

Home-School Partnerships in Supporting Students with School Anxiety, Avoidance, and Refusal

Mx. Devon Bacso, Ed.S.
School Psychologist

Ryan Harting, Ed.S., NCSP
School Psychologist

Session Goals


Attendees will:

1. Develop a basic understanding of the causes and scope of anxiety in children and teens that contribute to school refusal
2. Become familiar with LCPS' School Refusal Cohort tiered intervention program and supports available at school
3. Learn how parents can help implement evidence-based strategies for treating anxiety and school avoidance



Anxiety

Causes, Symptoms, and Prevalence



“A word we use to describe the system that helps us become **aware** of *possible* threats and dangers and **keeps us safe** from those threats and dangers”
-Lebowitz, 2021



Adaptive or Maladaptive?

- Danger is real
- Escaping a dangerous situation
- Self-preservation



- A false alarm
- Escaping a benign situation
- Can lead to functional impairment



Scope of the Problem

- Most common mental health disorder in US
- 1/3 of 13- to 18-year-olds will experience an anxiety disorder at some point
 - Less than 20% receive treatment
- Half of individuals first experience anxiety before age eleven
- 40% of parents of children with anxiety disorders also have had an anxiety disorder themselves



School-Based Anxiety and Refusal



The Spectrum of School Refusal Behavior

Repeated
misbehavior in
the morning to
avoid school

Periodic
absences or
skipping of
classes

Complete
absence from
school during a
certain period
of time

School
Attendance
with stress &
pleas for non-
attendance.

Repeated
tardiness in
the morning
followed by
attendance

Repeated
absences or
skipping of
classes with
mixed
attendance

Complete
absence from
school for an
extended
period of time

Four Main Functions of School Refusal

1. Avoid unpleasant experiences or sensations related to being in school
2. Avoid aversive social or evaluative situations
3. Seek attention and reassurance
4. Obtain tangible rewards outside of school

*Functions are not mutually exclusive



LCPS' Approach to Addressing School Refusal Behaviors



School-Based School Refusal Supports

- **Professional learning for staff**
- **Unified Mental Health Team (UMHT) support**
 - Small group curriculum
 - Attendance circles
- **School Refusal Cohort**
 - Began 2020-21 school year, in partial response to COVID closures
 - Consultants with topic area expertise, trained by Dr. Dalton
 - Assist across the district

School Refusal Cohort Supports

- **Consultation with school-based teams at Tiers 2 and 3**
 - Assess function of behavior
 - Interviews, forms, data collection
 - Suggest direct and indirect interventions
 - Develop individualized student support plans
 - Provide education and support to parents

Strategies for Anxiety

- Psychoeducation
- Cognitive restructuring
- Practiced behavior modification - exposure



What Do At-School Supports Look Like?

- **Collaborative multidisciplinary meetings**
 - Attendance meetings
 - UMHT meetings
 - Return to Learn meetings
 - IT, 504, IEP meetings when applicable
- **Data collection to understand school refusal behavior**
 - Attendance records
 - Behavior logs
 - School refusal scales
 - Anxiety hierarchies
 - Parent interview

Example Interview Questions

- What are the child's specific forms of absenteeism, and do these forms change daily?
- How did the child's school refusal behavior develop over time?
- What is the child's level of anxiety or misbehavior upon entering school or in the morning before school, and how do others respond?
- What specific school-related stimuli, if they can be identified, provoke the child's concern about going to school?
- Is the child's refusal to attend school legitimate or understandable in some way?
- What family disruption or conflict has occurred as a result of the child's school refusal behavior?
- What is the child's academic status, course schedule, and required make-up work?
- How much school attendance can the child tolerate (e.g. standing on the playground, sitting in the lobby, going to one class, attending a half day)?

Parents are Essential Partners

You know your child best!

- School communication
 - Alert the school if you are concerned
 - Attend school meetings once problem is identified
 - Engage in communication regarding attendance and anxiety
- Implement strategies and supports at home



Parent-School Partnerships



Parents as Partners in Treating Anxiety

- Well-intended attempts to protect child from distress can enable more avoidance
- Reassurance vs. self-efficacy
 - “I know you can do this!”
- Consistency of expectations for school attendance
 - Loving firmness
 - Calmly consistent
- Model calm and confidence - calm is contagious



What Sounds Helpful But May Not Be?

- Getting a fresh start by changing schools
 - Ex: Homebound, new school, homeschool, etc.
- Keeping a child home
 - Ex: seeming sick or giving mental health days on tough mornings, reward for having a good mood or attendance for a few days
- Avoiding the fight
- Using a doctor's note

Where do you see your child in five years?

