

Supporting Children With School Attendance Challenges: A Resource For Elementary School Professionals

This document is a companion to the webinar entitled “School Anxiety & Attendance Challenges: Practical Strategies for Elementary School Professionals”. This webinar can be accessed [here](#). Together, these materials are intended to explain the theoretical foundation of school avoidance and provide a framework for assessing the nature of a student’s struggles as well as concrete steps towards successful school attendance.

This framework is comprised of 5 steps:

- Step 1: Identify & gather the team
- Step 2: Assess the struggle
- Step 3: Set the stage for success
- Step 4: Develop and Implement
- Step 5: Communicate & Check-in

Step 1. Identify & Gather the Team

Who is on the student's team?

(Caregivers, school professionals, external mental health professionals)

Consider: who will the school point person(s) be? They will communicate with family & with external mental health professionals (if applicable)

Coordination is key to successful outcomes!

Step 2. Assess the Struggle

2a) Assess the functioning & maintaining factors

Conduct a file review of attendance history; academic and social performance; IEP (if applicable)

- Learning issues? History of bullying? Documented mental health challenges?

| Attendance Last Year | Attendance This Year | Grades & Learning Issues | Social Challenges | Other things of note |
|---|--|--|--|---|
| <i>Ex. Missed 2 days due to illness</i> | <i>Ex. Missed 10 days in September, 2 weeks in October</i> | <i>Ex. Meeting expectations but emerging struggles in math</i> | <i>Ex. Some challenges with peer rejection</i> | <i>Ex. Mother on long-term disability as of August; off of work</i> |
| | | | | |

Conversation with youth, if age appropriate

- *Start off with: We've noticed that it's been really hard to get to school lately and you've missed [amount]. School is really important and we want to support you to feel good about attending. Is it OK if we ask you some questions that will help us understand how to help?*

To get at the function behind the behaviour (Are they avoiding social stress? Academic overwhelm? Fear around separating from parents?)

****Is there bullying, racism, or another structural challenge that requires a systemic approach****

- How do you feel about coming to school? What was going on around the time(s) that it was harder to get to school? What is hardest about being at school? Do you have any specific worries about school?

Notes:

To get at potentially positively reinforcing activities they may have access to (wifi, preferred activities, screens, phone, etc.)

- *What do you do when you're not at school (during the school day)?*

Notes:

Conversation with caregiver(s), if possible

To provide clues to worries or other barriers to school attendance and clues about caregiver anxiety

- *What is it like for your child the night before going to school? In morning before school? How distressed are they? How is that for you? How do you respond?*

Notes:

Similarly to youth, to get at potentially positive reinforcing activities they may have access to (wifi, preferred activities, screens, phone, etc.)

- What does your child do at home when they're not at school?

