



pathways report

Updating school professionals about the challenges and solutions for students struggling with school avoidance.

Home Visits: Key to the Return for Many School Avoidant Students

As with all of Cornerstone's various initiatives over the years, our School Avoidance program can always be counted on to go the extra mile to ensure each student's success. And, in this case, our staff literally go the extra mile by including home visits as an important part of students' multi-pronged treatment protocol.

"The goal of home visits is two-fold," according to Pathways Director, Mr. Gregory Levine. "We are there to coach parents as much as we are there to offer support and encouragement for the students." Home visits occur only with the prior approval of the parent or guardian, and only after a detailed planning session with parents to determine exactly what will happen during the visit. In many instances the Cornerstone staff member may never even enter the home because

the supportive presence of a school representative waiting outside often is enough to motivate the student to dress and get on the bus or into the parent's car to be driven to school.

Most often it is Mr. Levine himself who will conduct a home visit, but there are times when the school's Principal, Mr. Gregg Weisman, or the student's clinician will travel to the student's home. Both practical and clinical factors determine who will do a home visit, e.g., is the student's home on the staff person's morning route to school; does the student particularly need the reassurance of his or her primary clinician; does a female student feel uncomfortable around male staff members given a history of abuse? Whichever staff member

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Easing Students into Academics at Pathways

School avoidance is a thorny clinical problem that requires a tailored and multi-faceted approach for each student. And, as with all mental health concerns faced by its students, Cornerstone must balance clinical intervention with academic accommodations to help each student succeed.

Even highly motivated students find academics challenging if they are overwhelmed with the anxiety and other complicating factors that contribute to school avoidance. Extreme dysregulation interferes with concentration and all aspects of executive functioning, making it difficult if not impossible for a student to be present in the classroom, literally



and/or mentally. In fact, sometimes the more devoted to academics the student is, the more anxiety is generated because of the constant fear of falling behind or receiving unacceptable grades.

Much of the clinical work with school avoidant youngsters is centered around the home and the caregivers who must partner with CDS staff to create incentives for the child to push through anxieties and to detach from naturally occurring rewards within the home. Most of the educational support, however, occurs within the school building, both in the Pathways suite and in "mainstream" classroom settings.

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Home Visits...

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conducts the home visit, however, he/she will follow the planned protocol that was agreed upon with the student's parents.

As with all of Cornerstone's clinical interventions, the use, frequency, and content of home visits are customized to the needs of each individual student. "Home visits are not a blanket intervention", according to Mr. Levine. "There are times, in fact, when home visits are clinically contraindicated depending on the initial assessment of what factors maintain the student's school avoidance." If, for example, seeking parent/adult attention and nurturance is a primary factor that contributes to a student's avoidance, then the arrival and attention of caring school personnel may inadvertently reinforce the avoidance of school.

Similarly, not all school avoidant students are assigned to the Pathways suite depending on the severity of the problem and on what motivates the youngster to either attend or avoid school. For example, students who are motivated by the ability to socialize with peers at school tend to do better as "mainstreamed" school avoidance students, spending little or no time in the Pathways suite on a day-to-day basis.

In short, home visits are like every other clinical intervention at Cornerstone: customized to address each student's need and to optimize clinical and academic success.

Easing Students Into Academics...

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The Pathways Program uses a combination of instructional settings to meet students where they are in their journey of reacclimating to attending school. While school attendance plans can differ from student to student, there are some techniques that are commonly used.

The ultimate goal, of course, is for students to become active participants in the typical classroom setting, engaging both academically and socially with peers and teachers. We have found over the years that pairing in-person remote instruction within the Pathways suite with mainstream class participation allows for an effective gradual exposure plan.

All CDS classrooms are equipped with sophisticated technology including sophisticated monitors, cameras, smart boards, and computers. Pathways students initially participate in their classes via remote learning while in the Pathways suite. They are given their schedules and are required to log in to their classes at the appointed time, thereby receiving instruction in real-time with their peers and teachers. Teachers and teaching aides also make themselves available to students on a scheduled basis in the Pathways suite to assist students with their assignments.

As students become more consistent with school attendance and improve the ability

to regulate their emotions, they are slowly transitioned to the actual classroom until they are fully integrated in the mainstream school setting. This transition can occur in very discrete, gradual exposure steps or accelerated as deemed appropriate by the student's clinical team.

CDS staff have identified numerous benefits of the combined on-site remote/in-classroom technique. These include:

- The ability to develop social connections with classmates while in a protected, less anxiety-provoking setting.
- Participation in real time instruction and interaction with teachers and peers.
- Reinforcement of the student's requirement to attend school on a consistent basis.
- The enhancement of students' sense of control regarding their presence in the classroom.
- The ability for students to discreetly receive remote support from each class's teaching assistant while in Pathways and to observe the class in an unobtrusive way prior to actively participating.
- The opportunity to learn each teacher's style and expectations, and the structure of the course, without the anxiety that can accompany in-classroom participation.



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Cornerstone Day School is the only therapeutic school in NJ that is licensed by the State Division of Mental Health to provide treatment. Cornerstone is also a Chapter of the National Honor Society and accredited as a school by MSA, AdvancedED and NIPSA.