

## School Refusal

by Aimée Engler

The following information is actually notes made from a workshop run by Griffith Uni concerning recent research into school refusal of autistic children.

The research summary can be found here:

[https://autismresearchtalk.wordpress.com/2021/06/01/i-have-bad-feelings-about-being-at-school-understanding-school-refusal-in-children-on-the-autism-spectrum/?fbclid=IwAR3AJQR7peM1DuQXkQ3jUAFmMybjAIMnFuESEz335Ut0r9ZqHR5a2c-q\\_xg](https://autismresearchtalk.wordpress.com/2021/06/01/i-have-bad-feelings-about-being-at-school-understanding-school-refusal-in-children-on-the-autism-spectrum/?fbclid=IwAR3AJQR7peM1DuQXkQ3jUAFmMybjAIMnFuESEz335Ut0r9ZqHR5a2c-q_xg)

The full study can be found here:

[https://link.springer.com/epdf/10.1007/s10803-021-05107-4?sharing\\_token=0K8i4Y1V6SZsf8rlo9-CUPe4RwIQNchNBiy7wbcMAY72xPIZ60E55J92rlv0135up3SyxAMQjVLseKDRgPZxcvmPGm9tpiXo-ULfcZVw4o5pkez9ISxwsh8QTcsiysu0W6xpGwTXIBvOd0KHYYlSvHH89ie1Bi12cAcCTr7YoyE%3D](https://link.springer.com/epdf/10.1007/s10803-021-05107-4?sharing_token=0K8i4Y1V6SZsf8rlo9-CUPe4RwIQNchNBiy7wbcMAY72xPIZ60E55J92rlv0135up3SyxAMQjVLseKDRgPZxcvmPGm9tpiXo-ULfcZVw4o5pkez9ISxwsh8QTcsiysu0W6xpGwTXIBvOd0KHYYlSvHH89ie1Bi12cAcCTr7YoyE%3D)

There are four types of withdrawal from school:

- 1) Truancy - child skips school without knowledge of parent
- 2) student withdrawal – parent intentionally withdraws child
- 3) student exclusion – school intentionally excludes child (eg. suspension, or gives child day off during NAPLAN testing)
- 4) school refusal – child refuses to attend

### What is school refusal?

- Definition:
  - an extreme reluctance to attend school
  - emotional upset
  - with the acknowledgement of parent
  - absence of conduct disorders
- 1-5% of students have this.
- It's an internationally growing area of concern.
- It costs a LOT of money to treat.
- It can negatively impact:
  - learning
  - academic achievement
  - social adjustment
  - early school dropout
  - adult mental health problems

### Factors associated with school refusal (to determine at-risk kids)

#### 1) child factors

- age of onset 13.8 years
- anxiety

- depression
  - no gender differences
- 2) parent and family
- depression
  - anxiety
  - low self efficacy (confidence in parenting skills)
  - family accommodation of child's anxiety (eg. child cannot dress themselves so you dress them. More they do it, more likely refusal occurs)
- 3) school factors
- demands at school (physical and emotional)
  - lack of teacher support
  - social isolation
  - being bullied

### **What about ASD kids?**

Will school refusal be more or less for kids with ASD? There has been no research into this question yet so we don't have an answer, but as ASD kids obviously have a tougher time at school it makes sense that they might refuse more.

*Reasons for this based on the DSM-5 criteria:*

- 1) Social reciprocity
- In the class room they might miss a turn to talk and be frustrated, or talk over others and get into trouble => less engagement and motivation and negative self-concept and confusion.
  - Difficulties in communicating with a new or different teacher.
  - Knowing what to say and when to say it to peers.
- 2) Nonverbal communication
- Teachers use nonverbal communication and child can't read it, therefore gets into trouble.
  - 'The hidden curriculum': there are codes/dances/symbols for everything that kids use and it's very hard to keep up with them all. If they are misunderstood then there's potential for bullying.
- 3) Relationships
- There may be less social motivators to attend school (eg. no friends to look forward to seeing).
  - Bullying due to obvious social difficulties.
  - Not wanting to be around all these people, especially if they're behaving in a different way than the autistic person approves.
- 4) Insistence on sameness/restricted behaviour
- Wanting to keep things the same, unknown teacher, transitioning to high school (age of on-set coincides), special days.
  - BUT going to school IS part of a routine!
  - Transitions are difficult such as school drop offs, holidays and the weekend.

