a Caregiver Action Plan to improve student attendance outcomes and school engagement
- Develop skills to educate caregivers on key concepts related to school refusal behavior

General Understandings

- **Chronic absenteeism:** Missing 10% or more of school
 - Nearly doubled from 16% (pre-pandemic) to nearly 30% by 2021-2022
 - Students of color and students with disabilities are disproportionately affected
 - Burton et al. (2014) revealed sexual minority youth reported more excused/unexcused absences and more depression/anxiety symptoms than heterosexual youth
- **School refusal behavior:** Child motivated refusal to attend school and/or difficulty remaining in classes for an entire day
 - Most common when entering middle school (ages 10 to 13)
 - Occurs on a spectrum

(Attendance Works, 2024a; Chang et al., 2024; Kearney, 2018)

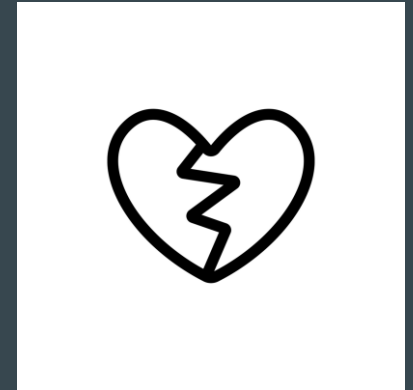
Families with children displaying school refusal behavior often experience...



Disrupted routines



Stress, frustration,
and hopelessness



Strained relationships

(Kearney, 2021)

Improving Outcomes Through Collaboration

- Collaborative, team-based approach (caregivers, school staff, and mental health professionals working together)
- Early intervention and close working relationship
- An evidence-based intervention may not be enough - need a unified front
- Uncover underlying issues that drive the behavior
- Implement a plan at home and at school
- Structured guidance and consistent support



(Attendance Works, 2024b; Unconditional Education, n.d.; Wallace, n.d.)

A Consultation Refresher

1. Entry and Relationship Building
2. Problem Identification
3. Problem Analysis and Goal Setting
4. Intervention Planning and Implementation
5. Monitor and Evaluation
6. Follow Up and Continuity

Warning Signs for Caregivers

- Attending after a “negotiation” or interfering behaviors in the morning
- Refusing to get ready for school
- “Sunday” questions and statements to “set up” an absence
- Somatic complaints (ex. Headaches, stomachaches)
- Feigning illnesses to miss school
- Calling or texting caregiver during the school day
- Increased irritability, clinginess, or emotional withdrawal
- Engaging in behaviors to get sent home

(Kearney, 2018; School Avoidance Alliance, 2025b; Wimmer, 2008)

Barriers

- Transportation
- Technology
- Family responsibilities
- Food/housing insecurity
- Trauma
- Chronic Illness

Aversion

- Academic struggles
- Anxiety
- Social challenges
- Undiagnosed disability
- Unwelcoming climate
- Bias in discipline practices

Root Causes to Consider

Disengagement

- Bored
- Loss of credits
- Lack of meaningful relationships
- No enrichment
- Employment conflicts

Misconceptions

- Only an issue if unexcused
- Suspensions don't count
- A few days won't matter
- Losing track of absences
- Stay home for any illness



Tier 3 - Individualized Interventions for Chronic Absences
Make caregivers integral members of the intervention team.

Ex. Regular team meetings to review progress, formalize plan in writing that includes scheduled follow-ups, coordination with external providers, frequent contact and collaboration

Tier 2 - Targeted Intervention for At-Risk Students

Increase direct collaboration with caregivers of students showing emerging or mild school refusal.

Ex. Invite to a problem-solving meeting, offer a workshop on managing anxiety at home, student-specific support plan with daily check-in messages, have a point person at school

Tier 1 - Promote Regular Attendance for All Students

Engage all caregivers in fostering pro-attendance culture.

Ex. Welcoming school environment, positive relationships with families, provide all families with accessible and culturally appropriate resources about how to support attendance, have systems that reinforce attendance

What's the function?

