



Understanding School Avoidance

Ruthliann Carmona, LMSW

Objectives:

- Define school avoidance
- Understand the prevalence of school avoidance and related risk factors
- Understand school attendance policies and its impact on the school avoidance issue
- Identify strategies for educators to support families and students
- Identify strategies for parents to support students at home and at school
- Resources for families and educators

School Avoidance:

What Is It?

School avoidance (also known as school refusal, school phobia, school absenteeism, etc.) is a term used to describe a child/adolescent who has demonstrated a pattern of behaviors that result in frequent absence from school. The motivations and manifestations of these behaviors vary case by case.

(Havik & Ingul, 2021)

What leads to school avoidance?

Individual Factors:

- Bullying or perceived lack of safety at school
- Need for/Lack of access to special education services
- History of frequent absences
- Low academic achievement
- Mental health conditions
- Pregnancy or parenthood
- Sleep deficiency
- Substance use

Family Factors:

- Child has caregiving responsibilities at home
- Health problems in family members
- Housing instability or homelessness
- Lack of structure or supervision
- Parent had negative school experiences and thinks missing school is acceptable
- Parent is incarcerated
- Parent is unemployed
- Parent works night shift or multiple jobs

School/Community Factors:

- Problematic Student-Teacher Relationship
- Unpredictability at School
- Cultural barriers
- Economic disadvantage
- Poor school climate
- Inconsistent school staffing
- Unreliable school transportation
- Unsafe route to school

(Allen, Diamond-Myrsten, & Rollins, 2018)

What does school avoidance look like?

Typical Behaviors:

- Physical
 - Frequent complaints of feeling sick, especially on school mornings
 - Difficulty falling asleep or frequent nightmares
- Emotional
 - Tantrums, crying or clinginess before school
 - Repeated requests to stay home
- Behavioral
 - An adolescent who misses the bus every day
 - Frequently asking to go to the nurse
 - Skipping individual classes or school altogether

When They Occur:

- Back to school transitions (beginning of the school year, after a day off, returning from a long or short break)
- Starting at a new school
- Major changes at home (divorce, death in the family, moving, family moving in or out of the home, etc.)
- Changes at school (New teacher/staff, etc.)

(Stancil, 2025)

Definitions

Common terms

- **In Attendance** – A student is present at their assigned school, or an activity sponsored by the school (e.g., field trip), for at least half of the regular school day.
- **Absence** - An excused, unexcused or disciplinary absence, a student is not present for the school day
- **Excused Absence** - When appropriate documentation is provided to the school; stipulations vary per district, and terms are set by the Board of Education
- **Unexcused Absence** - those which do not fall under any of the excused absences parameters
- **Chronically Absent Student** - A student who misses 10 percent or greater of the total number of days enrolled in the school year for any reason. This includes both excused and excused absences
- **Truancy** – when a student has reached a set number of unexcused absences in specified period of time
- **School Refusal Behaviors** - a spectrum of child-motivated actions resulting in frequent school absenteeism

(Bristol Board of Education, 2023)

Prevalence

The Issues with Data Collection:

- Varying definitions for school avoidance, make prevalence rates unclear (Havik & Ingul, 2021)
 - Ex: chronic absenteeism and truancy are different concepts, yet they both can lead to similar consequences (School drop-out, academic failure, delinquency, etc.)
- Parameters of an excused or unexcused absence can differ per district and can cover up issues resulting in delays in preventative actions

What is known:

- Some data show rates of truancy as high as 20 percent in some states (Casoli-Reardon, et al. 2012)
- A recent national survey found that 14% of students in kindergarten through 12th grade are chronically absent (Allen, Diamond-Myrsten, & Rollins, 2018).
- An estimated 1–2 percent of the general population and 5–15 percent in clinical-referred samples of youth are school avoidant; rates are equal between genders (Havik & Ingul, 2021)
- Individuals who avoid school are more likely to have long-term emotional issues, such as depression and anxiety, poor academic achievement, and dropping out of school (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 1994).

Interventions

- **Individual interventions**
 - Cognitive behavior therapy
 - Mentoring
 - Pharmacotherapy
- **Family interventions**
 - Family involvement in therapy
 - Parental education
 - Support for parental mental health
- **School and community interventions**
 - Collaboration between schools and medical professionals
 - Community schools
 - Safe and reliable transportation
 - School-based mental health programs
 - School-based support for vulnerable and at-risk populations
 - School nurse interventions

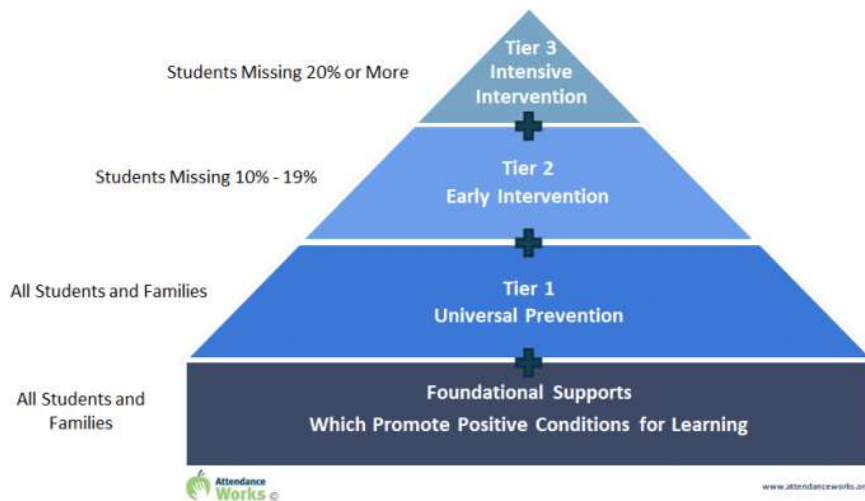
(Allen , Diamond-Myrsten, & Rollins, 2018)

Tips for Parents

- Once you notice a pattern act quickly and ask for help
- Document everything
- Find the source or cause for school avoidance
- Familiarize yourself with school refusal laws and school policies
- Seek treatment or additional school supports
- Make home “unfun.”

(Lightner, 2023)

School Strategies



Three Tiers of Intervention

- Clear and concise attendance policies
- Quick and consistent communication with parents as soon as concerns come up
- Emphasize the important of attendance to students and find ways to celebrate students efforts
- Collaborate with families to connect them with community and/or mental health supports
- Collaboration with school-based attendance teams

(Christopher A. Kearney, 2016).

Prevention is key!

Resources

- Boston's Children's Hospital: Managing Anxiety In Childhood and Adolescence
[bchnp-managing-anxiety-booklet.pdf](#)
- Attendance Works: Advancing Student Success By Reducing Chronic Absence
[Home - Attendance Works](#)
- *Managing School Absenteeism at Multiple Tiers : An Evidence-Based and Practical Guide for Professionals* – eBook available on the Clearinghouse website
- [Emotional Well-Being - Sesame Workshop](#)

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