

WHAT CAUSES SCHOOL REFUSAL BEHAVIOR (SRB)?



School refusal behaviors (SRBs) are behaviors that impede a child's regular and consistent school attendance.

These behaviors typically develop gradually. It can begin with avoiding a certain class, having serious problems with completing homework, faking illness to miss a day of school, or missing a presentation or test at school. Sometimes the return after weekends or holidays is extremely difficult. There may have been an event at school, between friends, or at home that causes school refusal behaviors.

There can be physical signs and symptoms of SRB, including dizziness, headaches, shakiness, chest pains, stomach pain, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, or muscular pain. There may be behavioral symptoms as well, including fearfulness, panic, crying, temper tantrums, withdrawing, fatigue, arguing, refusal to move, running away, aggression, or threats of self-harm.

The direct cause of SRB may never be known, but the function of the behavior can be identified through assessment. The assessment tool used to determine which primary function is the root for SRB is called the School Refusal Assessment Scale Revised (SRAS-R), developed by Drs. Kearney and Albano. This scale assesses the underlying cause for the SRB and informs proper interventions.

The SRAS-R will identify the function of the child's school refusal thus guiding you, your mental health professional, and your school with direction for interventions.

WHAT ARE THE FOUR FUNCTIONS OF SCHOOL REFUSAL?

Dr. Kearny and Dr. Albano describe the four main reasons why children refuse school.

1. AVOID SCHOOL-BASED STIMULI THAT PROVOKE NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

To stay away from objects or situations at school that make the child feel unpleasant physical symptoms or general distress.

Examples:

- Being on the school bus
- Walking in the hallways
- Being on the playground
- Being in the lunchroom
- Sitting in the classroom
- Feeling fearful of not keeping up
- Distress of not being able to do schoolwork because of a learning difference
- Adults at school (teachers, principal, other school staff) that the child may feel uncomfortable around
- The other kids at school
- Feelings of discomfort from being surrounded by lots of kids all day
- Feeling like they can't relate to other kids



2. ESCAPE AVERSIVE SOCIAL OR EVALUATIVE SITUATIONS

To avoid social or evaluative situations at school that are distressing to the child (such as school-related performance situations).

Examples:

- Tests
- Reading out loud
- Speaking in front of others
- Presenting in front of others
- Athletic performance
- Playground
- Lunchroom
- Recreational school sports

3. PURSUE ATTENTION FROM SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

To receive attention from a parent or significant other.

Examples:

- Difficulty separating from a parent, sibling, caregiver, and/or other
- Feeling needed by a parent

4. PURSUE TANGIBLE REINFORCERS OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL.

To obtain tangible rewards that make staying home more enjoyable/comfortable than going to school.

Examples:

- Wanting to stay home to play videogames, post on social media sites, watch movies, etc.
- Spending time with friends who are not in school
- Remaining in bed or at home with preferred items

A child with one of the first two functions (avoiding school to escape negative feelings) may start to also gain the positive rewards of staying home, which further reinforces SRB.

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CONTACT



717-947-1202



attend@iu13.org