Assessment Methods

| | |
|----------|--------------|
| R | Records |
| I | Interviews |
| O | Observations |
| T | Testing |

- Records review
- Interviews with child, caregiver, school staff
 - What strategies have already been tried?
- Daily attendance monitoring
- Direct observations of the behavior
 - May start at home
- Rating scales and questionnaires
 - School Refusal Assessment Scale - R
 - Functional Analysis/Assessment Screening Tool (FAST)
- Formal evaluation

Four Functional Profiles



Negative Reinforcement

Avoid/escape something aversive

- #1 **Avoid** general school related stress
- #2 **Escape** aversive social and/or evaluative situation



Positive Reinforcement

Pursue something

- #3 **Pursue** attention from significant others
- #4 **Pursue** tangible rewards outside of school

(Kearney, 2018)

Function #1: Avoid general school-related stress



- Typically age 5-10
- Distress related to something at school, but may not be able to explain it due to developmental level
- Difficulty with transitions, but may be okay once at school
- Fear is not related to a legitimate threat
- Physical
 - Shaking, stomach/headache, tension
- Cognitive
 - Asking questions or making negative statements about school
- Behavioral
 - Crying, tantruming, irritability, distractibility

Function #2: Escape aversive social/evaluative situation



- Typically age 11+
- May be similar pattern to function #1, but child is more cognitively advanced so they may be able to explain why they are struggling
- May skip only certain classes or days
- Anxious while at school
- Low self-esteem, perfectionism
- Social
 - Assemblies, asking for help, making plans with peers, group work
- Performance
 - Being called on, eating, test-taking, chorus, PE, driver's ed

Strategies for Caregivers: Functions #1 #2 Avoid/Escape



- Education about patterns of distress → recognize the behavior, intervene early
- Monitor their own distress
- Ample positive reinforcement for desired behavior
- Provide reassurance once, then focus on school preparation
- Do not promise extra things by attending, make it an expectation
- Refrain from using invalidating statements (Ex. “There’s nothing to worry about”)
- Determine when it’s okay to stay home (Ex. fever of 100+, bleeding, lice, etc.)
- Restructure routines to promote attendance
- Social and emotional strategies/therapeutic intervention
 - Ex. STOP, FEAR and SUDs models
 - Breathing and grounding techniques
- Do not go immediately home if child will not go in the building

(Kearney, 2018, 2021; St. Joseph’s et al., 2022)

Strategies for Caregivers: Functions #1 & #2 Avoid/Escape

Considerations for middle/high school students:

- Challenge distressing thoughts and encourage child to think realistically
 - This only works if there is a good relationship, child is doing well in school, is motivated to improve, and there's no legitimate threat
- Normalize mistakes
- Preparation to reduce anxiety
 - Presentations
 - Studying
 - Practicing asking the teacher questions



Function #3: Pursue attention from significant others

- Typically age 5-10
- May attend if the caregiver goes with them
- Not as anxious about being in school
- May miss the whole day or be tardy due to a “battle” before school
- May get in trouble to be sent home
- Seeking attention with no legitimate threat
- Physical
 - Stomach/headaches
- Behavior
 - Oppositional, noncompliant, tantrum, call/text to get picked up, get ready for school and then resist at the end or resist altogether

(Kearney, 2018)



Strategies for Caregivers: Function #3 Pursue Attention

- Evening and morning routines that allow more time than needed for each step
 - Positive praise for each step
 - Adjust the routine if they are having difficulty
- Schedule specific times for questions about school
- Ignore/downplay interfering behavior while reinforcing desired behavior
- Restructure directives
 - Neutral, calm, and matter-of-fact tone
 - Direct eye contact, make sure you have their attention
 - Short and direct - Tell them exactly what you want them to do
- Consistent reward/consequence system
 - Consider reward of a fun activity together
- Establish a school drop off routine - minimal dialogue to avoid negotiation
- Respond only once to calls/texts - have a system to handle this



Function #4: Pursue something tangible outside of school

- Typically age 11+
- Not necessarily anxious about being in school
- May be bored at school
- Accessing something outside of the school or class setting
 - Gaming, smartphone
 - Socialization
 - Risky activities
- May have excessive conflict at home



Strategies for Caregivers: Function #4 Pursue Tangibles

- Increased supervision and attendance monitoring
 - Escort from class to class if necessary
 - Find out where the child is likely to go so they can be found asap
- Frequent home-school communication regarding attendance
- Written and signed agreements for chores, attendance, etc
- Attendance log signed by the teacher
- Build in rewards at smaller intervals
 - Contingency planning: If the child stays home, do not provide access
- Help solve technology issues
 - Ex. Removing wifi/cellular access
- Healthy sleep strategies
- Provide suggestions for what the child can say if they are pressured to skip

School refusal behavior
can be maintained by
multiple functions.