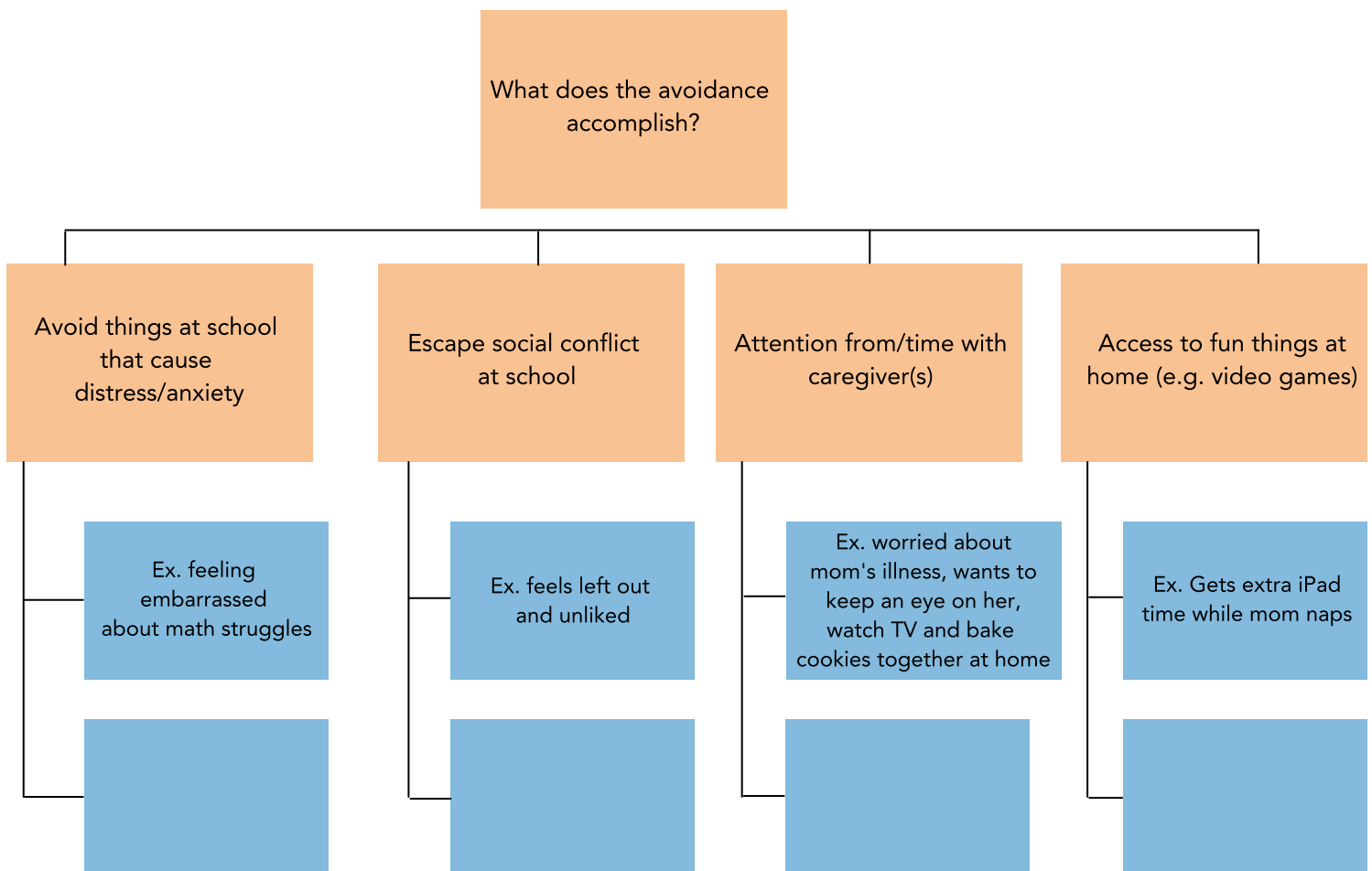
Notes:

To get at their sleep schedule and whether this is an additional barrier to getting to school on time and feeling rested

- What time does your child usually go to bed? Wake up? Do they have their phone with them in the bedroom?

Notes:

Record the potential functions of school avoidance for this particular student



2b) Assess the severity

Circle one.

- at risk: early and intermittent nonattendance (missing days here and there, mostly full days when attending)
- developing: missing full days with some regularity; intermittently missing partial days
- significant: missed more than two weeks of school consecutively
- long-standing: missed more than a month of school consecutively

If significant or long-standing, is student working with an external mental-health professional? **YES** **NO**

If NO, consider such referrals as appropriate, and aim to initiate during Step 3 (conversation with caregivers)

- For youth: e.g., school counsellor, Child & Youth Mental Health
- For caregivers: e.g., Confident Parents, Thriving Kids (Behaviour and/or Anxiety modules), Connect parent group

Step 3. Set the Stage for Success

Conversation with caregivers:

Intro:

"It sounds like [youth] has really been finding it hard to get to school. I'm so glad you're here today. We find that it really takes a team working together to support youth to get back to school, and you're a really important member of that team! We know it can be really hard on families when kids are struggling – it can be hard to know what to do and how best to help. What we're hoping will happen today is to talk a bit more about some of the challenges [youth] has been having, and make a plan for how to get [youth] back to school. How does that sound? Is there anything else you were hoping to cover today?"