What Can I Do at Home to Help My Child?

- Consistency (morning routines, attendance expectations)
- Praise coping strategies, ignore anxious behaviors
- Remove access to reinforcers if child stays home
 - Wifi/electronic devices are not the only type of reinforcement
 - What does a day at home look like?

Our morning routine	
<i>What I want my child to do</i>	<i>Time to complete this step (e.g., 7:00–7:20 AM)</i>

What Can I Do at Home to Help My Child?

- Consider rewards and consequences
 - Removing reinforcers is not a consequence
 - Informal or formal via attendance contract
- Planning for breaks, holidays, trips, etc.
 - As possible, maintain routines or return to them before school is back in session
 - Expect that challenges may get worse after breaks
 - Work with the UMHT and school

Behavior Contract

- I promise to be respectful by treating others as I would like to be treated (Golden Rule).
- I promise to abide by the following household rules:

1.
2.
3.

Privilege(s) for meeting these conditions:

1.	2.
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Consequence(s) for failing to meet these conditions:

1.	2.
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What Parents Can Do in the Moment

- “We will talk about it when you get home from school.”
- The power of “yet” — Growth Mindset
- Catch them coping effectively and reinforce



Roadblocks to Expect

- Transitions back to school
 - Ex: sickness, the end of summer, school switches, graduations to new schools
- Extinction bursts when new expectations are put into place
 - Remain consistent and behavior will fade
- No desire to go to school, but desire to attend after-school activities



Building Resilience in your Child

- Focus on quality time together
- Encourage times with positive peers and trusted adults/mentors
- Encourage regular participation in low-stress healthy activities
- Model healthy habits (sleep hygiene, healthy diet, exercise, engaging in spiritual activities, volunteer in the community to build connectedness, etc.)
- Get to know school UMHT members and encourage your student to do so—having a connection before you need it makes accessing help much easier

Outside Providers

- Finding outside providers
 - School social worker can be helpful in locating in-network providers
- Communicate with outside mental health providers
 - What strategies are you teaching my child?
 - How are you measuring my child's progress? When will we know they have reached their goals?
 - What can I do at home to reinforce what's learned in session?
 - Allow therapist to communicate with school



Additional Resources



Resources for Additional Learning and Support

Books:

- *Getting Your Child Back to School (2nd Edition)*, Christopher Kearney
- *Breaking Free of Child Anxiety and OCD*, Eli Lebowitz
- *Treating Childhood and Adolescent Anxiety*, Eli Lebowitz and Haim Omer

Video:

- Dr. Jonathan Dalton's March 2021 presentation, [Managing Anxiety for Children and Teens](#)
- Dr. Lynsey Riley's January 2022 presentation, [Supporting Students with School Anxiety and Avoidance Behaviors](#)

Further Learning Opportunities:

- Dr. Eli Lebowitz's [SPACE parent-based treatment program](#)
- Center for Anxiety & Behavioral Change's [parent management training](#)

What is SPACE?

SPACE stands for Supportive Parenting for Anxious Childhood Emotions and is a parent-based treatment program for children and adolescents with anxiety, OCD, and related problems.

SPACE was developed by Dr. Eli Lebowitz at the Yale Child Study Center and has been tested and found to be efficacious in randomized controlled clinical trials.

Who is SPACE for? Who is the patient?

SPACE aims to treat children and adolescents with anxiety disorders and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Although children do not have to attend SPACE sessions - they are the patients! When SPACE treatment is successful children feel less anxious and function better following treatment.

Some of the main anxiety problems treated with SPACE include:

- Separation anxiety
- Social anxiety
- Generalized anxiety
- Fears and phobias
- Panic disorder and Agoraphobia
- Selective mutism
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder

Who participates in treatment?

Parents (and other caregivers) participate in SPACE treatment sessions. In most cases the child or adolescent does not need to attend the treatment sessions.

What happens in SPACE treatment?

Parents who participate in SPACE will learn skills and tools to help their child overcome anxiety, OCD or related problems.

The treatment focuses on changes that parents can make to *their own* behavior, they do not need to make their child change.

The two main changes that parents learn to make in SPACE treatment are to respond more *supportively* to their anxious child and to reduce the *accommodations* they have been making to the child symptoms.

To read more about SPACE and how it works visit the [Resources](#) page.

Concerned your child may be struggling with school avoidance or refusal behaviors?

- Contact your child's School Counselor, School Psychologist, School Social Worker
- Check out your school's [Unified Mental Health Team \(UMHT\)](#)





Questions?

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