#2, #3

Winnie was very anxious
when her mother could not
pick her up after school as
planned due to a work
emergency and she had to
take the bus home.

Winnie has anxiety due to
recent events in the news.
She gets nervous when she
is separated from mom.

#2

When she stays home,
Winnie has attention from
mom and access to comfort
items (bed, snacks, videos,
and games).

#3, #4

A Collaborative Approach

Educating Families

Education empowers families, increases investment, and reduces anxiety.

- **Why** is the behavior occurring?
 - Explain the underlying causes of the behavior
 - Frame the behavior based on functions to foster a problem-solving mindset
- **How** do we plan to help?
 - Reassure that there are evidence-based interventions
 - Explain how this might look (ex. Gradual exposure, relaxation techniques)
- **What** can we expect?
 - Set realistic expectations and short-term goals
 - The process may be gradual and you might see an increase of behaviors at first

Building Trust and Rapport

- Many caregivers feel judged or blamed → may withdraw from the process
- Empathetic and non judgemental
- Active listening
- Validate concerns
- Focus on collaboration and respect
- Emphasize shared goals
- Acknowledge caregiver's efforts and strengths
- Consistency

Examples

| | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Validation | “I know you’ve been doing everything you can to stay on track and help Winnie. Your insights are so helpful.” |
| Positive communication | “I saw that Winnie made it to school on the bus today. Great work!” |
| No blame | <p><i>Instead of..</i> “You can’t keep her home every time she says she’s worried.”</p> <p><i>Try...</i> “I understand you could tell that her anxiety was very high and you wanted to support her. Let’s review our strategies together for managing the anxiety in the morning.”</p> |
| Shared goals | “We are going to work together to help support Winnie in meeting her goal of attending three days this week.” |

Motivational Interviewing (MI)

- Helps build engagement for caregivers who are perceived as resistant, ambivalent, or seem “stuck”
- Helps the caregiver feel heard and respected by:
 - Asking open-ended questions - “What do you feel would help your child get to school?”
 - Affirming their efforts
 - Reflecting on/restating their feelings
 - Summarizing points
- Collaborative tone with shared goals
 - “Let’s work together on this.”
 - “We share the same goal of..”
- Lowers defensiveness

Maintaining a Shared Vision

Collaborative Goal Setting

Set goals with the team, caregivers, and child. Be specific and realistic.

Ex: “Winnie will attend at least 6 periods per day for one week.”

Unified Expectations

Present as a united front where all adults communicate the same expectations.

Ex. If one person tells a child they can stay home, but another says they must attend, the message is unclear.

Consistent Responses

Regular communication with home helps everyone stick to the plan and increases consistency across settings.

Ex. If a child needs to check-in with SP before contacting home, reinforce this at home.

The Importance of Culture

- When identity is respected, families are more likely to engage
- Culture may impact views on education, attendance, or mental health
 - Worrying about child's future
- Ask questions to learn about culture and adapt accordingly
 - “Is there anything about your family's cultural or religious practices that you think is important for us to consider as we make this plan?”
- Build rapport through culturally responsive communication
 - Use an interpreter and translate materials
 - Communication norms: body language, formality, family decision-makers
- Leverage cultural strengths in the intervention
 - Community engagement
 - Faith leaders

Intervention for School Anxiety and Absenteeism in Children (ISAAC) Model

| ISAAC Model | |
|-----------------|---|
| Module 1 | Self-care strategies for parent wellbeing and self-efficacy |
| Module 2 | Learn strategies for responding to child's distress |
| Module 3 | Guidance on effective communication with the school |

