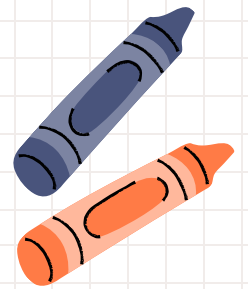


# SCHOOL REFUSAL / PHOBIA

## WHAT IS IT?

- The term 'school refusal' refers to difficulty attending school associated with emotional distress.
- NOTE: unlike truancy (the action of staying away from school without good reason/ absenteeism), or "skipping class", the child doesn't try to conceal their non-attendance
- Many children who experience school refusal say they want to go to school but cannot.
- Somatic symptoms are common in this population : headache, abdo pain, nausea, shakiness, dizziness.
- The difference between school refusal and "truancy" (the action of staying away from school without good reason/ absenteeism), or "skipping class" are:
  - In truancy the child is not anxious about the attendance of school, they conceal their lack of attendance from parents, and they often have a lack of interest in school work.
  - In school refusal the child doesn't try to conceal their non-attendance, and is anxious about the prospect of attending school.



## EPIDEMIOLOGY

- 1-5% of all school children
- Peaks at age 5-7, 11 and 14 yrs
- Sex ratio: M + F

## AETIOLOGY/RISK

- Separation anxiety
- Fearing teacher, test/exam, bully
- Depression
- Oppositional defiant disorder
- Family dysfunction
- Concern about what is happening at home in their absence - e.g. sick parent, sibling, pet

## ASSESSMENT

### HISTORY

- Child- why are they not attending school?
- Family reaction to school refusal
- Predisposing, precipitating, perpetuating factors
- Does the child have: Fear of loss of parent?
- Does the child have excessive fear of school/ teacher/ bully

### Information from the school

- Academic performance
- Social functioning
- Attendance
- + Standardised parent/ teacher behavioural checklist

### PHYSICAL EXAM + IX if relevant

- Especially if presenting with somatic sx



## MANAGEMENT / PREVENTION

- School return
  - Immediately if only brief refusal
  - Gradually if prolonged school absence
- Engage the child to talk about their feelings
- Work with family to create a plan to deal with anxiety
  - Relaxation training
  - Calm morning routine
  - Escort child to school
  - Allow child to stay in contact with parents
- Seek aid from the school to help with transition back to school
- Monitor regularly
- CONSIDER: paediatric or psychiatric referral



## COMPLICATIONS / PROGNOSIS

### SHORT TERM

- Poor academic performance
- Family difficulties
- Worse peer relationships

### LONG TERM

- Academic underachievement
- Employment difficulties
- Increased risk of psychiatric illness

### PROGNOSIS

- Consistent and firm parent input= resolve!
- Poor prognosis if:
  - >2 years since school attendance
  - Occur in adolescence
  - Associated with depression
  - Lower IQ

### References:

- <https://headspace.org.au/explore-topics/supporting-a-young-person/school-refusal/>
- <https://www.racgp.org.au/getattachment/c3e1167c-8547-418d-89f7-cbf45202c20f/200806sewell.pdf>
- <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/kidsfamilies/youth/Documents/forum-speaker-presentations/2017/school-refusal-parent-handout.pdf>
- Monash Gippsland Lecture: Abul Khan Re. Master Class on Child and Adolescent Mental Health 14 May 2020

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