Encouraging Your Child: 
Home and School Solutions for Great Attendance and Making the Most of Life

Brian C. Chu, Ph.D. 
Associate Professor 
Department of Clinical Psychology 
Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology 
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey 

Email: BrianChu@rci.Rutgers.edu

Youth Anxiety and Depression Clinic (YAD-C)

For Information: 
- http://yadc.rutgers.edu

Client population: 
- Ages 8 – 16 years old 
- Any Anxiety or Mood disorders

Services provided: 
- Diagnostic assessments 
- Goal-directed Cognitive Behavioral Therapy 
- Research Clinic

To schedule Intake: 
- Phone: (848) 445-3905
Encouraging Brave Behaviors and Attendance

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Useful websites

- American Psychological Association, Society for Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology
  - http://www.effectivechildtherapy.com/

- Association of Behavioral and Cognitive Therapy
  - http://www.abct.org

- NJCTS Webinar: 30 min summary of School Avoidance
Workshop goals

1. Prevalence and Significance of school avoidance
2. Connecting school avoidance to “Fear of Distress”
3. Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy approach
4. How to encourage great attendance for your children

Avoiding School

- Jared: 13 yo boy described to be “anxious his whole life,” but solely about school and school-related subjects. SA started in 1st grade due to separation fears. Anti-depressant helped with separation, but SR continued off-and-on through elementary. Attended alternative school during 6th-7th grade.

- At intake (January), had not attended a full day of school. Parents take older sibs to school, then return for him to drag him out of bed, get him up, and drive him to parking lot, until he refuses. He will scream, yell, insult his parents, and physically resist attempts to structure or discipline his time. Once, ran out of school into street, prompting school to call DYFS. Can’t identify any specific fears except he worries about how far he’s fallen behind in school. Stays up late hours and will sleep all day if allowed. When he stays home, he plays video games, watches TV, and sleeps. Parents rpt he is very social creature, who has a big circle of friends.

- School has attempted graded re-entry with false starts and failures. Student currently doesn’t attend any school and refuses to work with home-instruction. Parents rpt they can’t “control him” and also worry when restrictions and contingencies are “too harsh.”
Avoiding School

- Rick: 13 yo boy who has been “anxious his whole life.” At 4 yo, stopped wanting to go out and separating from parents. Attached to older siblings at college. Latest refusal started after older brothers came home from winter break and then left.
- Rpts significant social anxieties – one time he saw a kid’s lunch break out of a paper bag, and so he refused to carry his own lunch in a bag for fear of embarrassment. Fears answering questions in class, doing oral reports, team meetings, speaking to unfamiliar people, and popular kids. Will only attend outside events with older brother.
- Has missed 10 days/yr, current year, 25 days. At intake (Feb), had missed 15 days after brother left for college. Plays video games and computer when home; parents believe this is rewarding, but it’s more for comfort – no chances of being embarrassed at home. Parents use videogames as privileges to be removed if Ch does not comply.

School Avoidance (SA)

- **Definition:** “Child initiated inexcusable absence (partial or whole days), difficulties remaining in class, disruption in school routine.”

  - Truancy:
    - delinquency, without parent knowledge
  - Anxiety-based SA:
    - anxiety/distress based, with parent knowledge

- NOT a formal “Psychological Disorder”
Presentation of School Avoidance

- When/where do you see it?

- Typical presentation and when does it occur?
  - Resistance/sickness night before.
  - Protests/refusal in AM or on way to school.
  - Repeated visits to nurse’s office or calls to home.
  - Repeated requests for parent to pick up from school.
  - Predicted by events at school (e.g., bullies, tests, speech) or home (separation anxiety), or reinforced by “reinforcing” home environment

School Avoidance: Definitions & Prevalence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily absences (U.S. NCES)</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problematic school refusal (20% of absences)</td>
<td>1% - 4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial absenteeism – cut classes</td>
<td>4.4% - 9.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial absenteeism – tardiness</td>
<td>4.4% - 9.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duress during school day</td>
<td>1.7% - 5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall “best estimate”</td>
<td>5% - 28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All rates increase in inner cities, public schools, older grades, more impoverished schools
National Center for Education Statistics (2006): 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Missed 3 or more days in past month</th>
<th>20%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Missed 5 or more days in past month</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over the course of 10-month school year:</td>
<td>30-50 days</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

