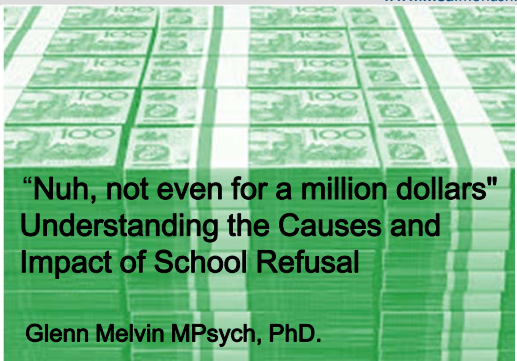


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**"Nuh, not even for a million dollars"**  
**Understanding the Causes and Impact of School Refusal**

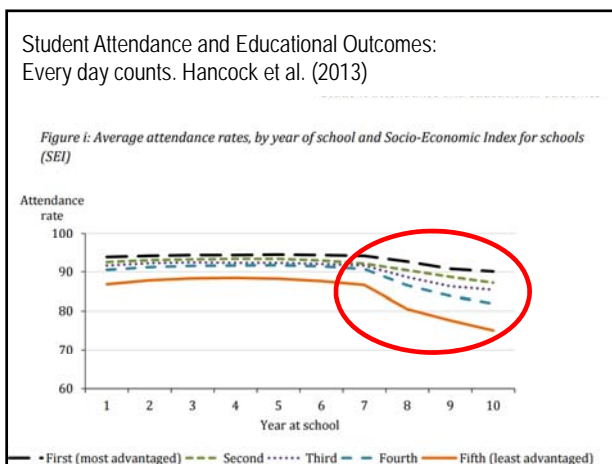
**Glenn Melvin MPsych, PhD.**

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### Non Attendance & Non Completion

- School non-attendance is associated with poorer academic outcomes and non completion
- School non completion is associated with a range of negative consequences on
  - Employment opportunities
  - Economic status
  - Social wellbeing
  - Physical and mental health
- Victorian school completion rates are increasing slowly (2009: 86.8% → 2013: 90.1%) DEECD, Annual Report 13-14.
- In 2014-15 Average attendance for Year 7-10 (Govt schools) was 90% (missing target of 91%) DET Annual report 14-15.

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### School Attendance Problems



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### School Refusal

- Severe difficulty attending school
- Severe emotional upset
- At home with parents' knowledge
- Absence of antisocial characteristics
- Reasonable efforts by parents to enforce attendance

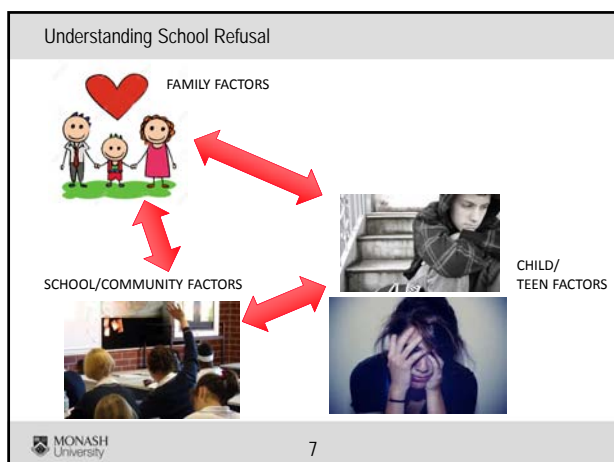
(Berg, 1997)

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### Other Attendance Problems...

- Truancy
- School Withdrawal
- School Exclusion
- Why classify?
  - Different types of school attendance problems require different management approaches given different underlying problems.
  - Provides a 'common language' for school communities and health services

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### Precipitants (Heyne et al. N=164)

Factor	Percentage
Bullying/teasing	35%
Socially excluded	26%
Change from PS to SC	21%
Fear/difficulties with teacher	21%
Illness in self	19%
Academic problems	17%
Separation problems	16%

