School Refusal: Assessment and Intervention

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Ice Breaker

- What has your experience been working with students with school refusal?
- What are the current polices and procedures for addressing school refusal behavior?
- What obstacles have you faced when trying to increase attendance?
The Perfect Storm

- School-related anxiety triggers were suddenly removed
- Other anxiety triggers may also have been eliminated
- No exposure to anxiety provoking stimuli
- Perceived danger associated with school environment
- Uncertainty with new school routines, safety protocols
Learning Objectives

- Assessing School Refusal – What is the function?
- Anxiety and School Refusal – The Cognitive Behavioral Framework
- Research-based School Refusal Interventions
- The Big “Sticks” – Use of 51A and CRA
Defining School Refusal

- School Refusal vs. Truancy
  - School Refusal – reluctance or outright refusal to attend school characterized by:
    ▪ Seeking comfort of parental figures and home
    ▪ Clear emotional upset when faced with the prospect of attending school
    ▪ Lack of antisocial behavior (may be aggressive as an avoidance strategy)
    ▪ No attempt to conceal problem from parents

  - Truancy – absence from school that is done without parental knowledge
    ▪ Often associated with antisocial conduct – aggressive behavior, drug use
    ▪ Driven by general lack of interest and motivation in education
    ▪ More likely to be associated with poor school achievement
Assessing School Refusal

Risk Factors for School Refusal

- Victim of bullying
- Poor School Climate/Connectedness – less integration in school community
- Rigid disciplinary policies – less use of positive behavior management techniques
- Inadequate attendance management policies – failing to catch it early
- Poor parental involvement
- Increased family conflict and maladaptive relational patterns
Assessing School Refusal

- The School Refusal Assessment Scale
  - A more effective classification of school refusal behavior
  - Based on the function or reason why the child is refusing school
  - Effective tool because it informs intervention

See Resource: School Refusal Assessment Scale, Revised (SRAS-R)
Assessing School Refusal

- Function 1: Avoidance of school related stimuli that provoke negative emotions
  - More typical of young children who struggle to identify their distress
  - May be related to difficulty with transitions, bus rides, entry into school building
  - Commonly associated with generalized anxiety disorder, somatic complaints
Assessing School Refusal

School Refusal Assessment Scale Questions – FUNCTION 1

- How often do you stay away from school because you will feel sad or depressed if you go?
- How often do you feel worse at school compared to how you feel at home with friends?
- How much more do you have bad feelings about school compared to other kids your age?
Function 2: Escape from aversive social and/or evaluative situations in school

- More common among middle and high school students
- Increased awareness of and concern with how others are judging them
- Difficulties with examinations, oral presentations, recitals, athletic performance, eating in the cafeteria
- Can begin with transition to middle or high school
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Social Anxiety Disorder
Assessing School Refusal

School Refusal Assessment Scale Questions – FUNCTION 2

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

- How often do you stay away from school because you feel embarrassed in front of other people at school?

- How often do you stay away from certain places in school (e.g. hallways) where you would have to talk to someone?
Assessing School Refusal

Function 3: Pursuing attention from significant others

- School may not be aversive
- More related to desire to remain with parents
- More common in young children – separation anxiety
- Also seen in situations where child is in a parental role in the house
Assessing School Refusal

School Refusal Assessment Scale Questions – FUNCTION 3

- How often do you feel you would rather be with your parents than at school?
- How often do you think about your parents or family when at school?
- Would it be easier for you to go to school if your parents were with you?
Assessing School Refusal

Function 4: Access to tangible reinforcers outside of the school settings

- Refusal is not directly related to aversive school situations
- Related to access to activities that cannot be utilized during the school day (video games, television etc.)
- More commonly associated with significant family conflict and conduct disordered behavior
- May fit “truancy” population description
Assessing School Refusal

School Refusal Assessment Scale Questions – FUNCTION 4

- When you are not in school during the week, how often do you leave the house to do something fun?

- When you are not in school, how often do you talk to or see people who are not in your family?

- When you are not in school, how often do you enjoy doing different things (example: being with friends, going places)?
Assessing School Refusal

- There may be a combination of functions

- CASE STUDY
  - Student with ASD chronically refusing school
  - Parents struggle to get him out of bed
  - Perfectionistic tendencies – very concerned about how others perceive him
  - Plays video games until late in the night
  - Allowed to play video games during the day when he refuses school – grandparents have to be with him at home
Assessing School Refusal

Case Presentation (Name Changed)
Leah – 7th Grade
- History of shyness
- Moved to district prior to 5th grade
- Some learning difficulties
- Falling out with peers – perceived that she was being bullied
- Somatic complaints (headaches, stomach aches) led to staying home
Assessing School Refusal