School Avoidance: Risks and Associated Features

- At greatest risk during 1<sup>st</sup> year of new school
  - KG, 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade, 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade

- Increased age on onset → more severe absenteeism

- Boys = girls

- Increased risk in presence of:
  - Anxiety
  - Depression
  - Conduct and Oppositional Disorders
  - Medical Illnesses: asthma, enuresis

- Intelligence and academic achievement
  - Does NOT seem to predict school refusal
**School Avoidance: Impairment and Prognosis**

- **Short-term Consequences**
  - Child distress, family conflict, disruption of routine
  - HW completion, ↓ grades, social alienation
  - Legal trouble, financial distress, child maltreatment

- **Long-term Consequences (mostly of treated youth)**
  - Family problems
  - Significant psychiatric and violence problems
  - Unstable job histories, unemployment
  - School dropout
  - Leaving home early, early marriage, marital problems
  - Having children with truancy

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**What “Causes” School Avoidance?**
School Avoidance: Categorical-Dimensional Approach
Based on Function (Kearney, 2001)

- **Function** =
  - what maintains a child's behavior? What motivates a child to refuse school?

- **Avoidance of Negative Affectivity (33.7%)**
  - Avoid stimuli that provoke negative affectivity
  - Experience general symptoms of anxiety, sadness, & somatic complaints
  - General misery and emotional/psychological vulnerability
  - Not targeted to 1 or 2 specific stimuli

- **Avoidance of Social Evaluation (7.8%)**
  - Escape aversive social or evaluative situations
  - Public speaking, social interactions, walking in hallways, tests, performance situations

- **Attention Seeking Behavior (23.5%)**
  - Receive intangible rewards at home: attention or sympathy from parents or others.
  - Results in tantrums, screaming, clinging, reassurance-seeking.

- **Pursuit of Tangible Rewards (34.9%)**
  - Skip school or classes to pursue reinforcers more powerful than school.
  - TB, video games, sports, friends, internet, sleeping late.

Disorders Associated with “Avoidance of Negative Affect” group: (Tillotson & Kearney, 1998)

- Generalized Anxiety Disorder: 35.7%
- No Disorder: 28.6%
- Depression - Dysthymia: 21.4%
- Separation Anxiety: 19.6%
- Social Phobia: 17.9%
- Panic Disorder: 10.7%
- Specific Phobia: 10.7%
Encouraging Brave Behaviors and Attendance

Disorders Associated with “Pursuit of Tangible Rewards” group: (Tillotson & Kearney, 1998)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disorder</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Generalized Anxiety Disorder</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppositional Defiant Disorder</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Disorder</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct Disorder</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression - Dysthymia</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separation Anxiety</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Phobia</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Understanding School Avoidance from a Cognitive-Behavioral (CB) Approach
Treatment Conceptualization: CBT Model of Anxiety

- Physical Feelings
- Anxiety
- Thoughts
- Actions/Behavior

CBT Model for School Avoidance

- Physical Feelings
  - Stomachaches
  - Sickness
  - Panic feelings
  - Sleep Disturbances

- Thoughts
  - “School's too hard.”
  - “The kids/teachers are mean to me.”
  - “I can’t handle it.”
  - Fear of being away from parents
  - “I don’t care.”

- Actions/Behavior
  - Resisting, delaying, refusal
  - Avoiding, Escape, fighting
  - Panic attacks
  - Begging, reassurance seeking
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What happens to distress over time?

Time (Chu, Skriner & Staples, 2014)

FIGURE 5.1. Effect of escape on learning in the case of a school-refusing youth. Escape is negatively reinforced by its immediate impact on distress reduction.

