



SPOTTING SIGNS OF POTENTIAL SCHOOL REFUSAL & ACTIONS THAT CAN HELP

by Fran Morgan

As in so many things, prevention is better than 'cure', or in this case interventions post-school refusal. So how does a school or parent spot the potential signs of school refusal?

Below are a few signs that might ring alarm bells. It's just possible that if you can spot it early enough, you can stop it escalating.

'Two different children' syndrome

This is my term for parents' evenings where it seems as though you're talking about two different children: one bright, helpful and well-behaved at school and the other full of challenging behaviours at home. Schools will often assume it must be a 'home' issue, but in reality it's often the stress of coping at school that causes the outbursts at home. It's useful to consider what a school might say if the child was kicking off at school – this might also be considered a 'home' issue, even if the parents were saying the child was fine at home.

Bad behaviour

When children can't cope they'll tend to protect themselves in one of two ways – by shutting down and bottling everything up, or by kicking off and letting it all out. If children are badly behaved it can sometimes be the result of an underlying condition or mental health issue that hasn't yet been assessed or diagnosed. Delays accessing support through CAMHS or the EHCP process compound this problem, but the school can still choose to recognise the effect of these delays and concede that there may be something else going on to trigger this behaviour. Ironically, if your child is excluded for bad behaviour, you may find you have better access to 'exclusion' support than a child that bottles things up until they can no longer cope.

Anxiety-fuelled illness

We know that high levels of stress and anxiety can manifest in physical symptoms such as feeling sick, headaches and stomach aches. Whilst these might have their roots in anxiety, they're still real symptoms. If you notice that these symptoms tend to accompany school 'triggers' (eg. specific lessons, tests, the start of term) then even if your child is still going into school, it could be a sign that there's a problem brewing.

New academic year trigger points

Potential school refusers are likely to be children who were more reluctant to be dropped off at reception when they were younger, or who struggle to go back after school holidays. Teachers



are also under additional pressure at these times and expect pupils to be more anxious, which means that potential school refusers may go unnoticed.

Key transition trigger points

The transition to secondary school (and potentially the transition from secondary to college) is one of the most common triggers for school refusal. Children with EHCPs or those on a SEN register at their primary school may receive extra attention from the secondary school, but children who fall below this threshold – and their parents – will rarely get any special treatment in a large and busy secondary school.

Some secondary schools also hold the view that they need to make their own judgements about their new Year 7 cohort – which means they don't always listen to parents and primary school teachers or invite feedback. There's also a misnomer that 'laying down the law' from Day One keeps new pupils in check – this is unlikely to phase 'troublemakers' and only serves to increase the stress levels of anxious children. Finally, there's a complete shift in attitude towards parents between primary (where they're desperate for parental help with reading, swimming, trips etc.) and secondary ("we'll take it from here, thanks, just drop them at the gate"). Add to this a school which is often four or five times larger than the primary school that the child left a few months ago, a much bigger site, a different teacher for every subject, classes all around the school buildings, an increase in the level and complexity of learning, no staff in the playground at break times it's not hard to see why this is such a key trigger for anxiety and school refusal.

Not talking

Just as with adults, danger looms when there's a difficulty that's not acknowledged and lies hidden. 'Faking it' is hugely stressful and allows children (and adults) to mask problems until they reach a point where they simply can't cope. Some children struggle to talk about their feelings, so this is a tricky one. If you notice that your child has become more reluctant to talk about their school day, then it would be worth trying to get to the bottom of why. Voicing a worry often helps, and if you can encourage your child to tell you as soon as they start to worry about something then you're in a much stronger position to help.

Resilience versus strength of character

Many school refusers are strong characters – and even outwardly extrovert – you have to be pretty determined to refuse school, given the pressure it solicits from every quarter. However, strength of character and resilience are not the same thing, and it's often resilience that gives school refusers a problem.



WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

Try to stay calm

Harder said than done, but our own anxiety will often fuel our child's anxiety. Think swans (gliding gracefully on the surface, legs paddling madly underneath). It's so hard when you are worried and desperate to find out what's going on, then others pile on the pressure, but if you can 'absorb' these external pressures and shield them from your child, it should help to prevent their anxiety levels rising even more.

