

## Strategies for anxious children and school refusal – Associate Professor Glenn Melvin

### Transcript

- 0:00:00 - 0:00:16 [Music]
- 0:00:17 - 0:00:26 So first up, what is school refusal? So with school refusal we see children and teens experience severe difficulty getting along to school.
- 0:00:26 - 0:00:38 This occurs in the context of emotional distress about attending school and this can take the form of anxiety, and in teens it can be anxiety and depression as well.
- 0:00:38 - 0:00:47 So kids who are engaging in school refusal stay home with their parents' knowledge so the mum or dad know where they are sort of during the day.
- 0:00:48 - 0:01:04 We see in these kids an absence of conduct sort of problems that might be more characteristic of truancy. For school refusal we also require some effort by the parents to enforce attendance and that varies of course from parent to parent.
- 0:01:05 - 0:01:22 School refusal is different to truancy. So truancy, we might know as wagging, is unauthorized absence from school where there's some effort by the older child or teen to conceal their absence. They'll protest and say no, no they were at school that day.
- 0:01:23 - 0:01:37 School refusal also is contrasted with school withdrawal where we see parents permitting a child or teen to stay home and this can vary from having extra vacations, going down to the beach during school term
- 0:01:37 - 0:01:47 but it also can occur when a parent will require a child or teen to stay home for their own needs, for their support, or to help out say in a family business.
- 0:01:48 - 0:02:01 In many cases, children whose parents have withdrawn them from school are quite happy to attend. So what's the most effective way to support students back to school after a period of absence through refusal?
- 0:02:02 - 0:02:18 Well we need a team approach. We need the young person involved, we need parents involved, we need the school teachers involved, wellbeing staff, and there might also be an external provider such as a psychologist or social worker or a psychiatrist involved.
- 0:02:19 - 0:02:30 So first of all, in effectively supporting a child back to school we need to have a comprehensive understanding of the problem. Why did the refusal emerge now?
- 0:02:31 - 0:02:44 What might the child be fearful of or struggling with at school? Is the child under any stress? They have health problems? And we need the team to contribute to developing this understanding.



- 0:02:44 - 0:02:49 Teachers will have a view, welfare staff will have a view, and this information needs to be brought together.
- 0:02:50 - 0:03:03 Next step, after we have a comprehensive understanding of what might be happening for the child, we need a plan for school return and everyone's input into that plan, including the young person, is required.
- 0:03:04 - 0:03:14 And then we need to work out whose job is who's so a psychologist or a school counsellor might be the one providing support to the child to manage anxiety.
- 0:03:14 - 0:03:23 Teachers might be involved in adjusting workloads, wellbeing staff member at the school might provide support upon the child's arrival at school.
- 0:03:24 - 0:03:33 Usually there's a gradual return to school after a period of absence through refusal, but some students will prefer to come back full time.
- 0:03:34 - 0:03:51 A child's return to school should be structured around a plan and the plan should describe when the child is expected at school, what they'll be doing when they're at school, and it's often useful for the child to have some say in the plan that helps them get back in.
- 0:03:51 - 0:04:00 The plan also should be written down or typed up and emailed to all involved in the teaching and wellbeing of the child at school.
- 0:04:02 - 0:04:15 Teachers can play an important role in responding to a child who's been refusing to come to school. They can mobilize others within the school, wellbeing staff, school counsellors to help form a team to respond to a child.
- 0:04:15 - 0:04:22 They can provide a space within the school where a child can settle if they're feeling anxious or overwhelmed
- 0:04:23 - 0:04:35 A space to calm down before resuming class. That might be in a wellbeing centre or space within the school. School staff might be able to support connection with other peers within the school
- 0:04:36 - 0:04:44 Might be able to provide practical assistance for students who are struggling academically, those are becoming anxious about their school work
- 0:04:44 - 0:04:53 They might be able to provide modest rewards or incentives for coming to school such as extra time doing a favoured activity at school.
- 0:04:54 - 0:05:08 It's important for teachers to keep I touch with family. Sometimes it can take a while for students who've missed a lot of school to really settle in to a routine of attending each day
- 0:05:09 - 0:05:24 So keeping in touch with parents can help put out spot fires or dramas that might emerge for the child and it's important to keep an eye on students who've had a history of refusing school
- 0:05:24 - 0:05:34 Particularly transition times at the start of term, the start of year, after school holidays, because these might be times where we see a slip up in attendance.
- 0:05:34 - 0:05:43 [Music]