



# pathways report

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

## *Poor School Attendance – A Growing Problem*

For quite some time, and especially since the pandemic, both educators and mental health professionals have been sounding the alarm about the growing problem of student absenteeism. School participation is essential for developing children: besides the obvious academic instruction, schools provide much needed structure and routine, allow for the development of social and other life skills, and for many are literally a lifeline as places to access food, healthcare, and a variety of social supports.

There are many factors that contribute to absenteeism. For some students it signals a lack of engagement with academic goals. For others, learning disorders and neurodiversity challenges such as ADHD quickly undermine self-esteem and students' perceptions about their ability to succeed. Other children have anxiety, depression, or other mental health disorders that interfere with learning and contribute to chronic school

avoidance. Still others come from families whose lack of financial and other resources create barriers to school attendance, such as the lack of transportation, the need to care for younger siblings while parents are at work, or having no clean clothes to wear.

Over the years school district personnel have asked Cornerstone staff for suggestions about how to address absenteeism in their schools. Our first suggestion involves closer monitoring of the data. Simply looking at daily attendance averages is of little use as these numbers do not help staff to zero in on the students who account for the bulk of missed days. For example, students who miss two or more days a month for any reason, excused or unexcused, can be flagged for further assessment.

Our second suggestion involves assessment, that is, taking a deeper dive into the causes for each student's chronic absence. As mentioned above, there are numerous,

not mutually exclusive factors that impact school attendance. Without articulating these it will be impossible to craft an effective intervention plan. Does the student need academic support, mental health interventions, or a caring adult to walk him to the bus stop each day? Even formally diagnosed school avoidance has multiple determining factors, including the avoidance of negative affect at school (e.g., related to bullying, severe social anxiety, or fears regarding school performance expectations), the fear of leaving caregivers at home or the desire for their attention, or the desire to access positive rewards at home or in the community (e.g., sleeping late, socializing, playing video games).

Our third recommendation is early and consistent outreach: calls to the parents of identified students should occur after one day missed, not two or three, with both

*continued on page 2*

## *Partnering with Parents to Address School Avoidance*

One thing that has become abundantly clear to Cornerstone staff over the years is that parent participation is a critical component of each student's success. And, perhaps more than any other clinical presentation, school avoidance requires an effective partnership with parents that typically involves daily contact and interventions that bridge the home and school environments.

As discussed in the other article in this issue of Pathways Report, the factors that cause and maintain chronic absenteeism are numerous and complex, and interventions can only be effective if those factors are understood. Once truancy is ruled out, as well as absenteeism related to the effects of poverty, community issues, and/or the need for students to help out at home, educators and clinicians can explore the factors that contribute to the clinical syndrome known as school avoidance.

School avoidant youngsters are often highly anxious, with extreme concerns about social judgment and about their ability to meet academic and other expectations. Some have little or no motivation for academic pursuits and instead seek the tangible rewards available at home or in the community. Some have experienced significant life changes or traumas, such as parental illness, and only feel safe at home or with a caregiver.

Parents of school avoidant children are often frantic and exhausted, and many feel shame about their inability to do what they judge to be a basic parenting function, namely, to get their children off to school each morning. To build an effective partnership with parents, school personnel must be careful to use language that is validating, empathetic, and non-judgmental and that builds hope. In their efforts to support a suffering child, parents often inadvertently

reinforce avoidance, making accommodations that prevent the child from facing and moving through their crippling fears. This relates in part to the pain associated with seeing a child in distress, and in part from their own inability to tolerate discomfort – parents of children with school avoidance and separation anxiety themselves have higher rates of panic disorder and agoraphobia. The inability to tolerate their child's and their own discomfort causes parents to swoop in and "save" children rather than encourage them to press forward despite their anxieties.

In other circumstances, parents may be unable or unwilling to maintain consistent rules and boundaries at home. This may relate to their own stress or organizational challenges, to the fear that pressing a child will exacerbate suicidal or self-harm impulses, to the weariness of dealing with a child's frequent

*continued on page 2*

## Poor Attendance ...

*continued from page 1*

teachers and administrators playing a role. The importance of school attendance should be strongly emphasized throughout the school community, with school staff warmly welcoming reluctant students when they appear, and incentives offered on a regular basis for good attendance.

Since mental health challenges are significant for many chronically absent students, we advise that on-site mental health services be shored up and that staff are fully informed about how to efficiently make referrals. Ongoing mental health education for families and the entire school community is of utmost importance.

A fifth recommendation involves the assessment of school culture and environment. In what ways can staff enhance a sense of safety, calm, and predictability? What activities can foster school connection for both students and caregivers? Students who are already struggling with academic and/or mental health challenges will be even more reluctant to attend school if the overall environment feels unwelcoming or unsafe.

Chronic absenteeism is a complex and thorny problem, one of many issues that school districts are juggling, often without sufficient resources. Cornerstone Day School proudly offers our specialized program for school avoidant youngsters, Pathways, and welcomes inquiries for consultation and staff training as well.

## Partnering with Parents...

*continued from page 1*

tantrums or aggressive behavior and thus “giving in”, and/or to the belief that children with mental health problems should not be “punished” with consequences.

Cornerstone uses several rating scales to help staff and parents begin to piece together the school avoidance puzzle. The Family Accommodation Scale (FAS) helps to target parental behaviors that protect rather than support the child, that is, that foster the child’s avoidance rather than supporting the child to tolerate anxiety and move ahead despite discomfort. For example, an accommodating behavior might be changing family plans to ease a child’s fears, or taking over a task that is usually the child’s responsibility. Another essential tool is the School Refusal Assessment Scale (SRAS) developed by child psychologist Christopher A. Kearney, a well-known expert in school refusal (see link below). The SRAS has both parent and child rating scales to help families and professionals pinpoint the function of school avoidance so that targeted interventions can be developed.

After setting the stage with an empathic stance toward both students and parents, and using assessment tools to zero in on the specific factors maintaining a child’s school avoidance, the partnership continues by using any or all of the following components:

- Ongoing education of families and students about the importance of attendance and the potential impacts of frequently missing school.
- Educating parents about how adults can inadvertently give attention to and reinforce the very behaviors they are trying to eliminate.
- Establishing and maintaining consequences for not attending school on a given day.
- Removing as many positive reinforcers from the home environment as possible on a non-attendance day (e.g., no access to phones, games, internet, etc.).
- Helping parents convey to children that their job is to go to school and be students, not to take care of a struggling parent or some other family-related role.
- Helping parents establish and adhere to consistent family routines (e.g., morning, mealtime, homework, bedtime routines).
- Helping parents decrease excessive reassurance and adopt a more matter-of-fact coping skills stance to help children face their fears.

For Christopher A. Kearney resources <https://academic.oup.com/book/1249/chapter/140180641>



[www.pathways-cornerstonedayschool.com](http://www.pathways-cornerstonedayschool.com)

[www.cornerstonedayschool.com](http://www.cornerstonedayschool.com)

10-12 Commerce Drive, Cranford, NJ 07016 • Phone: 908-543-0220 • Fax: 908-543-0222

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.