(Chu, Skriner & Staples, 2014)
Encouraging Brave Behaviors and Attendance

Encouraging Brave Behaviors
(How to engage life’s challenges)
Parent Plan

- Kids bring their own anxiety to the table, but parents play an important role in encouraging brave behaviors

- **Praise/Reinforce Approach behaviors:**
  - Active reinforcement of positive behaviors (attendance/approach behavior)
  - Active ignoring of unwanted behavior (complaining, reassurance-seeking, crying, whining, physical complaints)

- Develop reward chart and assign rewards

- Planning Gradual Hierarchies together
  - Hierarchy = a list of graded challenges ranked from easier to harder challenges

- Goals: Reduce child dependence on adults
- Increase child confidence

Accommodation Cycle

- Accommodating is usually:
  - Easiest
  - Feels compassionate
  - Parents feel helpless

- Child:
  - Hears mixed messages
  - Misses opportunity to tolerate distress
  - Misses potential positive reinforcement at school
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Passivity/Discouragement Cycle

- Passivity is:
  - Easiest
  - Feels compassionate

- Child:
  - Hears mixed messages
  - Misses opportunity to tolerate distress
  - Misses potential positive reinforcement outside

Passive Response?

Indirect encouragement?

“Don’t you want to see friends?”

“Don’t you want to get rest.”

“I’m tired.” Cancels with friends

“Don’t you want to see friends?”

“Don’t you want to get rest.”

“I’m tired.” Cancels with friends

Outcome?

Teen goes back to sleep

Aggressive-Coercive Cycle

- Aggression usually:
  - Escalates
  - Reflects frustration more than problem-solving

- Child:
  - Child feels misunderstood
  - Less motivated to comply.

Trigger

Parents wake teen up in morning

“If you don’t get to school, you’re going to fail!”

“If you don’t get up, no computer for a week!”

“I’m already failing.”

“If you don’t get up, no computer for a week!”

“I’m already failing.”

Escalating Threats?

“Then forget it! Get out!”

“I’m already failing.”

“If you don’t get up, no computer for a week!”

“I’m already failing.”

Outcome?
### Step 1: Track your own patterns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Anxious behavior</th>
<th>Adult Reaction</th>
<th>Child Reaction to Adult</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Woken up for school.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Asked to answer question on blackboard</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Parent-child tracker – anxiety example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Anxious behavior</th>
<th>Parental Reaction</th>
<th>Child Reaction to Parent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Asked to answer question on blackboard</td>
<td>Keeps head down; freezes; mumbles</td>
<td>Teacher: &quot;Well, let's just move on to someone else.&quot; Or &quot;Are you not prepared again?!&quot;</td>
<td>Child shrinks lower; freezes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reinforcing Avoidance

Child shrinks lower; freezes

Reinforcing Avoidance/ Misses opportunity.
### Parent-child tracker – mood example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Depressed behavior</th>
<th>Parental Reaction</th>
<th>Child Reaction to Parent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Struggling with HW.</td>
<td></td>
<td>I snap back: “Well, you’re not getting anywhere with that attitude.” Or, “I don’t care if you sit there all day.”</td>
<td>Child throws pen down and puts head down.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Says something negative: “This homework sucks.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Sleeping on couch</td>
<td>“I can’t get up; I’m tired;” cancels outing with friends.</td>
<td>“Well, why don’t you get your rest;” or “It probably won’t be fun if you’re sick.”</td>
<td>Child goes back to sleep.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Criticism: Punishing efforts to persevere**

**Reinforcing Avoidance**
Step 2: Encourage Approach; Avoid Conflict

- **Empathize**: Actively Listen and Label child’s feelings

- **Active reinforcement** of positive behaviors

- **Active ignoring** of unwanted behavior to extinguish (complaining, reassurance-seeking, crying, whining, somatic complaints)

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Step 2: Be cliché: Empathize and Encourage

- **Empathize**
  - Active listening
  - Help child identify and label feelings & thoughts.

- **Encourage**
  - Demonstrate calm, accepting attitude towards child.
  - Give calm encouragement
  - Engage in problem solving

But!