- Performance anxiety.

5) Circumscribed interests

- School just isn't interesting. Why learn this stuff? It's pointless!
- Unable to think about anything else.
- Don't have anything in common with peers to share and build friendships.

6) Repetitive behaviour

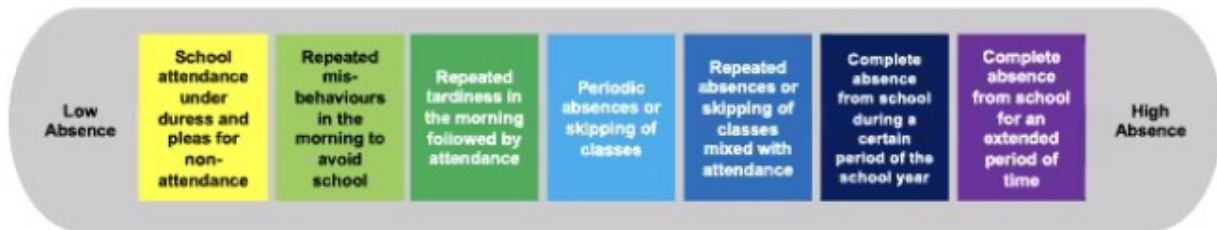
- Bullied or misunderstood (by both students and teachers) because of stimming.
- Stress and exhaustion of suppressing or limiting stims/not being free to stim.

7) Sensory

- Too noisy, too smelly (body odour), too bright, hard to sit still, too many people, not enough breaks, uniform feels wrong, etc. etc.

+ Co-occurrences, eg. ADHD, OCD, anxiety, depression – all play a role.

**Continuum of school refusal behaviour in youth (Kearney, 2001)**



Behaviours fit into this continuum which is useful as then we can prevent school refusal. The aim is to deal with the behaviour/causes of the behaviour early on and to avoid it becoming worse.

Research shows that the children who were forced to go regardless, and didn't have their whims catered to (eg. 'You can stay home just this once', or 'Let me help you get dressed') often overcome school refusal. If a parent is at home then school refusal is more likely to happen because if both are working then there's no option – the child must go to school. However this must be balanced with the anxiety and damage from forcing the child as well as the child's exposure to the school environment. This is particularly the case with kids on the spectrum.

Further notes about the different categories:

*School attendance under duress and pleas for non-attendance*

- Sometimes it's very clear that the child doesn't want to go, where the child actually says, 'I don't want to go'.
- Sometimes it's not clear and the parent needs to investigate (perhaps the child sees school as completely separate and refuses to talk about it). Look into somatic claims of sore tummies, tiredness, etc.

*Periodic absences or skipping of classes*

- Can be up to 1 full day off per week.
- This category had the highest number of behaviours associated.
- It can occur by the child making trouble in class, absconding, or having somatic complaints. Other examples included climbing a tree and refusing to get down, hiding within the classroom or in the toilet, and work avoidance.

*Repeated absences or skipping of classes mixed with attendance*

- 1-2 days a week, same lesson every week, or leave school early/arrive at school really late.
- Can depend on the time or year (start and end of the term are worst).

**Other thoughts about school refusal**

- School refusal seems to be culturally specific, more European and first world countries. In Asian countries parents and schools pressure kids (and kids put own pressure on) because going to school is so important. There's huge competition. However in Japan there's now a social crisis as a huge number of young adults are locking themselves in bedrooms because they were pushed for so many years. Mental health is sacrificed.
- In US, 43% of school absences is due to school refusal. But this is only based on school attendance records where the child literally doesn't show up. Whereas many signs aren't recorded in this way – it's considered behaviour management and absconding instead. Therefore the number is probably higher.
- Just because someone is at school doesn't mean they're actually participating.
  - Their behaviour might be (intentionally or unintentionally) preventing them from working (eg. they are sent to another class, internally suspended, hiding under a desk).
  - They might sit at their desk but not actually be doing work (eg. zoned out, fallen asleep).
  - They find others ways of getting out of the classroom (eg. sport and music or other extra curricular activities).

**Current research in this field**

- Very little research has been done in this area around the world.
- Interaction between anxiety and school refusal needs further examination.
- Both ASD and non-ASD children have similar signs of anxiety therefore they don't know how much it's to do with school, autism, or anxiety itself.
- They are yet to ask adult autistics as to why they did it/get personal accounts.
- No research at all into relationship of sensory issues with school refusal.