

## SCHOOL RELUCTANCE

### What is it and why does it happen?

School refusal/reluctance behaviour refers to child-led behaviour in children or young people who refuse regularly to attend school, showing one or a combination of the following:

- Completely and illicitly miss school
- Attend school but leave during the course of the day
- Attend school only following severe behaviour problems in the morning
- Attend school under great duress and plead with parents/carers not to go.

Related terms include truancy, school phobia, or school anxiety.

We use the term 'school reluctance' to cover all of the above.

Research by Kearney (2004) analysed the functions of school refusal behaviour and found that there are four broad categories of school refusal behaviour. The first two functional conditions refer to young people who refuse school for negative reinforcement (factors making them not want to go in), whereas the latter two functional conditions refer to young people who refuse school for positive reinforcement (factors making them want to stay away). Of course, some people refuse school for multiple reasons as well:

- a. **Avoid school-related stimuli that provoke a general sense of negative affectivity** (i.e., anxiety and depression);
- b. **Escape school-related aversive social and/or evaluative situations;** (social anxiety, avoidance of humiliation, situations, including performance, public presentations, test taking, class participation, being called on, social interactions etc. Stereotype threat)
- c. **Gain attention from significant others (e.g., parents);**
- d. **Pursue tangible reinforcement outside of school** (e.g., shopping, playing with friends, time with romantic partner or drug use).

The reasons for school refusal behaviours are important to understand in order to inform strategies that are likely to be more or less effective.

Thambirajah (2008) explains that the child or young person may also display defensive aggression as a means of trying to control a situation that feels 'out-of-control'. Typically this might be directed towards a parent or carer who is encouraging the child to go into school and may include verbal abuse or physical aggression directed at objects or people. (See Emotionally Based School Refusal Guide, Derbyshire CC.)

Practitioners need to be aware that some pupils presenting with school refusal behaviours appear to function well when they are in school. Likewise, they may happily socialise with friends outside school or attend specific clubs or activities. This can lead school staff and others to question whether a pupil is actually experiencing difficulties and, in turn, can lead to potential misunderstanding with parents who are experiencing significant problems at the beginning or end of the school day.

### What can we do about it?

Initially, the school should follow its own policies and procedures about attendance and pastoral support.

If school staff need advice, they can speak to their educational psychologist (EP). The EPs are happy to advise during a regular school visit, or by email or phone, at a consultative level.

If more intensive advice is needed, staff should use the Early Help process, to make a more formal request for the EP to become involved with the support for the child. This Early Help support is likely to include the following aspects:

- Ensuring that the school monitors the pupil's attendance and truancy from lessons closely, and that, early on in the course of a developing pattern, they consider the reasons why it is happening.
- Using the four causes given above as a useful framework for considering the reasons for school reluctance. Staff will need to pool their knowledge about a pupil, to gain a full picture.
- Making a plan about how to support the pupil towards positive engagement and attendance at school. With the maximum possible collaboration with the student, agreeing strategies to use, and arrangements for implementing these.
- Usually, identifying a key member of staff to support the pupil and to coordinate the planning. This member of staff needs to have a positive relationship with the pupil, and to be made available at appropriate times when they can meet the pupil.
- Through the plan, striving to maintain (and eventually increase) the attendance that the pupil is actually achieving. In acknowledging the difficulty which the pupil is having and the anxiety which they are experiencing, we must try very hard not to encourage avoidance-based strategies (such as signing the pupil off sick and providing education at home). Instead, we need to identify the specific stressors for the child, and put in place measures to reduce these and to support the child to cope more confidently in school. This can be very difficult to do, and is a strong reason why a supportive EH team needs to meet regularly to review and plan.

There is a very helpful booklet from Derbyshire County Council, created by a group of their school and support staff, which contains further information about school reluctance and some materials for use in working with children. A link to this is given below. We thank Derbyshire County Council for permission to reproduce these materials here and to use them in the support of Cumbrian children and young people.

The external links below (which were checked in February 2019) give more information about school reluctance:

- Mind Ed training session which provides an overview of school refusal and anxiety;  
<https://www.minded.org.uk/Component/Details/445670>
- Helpful 'Tips for Schools' when difficulties start to emerge (although some of this has USA rather than UK focus);  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20140211071449/http://www.nasponline.org/families/school>

[refusal.pdf](#)

- Some general 'dos & Don'ts' for parents – again a bit American in style;  
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/when-your-adult-child-breaks-your-heart/201709/understanding-school-refusal>
- Resource for parents here including 'easy read' leaflet for learning/literacy difficulties;  
[https://mindedforfamilies.org.uk/Content/refusal\\_to\\_go\\_to\\_school/course/assets/1bfb4d367729cd39ff979bd1c0e55eacf9a96f7c.pdf](https://mindedforfamilies.org.uk/Content/refusal_to_go_to_school/course/assets/1bfb4d367729cd39ff979bd1c0e55eacf9a96f7c.pdf)
- Autism Specific information here;  
<http://www.autism.org.uk/about/in-education/exclusion/school-refusal-strategies.aspx>