Build bridges with school

So much of the problem is around a lack of awareness, recognition and understanding about school refusal. Schools and teaching staff are facing huge pressures from funding cuts, increasing admin, attainment targets and there's a real spotlight on attendance. Building a good relationship with school as soon as possible has to help if there are problems further down the line. You might be able to find a 'champion' in your school (and often in other areas like the EHCP process, or with CAMHS) who can provide support when it's needed. If things have gone South already, then an informal mediation-style approach might work, perhaps with a third party helping to find a way through.

Don't wait

You know your child, and you probably know quite early on if they tend to get anxious or have other issues which may affect their ability to cope with school. It's potentially easier to discuss this with teachers at primary level – and because your child probably only has one main teacher they are more likely to understand your concerns – but at secondary level this becomes much more difficult. You'll have to be more insistent – probably with your child's tutor – as soon as you see a problem brewing.

Accept that your child may not be able to explain why

As adults we assume that there's a reason for things, and we like to try and problem-solve. Professionals also want to know 'why?' so that they can get to the root of a problem and suggest appropriate therapies/interventions. The problem with school refusal is that often children can't explain why they can't 'do' school, they just know they can't. For adults this is hugely frustrating (we know they can't, what we want to know is why). But many children can't explain it. They know they should be able to cope with school, they know that other children cope perfectly well with school, they're often very bright so they understand that what they're feeling isn't rational, but they still can't explain it. Perhaps they're terrified that if someone



delves too deep, they'll discover something really scary, so they shut down and refuse to engage. Whilst this won't help you with assessments and diagnoses, if you can accept that your child doesn't know why and convince them that you believe them and won't keep asking, then this might remove some of the stress at home. Trying to encourage them from an early age to talk about how they feel/the good and bad things that happen to them each day has to be helpful at spotting problems early on. We're all time-poor, which makes this even more important. If they don't like to talk, one way round it is to deflect the conversation to you/someone else/a character in a book to encourage them to talk about their feelings in a safer way.

Trust your gut instinct

When we're thrown into the unknown, we look to experts for advice. Often parents find that the advice they're given feels at odds with their own thoughts about their child. Sometimes that advice is accompanied by an expectation that you won't agree, but that you should trust the expert as this is an area in which the expert has in-depth knowledge and you do not. I think it's safe to say that not all professional advice is right for your child and your family, and that you should make your own judgement.

There are some ideas around school refusal that can make matters worse, whilst schools and support services may have their own agenda which doesn't necessarily 'fit' with your child's needs. As a parent you know your child better than anyone. Don't force them to do something if you feel it's wrong. Don't simply accept the advice you're given by the various professionals.

There are two pieces of advice in particular that have always worried me:

The first is the 'face the fear and do it anyway' school of thought, which can work but can also lead to 'flooding' and have the reverse effect if the levels of anxiety are too high.

The second is the idea that teachers or other professionals should come to your home to take your child to school. Home needs to be a safe space for children with excessive anxiety, and if this is compromised they'll potentially retreat still further.



WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO?

Be prepared to admit that school refusal exists at your school

Every school will experience difficulties such as bullying at some point, just as every school will have pupils who experience school refusal. Whilst it's uncomfortable to admit, there's a lot that can be done to support parents if the subject is out in the open. A parent support group endorsed by the school would be a great start, allowing parents to support each other whilst allowing staff to understand common issues and start to explore possible interventions.

Mental health is a huge spectrum

There's (quite rightly) a lot of focus in schools on certain aspects of mental health – self-harm, anorexia, the effects of bullying – but excessive anxiety, often the precursor to school refusal, is also a mental health issue. Anxiety is not just a few nerves or being a bit worried and it should be taken very seriously by all involved to prevent long-term mental health problems. By law schools MUST identify and support children with SEND. There is also statutory guidance for schools from the Department for Education on Supporting Pupils with Medical Health Needs and this includes anxiety. Make sure it's included when you're drafting policies and hosting talks around well-being and mental health. Remember that schools should notify the local authority if absence due to illness lasts for over 15 days (consecutive or cumulative). The LA have a duty to ensure that a child receives alternative educational provision whilst absent.

Authorise absence due to illness

Absence due to both physical and mental illness should be accurately recorded. The potential legal implications of unauthorised absences rarely help improve attendance, can add to the child's anxiety and substantially increase the difficulties families face. Attendance should not take priority over health needs and families need your support rather than fines and prosecution.