- Parent focused program for emotionally-based school avoidance (EBSA)
- 3 modules over 3 weeks
- Psychoeducational videos, self-completed tasks, and coaching
- Feasibility (ages 5-11) study: Early promise for families affected by emerging ESBA
 - Small to moderate reductions in school avoidance behaviors, anxiety, and accommodating behaviors
 - Appreciated coaching

Caregiver Considerations

Caregiver Mental Health

- Recognize that caregivers may feel high stress, anxiety, frustration, guilt, hopelessness, etc.
 - Connect them with resources (ex. Support groups)
- Educate caregivers on the impact of emotions and behaviors
 - Alternative responses for accommodating behaviors
- Boost caregiver efficacy through skills training
 - Stress management techniques

Attendance-Friendly Homes

- Establish consistent evening/morning schedules and predictable routines
 - Checklists
 - Pick out clothes and prep items the night before
 - Pleasant morning activity but still geared toward getting to school
- Remove unintended rewards for staying home
 - Home should be boring during school hours
- Positively reinforce school attendance
 - Verbal praise
 - Small reward after school
- Set clear boundaries
 - Not allowing to stay home unless ill
 - Firm but supportive

Weekends, Breaks, and Transitions

- Plan a fun activity Sunday afternoon and keep Sunday evening quiet
- Help their child focus only on Monday and not the whole week
- Praise Monday attendance and plan a small treat Monday night
- Positive reinforcement for meeting goals at the end of the week
- Structured activities during school breaks
- Start the morning routine a few days before a break ends and 1 to 2 weeks before a new school year
- Attend orientation sessions or ask for a tour
- Know the transportation plan
- Allow for flexibility in caregiver schedule on the first day of school

Caregiver Action Plan

Caregiver Action Plans → Quick Guide For “In the Moment” Use

- The Caregiver Action Plan is a living document that can change
- Include components and use a format that works for all involved
- Components to consider
 - School staff contact info - Who is the point person?
 - Goal
 - Contingency
 - Routine checklists/timeline
 - Transportation plan
 - Important/general strategies
 - De-escalation strategies or grounding techniques

Considerations for Development

- Every plan looks different!
- Evening and morning checklists/timelines
 - A checklist or schedule may not make sense for everyone
 - May need different schedules depending on the day
 - Consider clothing, breakfast planning, hygiene
- Transportation plan
 - Bus time, drop off reminders
- Strategies section
 - What are the main points to remember for implementation
 - Start with a few strategies and add more once there has been success
 - Language recommendations, reminders for reinforcement, data collection info

Caregiver Action Plans → Supportive Resources

- Full intervention plan
- Schedule for follow-up meetings
- Reminders for school breaks
- Contact information for school staff (ex. Nurse, administrator, teachers, attendance office, etc)
- Contact information for private providers
- 24/7 crisis resources
- Information for support groups and parent training

Sample Caregiver Actions Plan



Maintaining Ongoing Collaboration

- Schedule periodic check-ins to monitor progress
 - Formal or informal (phone call, email)
 - Encourage caregivers to reach out if they have questions
- Anticipate and normalize setbacks
 - Be upfront about this with families
 - Talk through setbacks to see if something changed
- Adapt the plan if needed, but do so with the caregiver
 - Adjust if the student made progress
 - Convey that the team is not going to give up on the child
- Sustain communication for a period of time even after the students has re-engaged successfully

Considerations for Home Visits

- Personal safety
- Effective and respectful communication
- Proper documentation
- Follow-up procedures and timelines
- Cultural considerations
- Legal and ethical considerations
- District policies and procedures
- [Sample home visit documentation form](#)
- [LEAP Model](#)



(School Avoidance Alliance, 2025a)

Summary of Ideas to Support Various Parenting Styles

- Maintain collaborative and frequent contact
 - Emphasize a non-defensive approach that is focused on the future
 - Face-to-face contact at school or at home
- Work with other professionals that the family is involved with
- Provide options when appropriate
 - Ex. IEP/504, vocational settings, alternative ed, summer school, credit recovery
- Feasible and clear interventions
- Consider potential barriers and the initial increase of behaviors
- Social support networks and resources
- Consider private mental health referrals first
- Use the legal system as a last resort

Teamwork is more than a strategy... it's the bridge that connects students to school.

Thank you!

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