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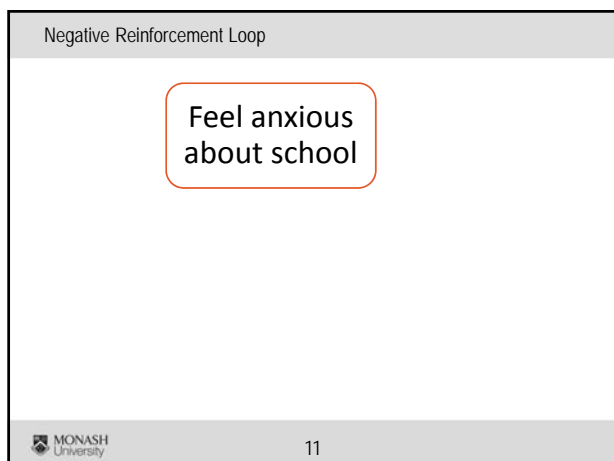
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### Factors associated with school refusal onset (McShane et al. 2001)

Factor	%
Family Conflict	43%
Conflict with peers	34%
Family separation	21%
Changing school or moving home	25%
Physical Illness	20%

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- ### Anxiety and Avoidance of School
- Avoiding anxious or depressive feelings associated with the school setting e.g., classrooms, toilets, fire drills
  - Avoiding anxious or depressive feelings associated with social situations e.g., with peers, teachers, giving a presentation to your class
  - Seeking attention from parents or anxiety at separation from parents
- (Kearney & Spears, 2014)
- MONASH University
- 12

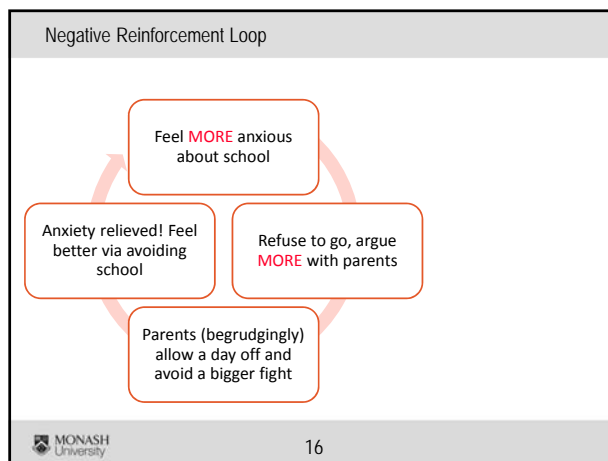
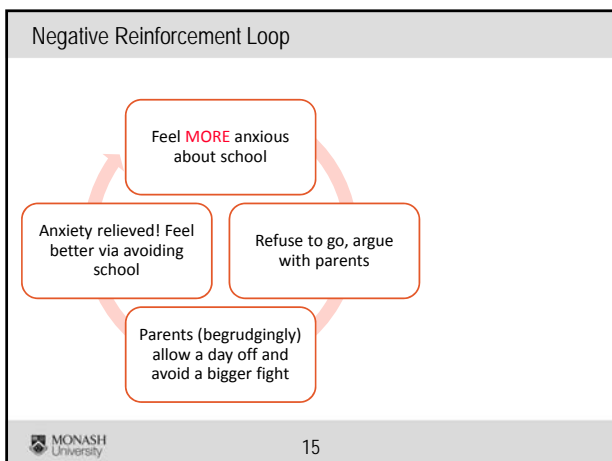
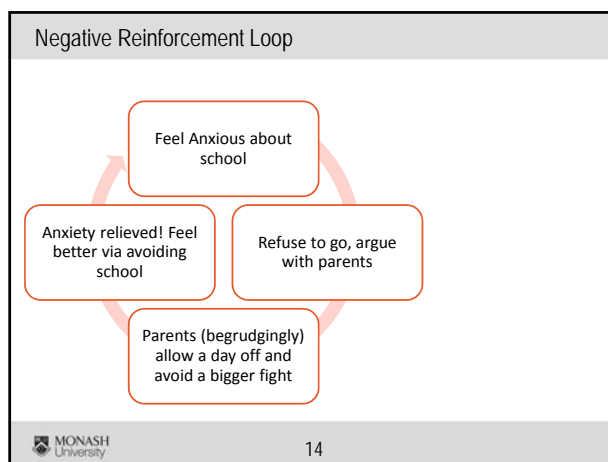
### Diagnostic Picture

