

Difficult Cases: School Refusal

Presenters:

Molly Scharf, MD and Viki Katsetos, MD

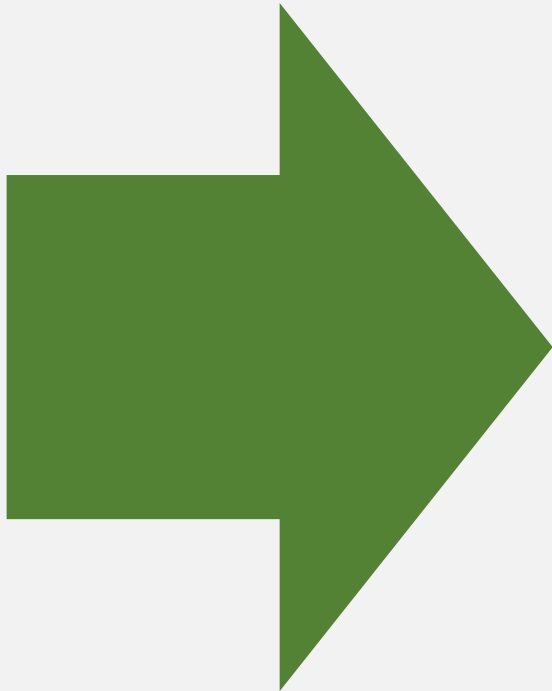
School Refusal

☞ Why is school refusal difficult to manage?

Epidemiology

- Prevalence: 1-5%
- Boys = Girls
- Most common ages:
 - ages 5, 6
 - ages 10, 11
 - But can occur any age!
- No socioeconomic differences

Urgent Situation?



