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

Student Attendance and Educational Outcomes: Every day counts. Hancock et al. (2013)

School 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

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)
Understanding School Refusal

Precipitants (Heyne et al. N=164)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bullying/teasing</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socially excluded</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change from PS to SC</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear/difficulties with teacher</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illness in self</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic problems</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separation problems</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family Conflict</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict with peers</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family separation</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing school or moving home</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical illness</td>
<td>20%</td>
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</tbody>
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Negative Reinforcement Loop

Feel anxious about school

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)
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

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

Negative Reinforcement Loop
Feel Anxious about school
Anxiety relieved! Feel better via avoiding school
Parents (begrudgingly) allow a day off and avoid a bigger fight
Feel better via avoiding school
Refuse to go, argue with parents
Anxiety relieved! Feel better via avoiding school
Parents (begrudgingly) allow a day off and avoid a bigger fight

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

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)
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?

• 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)

Some Parental Reactions to School Refusal

• Shame/Embarrassment
• Anger
• Anxiety
• Hopelessness
• Confusion
• …

• 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)
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

  - 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.

Thank you for your attention

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