Understanding of school refusal:

"From the information you and [youth] shared, it really looks like [youth] has been struggling with anxiety about getting to school. We know that when anxiety is part of the picture, 'waiting it out' doesn't usually work all that well. The anxiety can just grow stronger, and it can be harder to get back after they've been away longer. Different kids have anxiety about different things – it sounds like for [youth], the ____ anxiety is the biggest right now, and ____ anxiety is also playing a role. [for example 'social anxiety is the biggest – really those fears about being judged, having to give presentations, those kinds of things. And we know that [youth] also has a harder time with math and writing at school, which probably adds a layer of stress to school as well.] How does that fit for you?"

Overcoming school refusal:

“What we find tends to work best is a stepwise approach. First we want to talk about barriers to getting back to school on a really practical level. For lots of youth once they stop going to school their sleep cycle often gets out of whack – and it sounds like that’s been happening for [youth].

The next step we find really helpful is to make sure that in the daytime, when they’re staying home, it isn’t too fun...oftentimes when kids stop going to school they’re watching shows or videos, or doing other fun things instead of going to school. As we start to talk about a plan for slowly getting back to school, we find it’s important to do that at the same time that parents are starting to limit the amount of enjoyable activities they have access to.

When it comes to actually starting to get back to school, we want to make sure we’re really taking it step by step, and hopefully starting with things that feel easier for [youth], and then working our way up to harder situations as they get more confident and comfortable with being back.

We’d like to have a meeting with you, [youth], and [school counselor, teacher, etc.] to talk about a team effort to support [youth] getting back to school gradually. When you’re talking to [youth], let them know that our goal is really to work with them on a plan that is realistic for them. We’re here to support and really problem solve those barriers that are there.

We’d like to start with just a 30-minute visit to school, so that [youth] can reconnect with [point person]. We’d want to make that at a time of day that feels easier for [youth] – often this is later in the day for kids who’ve been sleeping in.

Conversation with youth (caregiver present):

It sounds like you’ve been finding it really hard to get to school. It sounds like you’re struggling with worries about getting to school [and mathematics, being with other kids at recess, etc.]. Thank you for your bravery sharing that with us. We know that when worries are part of the picture, staying away from school usually makes the worries even stronger, and it can be harder to get back when you’ve been away. Our goal is really to work with you on a plan that is realistic and to support you getting back to school.

It’s really important to talk about what that will look like in advance. It’s often good to have a plan for what to say if anyone asks where you’ve been or why you haven’t been at school. Some kids might choose to say that they’ve been feeling worried, but others might prefer to say that they’ve been ill or they’ve been away. It’s your personal information and it’s up to you to decide. We’ll share that information with your teachers so they know the ‘story’ too. Some kids prefer for their teachers not to say too much when they get back – just ‘hi Johnny’ – so that there’s not too much attention on you. What do you think you would prefer? Also we wanted to let you know that the first goal is just getting back to school – not catching up on your work. So if it’s OK with you, we’ll let your teachers know that they’re not to give you any work to catch up on for [amount of days/weeks]. And while you get settled back into being in classes, there also won’t be homework for the first little bit. We want to take it step by step! Sometimes certain classes feel easier than others – as you start to get back to school you might want to start with the class that feels the most comfortable, and then work up from there, kind of like climbing a ladder (e.g., not starting with PE if social anxiety).