Case Presentation (Name Changed)

Leah – 7th Grade

- Somatic symptoms would also arise prior to large family gatherings
- Significant tantrums with prompts to go to school
- Bedroom and cell phone became primary coping skills
- Would not turn video on with tutor during Covid
- Would not meet with therapist via Zoom
Assessing School Refusal

Case Presentation (Name Changed)
Leah – 7th Grade

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<th>Child SRAS-R</th>
<th>Parent SRAS-R</th>
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<td>Function 4: 22</td>
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Assessing School Refusal

Assessment Methods

- SRAS-R

- Measures of Internalizing Problems (e.g. BASC-3, BYI-2)

- ABC data – parent report is vital

- Record review – diagnostic history, potential learning issues, medications

- Direct observation – home assessment

- Understanding school refusal cognitions
School Refusal: CBT Framework

The CBT Triangle

EVENT: Parent tells child to go to school

Consequences - - Thoughts

Behaviors - - Feelings
Assessing School Refusal

Thoughts
- Unhelpful and/or inaccurate thoughts about the event (cognitive distortions) fuel anxiety

COMMON DISTORTIONS RELATED TO SCHOOL REFUSAL
- Fortune Telling
- Overgeneralization
- All or Nothing Thinking

Resource: Top Ten Cognitive Distortions List
Assessing School Refusal

Behaviors

- Child engages in behaviors with the purpose of decreasing their negative feeling state
- It is adaptive to want to decrease negative feelings through avoidance
- The issue is that cognitive distortions lead child to identify danger when no danger actually exists
Assessing School Refusal

Consequences

-The avoidance behavior is reinforced when the child receives their desired consequences

-The cycle continues because there has been no corrective experience where the child realizes that their thoughts related to school are inaccurate or unhelpful
Research Based School Refusal Interventions

Psychoeducation – Parent and Child
- Need to understand WHY this is happening
- Explaining the FALSE ALARM – what is the anxiety response
- Relationship between avoidance and increased anxiety
- Treatment means facing your fears
Research Based School Refusal Interventions

Relaxation Training

- Helping the student to understand that they can control their physiology
- Mindfulness, Deep Breathing, Guided Imagery, Progressive Muscle Relaxation
- Needs to be practiced regularly and when calm
- Needs to be heavily reinforced – Kids aren’t motivated to use these skills!
Research Based School Refusal Interventions

Addressing Dysfunctional Beliefs

- Developing more accurate and helpful beliefs
- Helping student to identify thoughts as distortions
Graded Exposure

- Develop a list of feared situations
- Create a hierarchy from least to most feared
- Expose student to feared stimuli in order from least to most
- Student must stay in the environment until calm!!!
- 3 successful trials leads to increase to next feared stimulus level
Research Based School Refusal Interventions

CHAT TIME

What has your experience been designing and implementing graded exposure hierarchies?
Research Based School Refusal Interventions

Parental Contingency Management

- Strong reinforcement for completing graded exposure
- Strong response cost for failing to follow through on graded exposure
- Need for natural consequences – no screen time, need to complete work, need to practice anxiety reduction strategies, early bed time etc.
Research Based School Refusal Interventions

ATTENTION-MAINTAINED SCHOOL REFUSAL
- Intervention must be more focused on parents
- Parents must learn brief and clear instructions
- Parents must learn not to engage in power struggle
- Beware the EXTINCTION BURST!
- Parents must develop a clear and structured morning routine
- Strict rewards for following routine and attending and response cost for failing to follow routine
The Big “Sticks” – CRA and 51-A

CHILD REQUIRING ASSISTANCE (CRA):

“Habitual Truant”: A child between 6 and 18, who, without excuse, willfully fails to attend school for more than 8 days in a quarter. The school applicant must state whether or not the child and the child's family have participated in a truancy prevention program. M.G.L. c. 119, § 39E. Under M.G. L. c. 119, § 39G, dismissal must occur when the child turns 16. (Note the contradiction regarding age limits in these statutory provisions.)
The Big “Sticks” – CRA and 51-A

Use of the 51-A

- Parent not following through on interventions to get child to school
- Parent reinforcing child’s absence from school
- Abuse and neglect contributing factors to child’s absence from school
The Big “Sticks” – CRA and 51-A

DISCUSSION

-What has been your experience using CRA and 51-A as intervention tools for school refusal?

-How is the decision made to use the CRA and/or 51-A as intervention?

-What are the pros and cons of these tools as part of behavior modification plan?
Moving Forward – Developing an Action Plan

DISCUSSION

- How do you want to use this information to inform your school refusal interventions?
- Are there systems changes that need to be made to better respond to school refusal?
- How are you going to take this information back to your buildings?