Consider the influence of other Special Educational Needs & Disabilities

Unrecognised or poorly supported Special Educational Needs & Disabilities can trigger anxiety in school, and many are comorbid with anxiety. Autistic Spectrum Disorders and Sensory Processing Disorders can be particularly significant in creating high levels of anxiety within the school environment. According to recent research, 70% of autistic children also have a mental health difficulty such as anxiety and/or depression (AUTISTICA, 2017).

If a child already has an EHCP, ongoing attendance difficulties could indicate that the EHCP needs to be reviewed as it may not be meeting the child's needs. If a child does not have an EHCP this could indicate they have unmet needs that require assessment for an EHCP.



Be sympathetic and avoid harsh judgements

Please recognise that a 'school refuser' is not lazy or rebellious, instead they are experiencing a mental health difficulty and will want to attend school but find their anxiety overwhelming. Schools can often be reluctant to provide young people with work to do at home, however positive support and regular opportunities to keep up with school work will make it easier for them to reintegrate and not add to their anxiety. If teachers and peers can keep in touch and are encouraged to offer the same sort of support they would offer to a classmate with a long-term physical illness it will make any return easier to manage.

Often young people feel negatively judged and alienated from their school community which also makes reintegration more difficult. The most important thing is to make sure that every member of staff is fully aware of the child's difficulties, how to avoid making their anxiety worse, and to make sure that any plans for a transition back into school are consistently adhered to. Reintegration's fail when there is inconsistency and someone wasn't made aware of a child's needs.

Acknowledge that there is not a quick or easy 'fix'

Anxiety based school refusal is a difficulty that requires an understanding, patient and flexible approach. There will be many small steps forward, but many small steps backwards too. It is crucial that the young person feels that they have a degree of control and the more pressure or criticism they experience the worse their anxiety will become. Allow the child to devise a timetable that builds gradually. This may start with just coming in for lunch for a week or for their favourite lesson but as long as it gradually builds at a child's pace, progress is being made in the right direction.

Desensitisation is based on the idea that a person is gradually exposed to their fear. This is an effective technique, but it is widely misunderstood and wrongly interpreted. Ideally this would be carried out by a qualified therapist, but even when steps such as a reduced timetable are introduced by a school and some compromise is made, they often fail. Why? - Because for desensitisation to work, the person with the phobia **HAS TO BE IN CONTROL**. This seems counterintuitive to adults, but the research is clear. Very small, incremental steps are made, sometimes even starting with just putting a uniform on for the first day and not even leaving the house. Every child is unique and they should be the ones to lead how much they can do each day. The longer a child has been out of school or the more serious the reasons, the longer it can take and the smaller the steps often need to be. Although time-consuming, this allows a child to build in confidence again, learn to recognise and manage their anxiety and this is far more successful.



Regular and open lines of communication

Too often, especially at secondary level, parents don't know who to contact if they have concerns about their child's level of anxiety around school. There needs to be a clear point of contact (ask if you're not sure), and then formalised lines of communication within school to try and prevent any potential school refusal problems escalating.

A nominated member of staff for school refusal

Following on from this, a nominated member of staff for school refusal, distinct from the SEN team, would offer a number of benefits. It would avoid parents being passed between behaviour specialists, attendance officers and SEN staff. The role could include educating school staff and senior management and keeping abreast of the issue in a wider context. It could also include proactive support for parents (see below) and co-developed interventions that could be workable for both parents and school.

Secondary school mentor groups

Although secondary schools usually divide each cohort into smaller tutor groups to take the register and provide 'pastoral care', in reality there is little time for tutors to get to know their pupils and notice when things might be going awry. Rethinking this by providing more time, or by offering a different type of mentor group (this could include older pupil 'buddies') to supplement registration/tutor groups might mean that vulnerable pupils have more opportunities to flag their anxieties, and more chance that others will notice.

A different approach to the new school year

Individual schools could do a lot to reduce potential trigger points at the start of new terms and especially new academic years. Identifying vulnerable pupils and spending extra time making sure they settle into a new routine, with new teachers and potentially classmates, might be all that's needed to reduce anxiety to a manageable level.

Recognise the problems within support services

The problems with CAMHS, EHCPs, social services and the NHS are all well-documented, and make life even more difficult for schools, but schools need to recognise that these problems also compound the situation for school refusers and their families. It means that children who may need to be in a different setting or accessing therapies are stuck and struggling. It's not the school's fault, but it's not the child's fault either. Recognising there's a problem, without insisting on a diagnostic label or 'permission to authorise' absence would at least help parents who have the threat of legal prosecution adding to their worries.