(McShane et al. 2001; Rivendell Unit, NSW; Heyne et al. 2000; Melvin et al. 2016; Monash University)

- Anxiety Disorder
  - Separation Anxiety Disorder
  - Social Phobia
  - Generalised Anxiety Disorder
- Depressive Disorder
- Behaviour Disorder
  - Oppositional Defiant Disorder
- Experience of more than one disorder is common



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### Age

- School refusal is often thought to have two peaks – entry to primary and late primary/entry to secondary school (King & Bernstein, 2001).
- Average age: 12.3 (range 9-13 year olds) – Great Smoky Mountains Study (Egger et al. 2003)
- Transition times

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### Gender

- Approximately equal males to females
- E.g., Female: Male ratio
  - 53:47 Community sample (Egger et al 2003)
  - 45:55 Outpatient sample (Melvin et al 2016)
  - 45:55 Mixed clinical sample (McShane et al 2001)

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## Prevalence

- Accurate Australian data on the prevalence of school refusal is not yet available
- USA Community Sample N=4500 9-13 year olds
  - 3 month prevalence of anxious school refusal = 2.0% (Egger et al. 2003)

## Factors Associated with School Refusal

- Compared with school attenders, children & teens with school refusal report
  - More thoughts about
    - personal failure "I can't do anything right"
  - Less thoughts about
    - positive things "I enjoy life"
    - hostility "Bad people deserve to be punished"
  - A greater tendency to overgeneralise
    - E.g. today at school was bad, everyday will be bad – persistence and pervasiveness of problems (Maric, Heyne et al. 2012)
- Insomnia, nightmares, night terrors and daytime sleepiness associated with school refusal behaviour in children (Hochadel et al., 2014)

## How are Families faring?



## How are families faring?

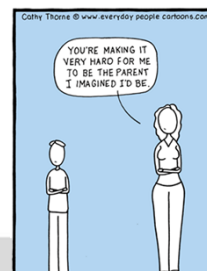
- Family conflict – most common precursor to school refusal in an Australian clinical sample – (McShane et al, 2001)
- Parents with a child who is school refusing report greater difficulty with communication and family roles. – (Bernstein & Borchard, 1996)

## How are families faring?

- Compared with parents of children who attend, parents of children with school refusal report
  - Lower levels of parental self-efficacy
  - Higher parental anxiety
  - Higher parental depression
  - Poorer family functioning (Carless, Melvin, Tonge & Newman, 2015)
  - More likely to have received treatment for a mental health problem (Egger et al. 2003)

## Some Parental Reactions to School Refusal

- Shame/Embarrassment
- Anger
- Anxiety
- Hopelessness
- Confusion
- ...



### Schools Factors

- According to Year 6-10 students...
    - Peer relations at school found to be important risk factor for school refusal
    - Teacher Classroom management plays an indirect role in reducing risk for school refusal via preventing bullying and social exclusion.
- (Havik et al 2015)
- Student and parent connectedness to school and school climate are associated with student attendance

### Outcomes of School Refusal

- Risk of recurrence of school refusal, university refusal...
- Poorer educational achievement
- A 20-29 year follow up study found social problems, family conflict, fewer go onto having children (Flakierska-Praquin et al 1997)
- 50% receiving psychiatric services 5 years after detection (Buitelaar et al 1994)

### Outcomes of School Refusal – Australian Data

- McShane et al (2004)
  - 6 month follow up – 30% in home education or unemployed
  - 3 year follow up – 24% in home education or unemployed
- King et al. (2001) – 3-5 year follow up
  - 13 of 16 (81%) treated with CBT were attending school regularly (90% over past 2 weeks) at follow up.

### Summary

- School refusal is a challenging problem that has multiple determinants
- School refusal is equally common in males and females and is more likely to occur at transition points.
- School refusal is strongly associated with anxiety disorder; avoidance of school reduces anxiety (and family stress) in the short term
- The impact of school refusal on families is substantial and needs to be acknowledged
- School refusal is largely associated with poor outcomes which justify the need for greater investment in prevention and treatment.

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Thank you for your attention  
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