- Resist temptation to pacify or give easy reassurance
- Do NOT problem-solve FOR the child

- Be cliché: “I know you’re nervous and I know you can do it.”

- Show confidence in child’s ability to manage distress and problems
Step 3: Build a Reward System

- Identify problem behavior or behavior you want to encourage.
  - Be specific!
  - Be reasonable!
  - Break down into small parts!

- Build a rewards menu.
  - Make sure rewards are reinforcing to child!
  - Make rewards reasonable. Monetary rewards are rarely the best!

- Make sure the plan is a REWARD plan, not a PUNISHMENT plan
- BEST Rewards: Daily Renewable Rewards

Avoiding School

- Rick: 13 yo boy who has been “anxious his whole life.” At 4 yo, stopped wanting to go out and separating from parents. Attached to older siblings at college. Latest refusal started after older brothers came home from winter break and then left.

- Has missed 10 days/yr, current year, 25 days. At intake (Feb), had missed 15 days after brother left for college. Plays video games and computer when home; parents believe this is rewarding, but it’s more for comfort – no chances of being embarrassed at home.

- Parents use videogames as privileges to be removed if Ch does not comply. When child refuses to go to school, parents threaten to take away his video games. When he continues to refuse, they do take away his game console, to which the child replies, “Who cares, I don’t want that anyway!” The child continues to refuse and now parents don’t have any major incentives for the child.
### Reward Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>W</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gets up within 10 minutes of alarm (1)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completes HW before dinner (3)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not curse at mother when reminded to do HW (5)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calls friend and invites over (5)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rewards:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>10 pts:</strong> Gets X-box for 1 hr.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>20 pts:</strong> X-box or computer for 1 additional hour.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Coordinating with Schools
Joint Family-School Plan

1. **Identify Liaison:** School personnel who is familiar with goals and plan.

2. **Family-School meeting:** with and without child
   - Share information about in-school/out-school behavior
   - Agree on goals
   - Know Resources and Limits school is willing to offer.
   - Agree on child, parent, school roles

3. **Goal:** re-integration into school ASAP.
   - Only a fever is excused.

4. **Break goal into small steps**
   - Brain-storm and problem-solving
   - Push to accomplish whatever steps are tolerable.

5. Establish rewards both inside and outside of schools

6. Enact practice inside and outside of school

7. Track accomplishments and reward success!

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**Some Possible School Accommodations**

(if called for – not given freely)

- Modified assignments
- Testing in private, quiet place to reduce anxiety
- Educate teacher about child’s anxiety and suggest strategies to facilitate child’s coping (reframe)
- Identify safe adult at school (problem-solving or anxiety management strategies)
- School staff prompt child to use coping strategies prior to school triggers (tests, recess, starting assignment)
- Children with anxiety disorders might qualify for a Section 504 plan or special education if significant impact on school functioning
## Assigning Roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Child Role</th>
<th>Parent Role</th>
<th>School Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Morning Routine</strong></td>
<td>a. Drag myself out of bed</td>
<td>a. Use empathize and encourage</td>
<td>a. Potentially send attendance officer?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Get ready</td>
<td>b. Make bedroom aversive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. School Arrival</strong></td>
<td>a. Use relaxation</td>
<td>a. Use empathize and encourage</td>
<td>a. Can allow friend/other student/school staff to meet child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Coping thoughts</td>
<td>b. Be directive but don’t solve problems</td>
<td>b. Allow for graded hierarchy for attendance/tardiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. Remember “stress hill”</td>
<td>c. Remind of rewards</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. During School Day</strong></td>
<td>a. Graded reduction of nurse visits, etc.</td>
<td>a. Remove contact during day</td>
<td>a. Provide reasonable accommodations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Use coping skills</td>
<td>b. Graded reduction of contact if cold-turkey not</td>
<td>b. Adopt empathize and encourage approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. Reward oneself for sticking in there!</td>
<td>c. Reward!</td>
<td>c. Provide encouragement but don’t over-accommodate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Helpful Readings