

Chapter 1

Increasing Understanding About School Refusal and Truancy

One of the major challenges facing educators in the 21st century is how to effectively address the problem of school refusal and truancy. Students identified as school refusers and truants are absent from school for myriad reasons, ranging from emotionally based difficulties (e.g., anxiety, depression) to reasons that are not emotionally based (e.g., hanging out with friends, playing video games, abusing drugs and alcohol). Contextual risk factors contributing to this problem may include family issues (e.g., poverty, homelessness) or victimization at school. Although numerous causes and risk factors are associated with students' school refusal and truancy, these students have one thing in common—they are not coming to school. The length of absence ranges from days or weeks to several months. A leading researcher on this issue has called excessive absenteeism from school a “serious public health issue” (Kearney 2008a, p. 451). The problem is considered serious because of the high percentage of students with excessive absenteeism, the consequences to individuals and society, and the stress and heartbreak often experienced by affected families. An estimated 5% to 28% of students engage in some form of school refusal or truancy (Kearney, 2001).

This revision of *School Refusal: Assessment and Interventions Within School Settings* (Wimmer, 2003) intends to (a) review the many terms associated with school refusal and truancy and their causes, with greater coverage of contextual risk and protective factors; (b) provide a framework for assessment and intervention of school refusal and truancy within a multitier, response-to-intervention (RTI) model; (c) outline recent intervention research conducted on this topic and successful programs designed to reduce absenteeism; and (d) help practitioners move toward a comprehensive, cross-disciplinary approach, drawing from research in education, psychology, medicine, social work, and criminal justice, as suggested by Kearney (2008b).

Chapters 1 through 3 of this book outline the terms, etiology, and history (Chapter 1); current conceptualizations of school refusal and truancy and contextual risk factors (Chapter 2); and identification and assessment of school refusal and truancy (Chapter 3). Chapters 4 through 7 focus on prevention and intervention for school refusal and truancy within a multitier RTI framework, with reviews of Tier 1 universal strategies (Chapter 4); Tier 2 targeted interventions (Chapter 5); Tier 3 intensive interventions (Chapter 6); and alternative programs and schools, whole school reform, and charter schools (Chapter 7).

It is my hope that this book will provide readers with the tools necessary to tackle this difficult problem at all levels of the RTI model. Only through a comprehensive approach addressing all aspects of this multifaceted problem—individual, family, school, and community—will we be able to truly make a difference in the lives of school-refusing students.

TERMS ASSOCIATED WITH EXCESSIVE ABSENTEEISM

As shown in Table 1.1, several terms are used to describe excessive absenteeism. *Psychoneurotic truancy* and *school phobia* were terms used in the 1930s and 1940s by researchers and practitioners. Contemporary writers generally use the term *school refusal* to describe emotionally based absenteeism, *truancy* to describe unexcused absence from school and nonemotionally based absenteeism, and *school refusal behavior* in the broad sense to describe both emotionally based and nonemotionally based absenteeism. The terms *problematic* and *excessive absenteeism* are used to refer to a student’s absence from a high percentage of classes or school days, regardless of the reason. *School withdrawal* refers to when a parent or guardian legally withdraws a child from school

TABLE 1.1. Terms Associated With School Refusal and Truancy

Absenteeism	Excused or unexcused absence from school.
School phobia	An outdated term used to refer to a child’s intense anxiety about being at school.
School refusal	Emotionally based absenteeism from school (e.g., a result of anxiety and/or depression).
Truancy	Unexcused absence from school.
Habitual truancy	Applied to students who are referred to court in violation of state compulsory attendance law.
School refusal behavior	An umbrella term used to refer to students who demonstrate emotionally based school refusal as well as those traditionally referred to as truant.
School withdrawal	Parent’s or legal guardian’s legal withdrawal of a child from school when the family moves, decides to enroll in another school, or chooses to homeschool a child. Also refers to illegal situations such as when the child is kept home as a support person for a parent who is anxious or depressed.
Emotionally based absenteeism	Unexcused absence from school due to emotional difficulties such as anxiety or depression.
Nonemotionally based absenteeism	Unexcused absence from school due to factors such as hanging out with friends, playing video games, being involved in gangs, or engaging in other illegal activities.
Problematic absenteeism	A descriptive term that does not imply cause. For example, as described by Kearney (2008b), students who are absent at least 25% of total school time for at least 2 weeks.

(e.g., the family moves) or illegally withdraws a child from school (e.g., to use the child as a support person for a parent who is depressed). The number of terms used to describe students who are habitually absent from school may contribute to the confusion in schools' attempts to solve the problem of excessive absenteeism.

Absenteeism

Absenteeism simply refers to excused or unexcused absence from school. Excused absences include illness or injury reported by a parent or guardian. Excused absences also include vacation time (length of time approved by the school district) and other events such as funerals. Unexcused absences are absences the school district does not consider legitimate and may be related to environmental, social, emotional, or other conditions (Kearney, 2008b).

School Phobia

The early psychoanalytical writers introduced the notion that some children stayed home from school because of anxiety, rather than because they were delinquents engaging in truancy (Kearney, 2001). Broadwin (1932) described a form of truancy from the perspective of a child who wants to stay home because of an intense fear of something happening to his or her mother: “While in school suddenly an idea comes into my mind, that something terrible is happening to mother, the house is on fire and she is being burnt, or my mother is being run over by a truck and being killed” (Broadwin, 1932, p. 254).

Broadwin called this phenomena “a deep-seated neurosis of the obsessional type” (p. 254). He described the instinctual drives and unconscious feelings at play from a psychoanalytical perspective (i.e., the child’s strong attachment to the mother accompanied by hostile attitudes toward her). Partridge (1939) described a form of psychoneurotic truancy whereby separation-anxious children have difficulty separating from an overprotective parent.

In 1941, Johnson, Falstein, Szurek, and Svendsen, from the Institute for Juvenile Research in Chicago, published an article outlining two case studies of what they called school phobia. The authors defined school phobia as a “deep-seated psychoneurotic disorder fairly sharply differentiated from the more frequent and common delinquent variety of school truancy” (Johnson et al., 1941, p. 702). They further defined school phobia as intense terror about being at school. They noted that the duration of school phobia could range from cases that “clear quickly” to those requiring “intense treatment” (Johnson et al., 1941, p. 702). Fourteen years later, in 1955, Johnson called the term *school phobia* a misnomer, because most often the etiology underlying what was then known as school phobia was, in fact, separation anxiety (Johnson, 1957).

School Refusal

In the 1980s and 1990s an acceptance was emerging—that emotionally based school avoidance could be caused not only by separation anxiety but also by other forms of anxiety or depression. Thus the term *school refusal* began to be used by some practitioners and researchers (Burke & Silverman, 1987; Last, Hansen, & Franco, 1998; Last & Strauss, 1990). This term recognizes the wide range of causes and risk factors associated with attendance problems (Burke & Silverman, 1987; King, Ollendick, & Tonge, 1995). School refusal refers not only to those students with separation anxiety but also to students who miss school because of other types of anxiety, including social anxiety, performance anxiety, generalized anxiety, panic, and posttraumatic stress disorder. Simple phobias may be present for some students (fear of the fire alarm or the school bus), but the notion that anxiety-based school refusal is a result of a true phobia associated with objects at school or the school building itself has been replaced with a broader, more inclusive conceptualization of the issue (Kearney, 2001). Many forces—not just separation anxiety or a phobia—may be at play when a child refuses to go to school.