As mentioned above, consider initiating external mental health referrals if needed:

- For youth: e.g., school counsellor, Child & Youth Mental Health
- For caregivers: e.g., Confident Parents, Thriving Kids (Behaviour and/or Anxiety modules), Connect parent group

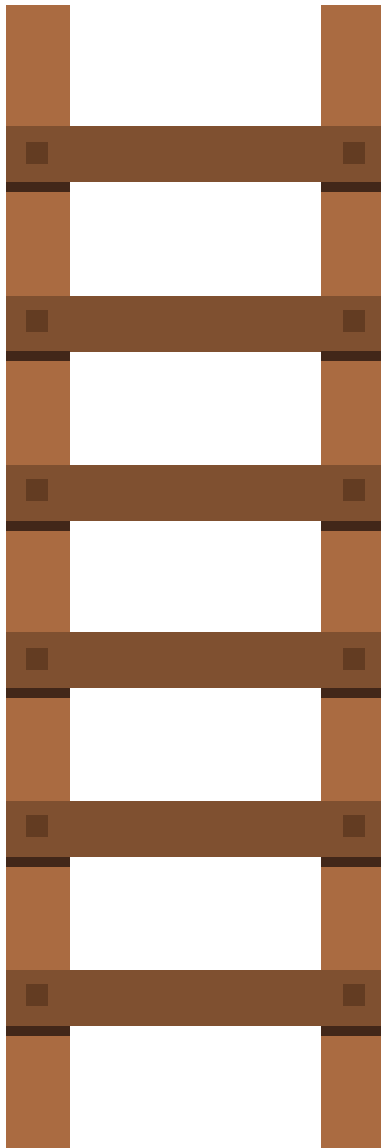
Step 4. Develop & Implement Plan

4a) Develop the bravery ladder/fear hierarchy.

Often, the school point person can work on this with the child & family. Other times it can be done by the involved mental health professional. Make it fun and have each step associated with a reward. Below are some example steps (make sure to understand what is harder for each individual child – some may prefer to meet with teacher alone before having a playdate on school grounds, for example):

- Walk to the school and back → Earn some stickers (younger kids) or extra iPad time (teens)
- Go to the school playground → Get to pick dessert etc.
- Visit with a friend (classmate) on school grounds → Reward
- Attend school for 30 mins w/o expectations to complete school work → Reward
- Attend school for 1 hour during a preferred activity → Reward
- Attend school for 2 hours during a preferred activity → Reward
- Attend school for 2 hours during a more challenging activity or with a small academic expectation → Reward

Titrate up until full re-entry.



Brave Step:
Reward:

Brave Step:
Reward:

Brave Step:
Reward:

Brave Step:
Reward:

Brave Step:
Reward:

Brave Step:
Reward:

4b) Plan School Re-entry

Key is to make as much of the unknown known so that youth know what to expect (this will vary based on the age of child). For example, for a young child, “tomorrow we will do circle time by you won’t have to raise your hand” and for an older child, “tomorrow you’ll sit at your desk but won’t have to do any work”

- What needs to happen BEFORE the return
 - Integrated case meeting & document re-entry (could be in IEP)
 - Determine what period are they auditing courses for (if appropriate, and if so for how long)
 - Address logistical concerns such as a ‘Cover story’ for peers for older kids (script to use; everyone aware); seating arrangements
 - What work is expected to make up (missed work; going backwards)
 - When do expectations for new work start?
 - Passes to go see counselor / leave class without a lot of explanation
 - Plan for time at school (how much time? Where? With who?)
- What needs to happen DURING the return
 - A point person to check in with in the mornings
 - Teachers shouldn’t draw a lot of attention to them coming back into the classroom
 - A pass during the day to go see point person / school counselor (if needed & age appropriate)
 - Develop plan for ongoing check-ins to ensure gains are maintained
- Tips that will help get the youth back on track (before re-entry)
 - Sleep information / sleep hygiene recommendations
 - Limiting technology / preferred activities during the school day
 - Practicing the routines (e.g., walk/drive to school)

Step 5. Communicate & Check-In

- Regular communication with parents/caregivers to monitor progress & celebrate success
- Troubleshoot problems early
- Develop plan for ongoing check-ins to ensure gains are maintained