**THE LONGER THE CHILD IS
OUT OF SCHOOL, THE MORE
DIFFICULT IT IS TO RETURN**

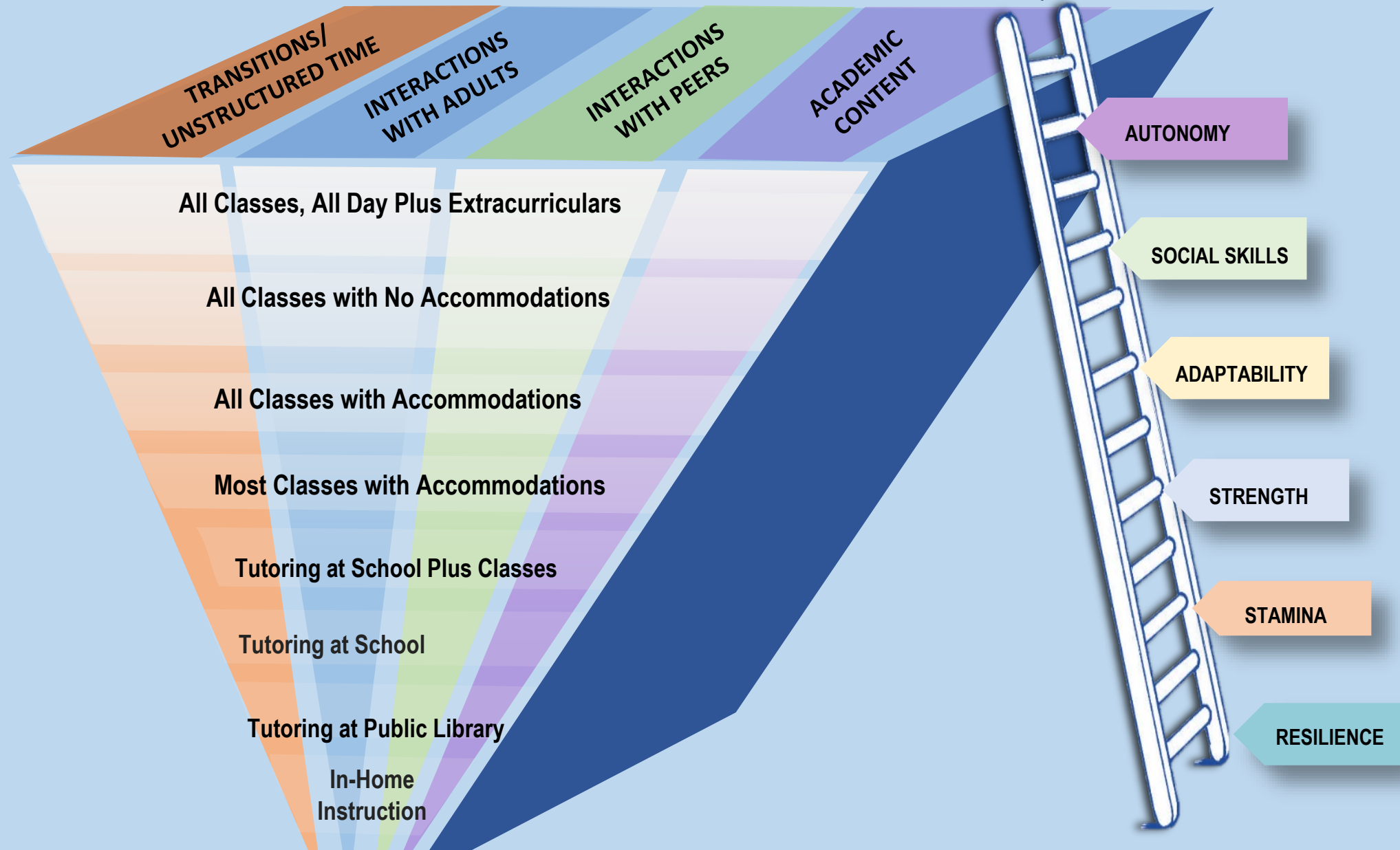
Short-term Consequences

- Poor academic performance
- Family difficulties
- Problems with peer relationships

Long-term Consequences

- Academic underachievement
- Employment difficulties
- Increased risk for psychiatric illness

Ready for Young Adulthood



What does this mean to you (us)?

- ✦ It means intervention/treatment steps to facilitate return to school must start immediately and often before all diagnostic questions are answered!
 - Requires comfort with uncertainty
 - for providers, as well as parents and ultimately the child

Clinical Features

- Gradual and sneaky or sudden onset
- Symptoms may begin after a holiday, vacation, or illness
- Weekends, vacations exacerbate symptoms
- Stressful events – home, school, peers may trigger refusal
- Some have difficulties as they get closer to school
- Some children make no effort to leave home
- Fear, panic symptoms, crying episodes, temper tantrums, threats of self-harm, somatic symptoms

Causes

- Heterogeneous and multifactorial
- Serves different functions depending on the child
- Avoidance of specific fears provoked by the school environment
 - Test-taking situations
 - Bathrooms
 - Cafeterias
- Escape from aversive social situations
 - Children (Bullying)
 - Teachers
- Separation Anxiety
 - Parent, family member

A Variety of Dysfunctional Family Interaction Patterns

- Over-dependency
- Detachment with little interaction among family members
- Isolation with little interaction outside the family unit
- High degree of conflict

Associated Psychiatric Disorders

- School refusal is not a psychiatric diagnosis
- Related emotional distress is significant
- Anxiety and depression most common
- Children: anxiety symptoms
- Adolescents: anxiety and mood disorders

Psychiatric Disorders in Children with School Refusal

(Bernstein et al 1991)

<u>Diagnosis</u>		<u>Percentage</u>
Anxiety Disorders		54%
	Separation Anxiety	20%
	Anxiety Disorder, NOS	12%
	Generalized Anxiety Disorder	8%
	Social Phobia	6%
	Panic Disorder	4.5%
	Panic Disorder with Agoraphobia	3%
	Agoraphobia	.5%
Mood Disorders		52%
	Major Depression	30%
	Dysthymia	22%

Psychiatric Disorders in Children with School Refusal

(Bernstein et al.1991)

<u>Diagnosis</u>		<u>Percentage</u>
Disruptive Behavior Disorders		38%
	Oppositional Defiant Disorder	24%
	Conduct Disorder	3%
	ADHD	6.5%
	Disruptive Behavior Disorder, NOS	5%
Other Disorders		27%
	Adjustment Disorder (with mood and/or anxiety)	26%
	Learning Disorder	5.5%
	Substance Abuse	2.5%
	Other	1.2%

Final Piece of the Assessment

Collaboration with school staff regarding efforts so far to work with the child and family

- History of attendance of this child and siblings
- Review of attendance records, report cards, and any available psycho-educational evaluations

Intervention

- Primary goal – early return to school
- Avoid written excuses for Home Instruction unless a medical condition makes it necessary
- Treatment should focus on underlying psychiatric conditions, family dysfunction, and other contributing factors

Intervention

Because anxious children often present with physical symptoms, the Primary Care Provider may need to take a stand and explain that the problem is a very real physical manifestation of psychological distress and anxiety rather than a sign of a physical illness.

Time for a Role Play!

Treatment

MULTIMODAL, COLLABORATIVE, TEAM APPROACH !!!

- Primary Care Provider
- Child
- Parents
- School Staff
- Mental Health Professional

Treatment – General Principles

- Parent involvement is critical
- Exposure to school is critical

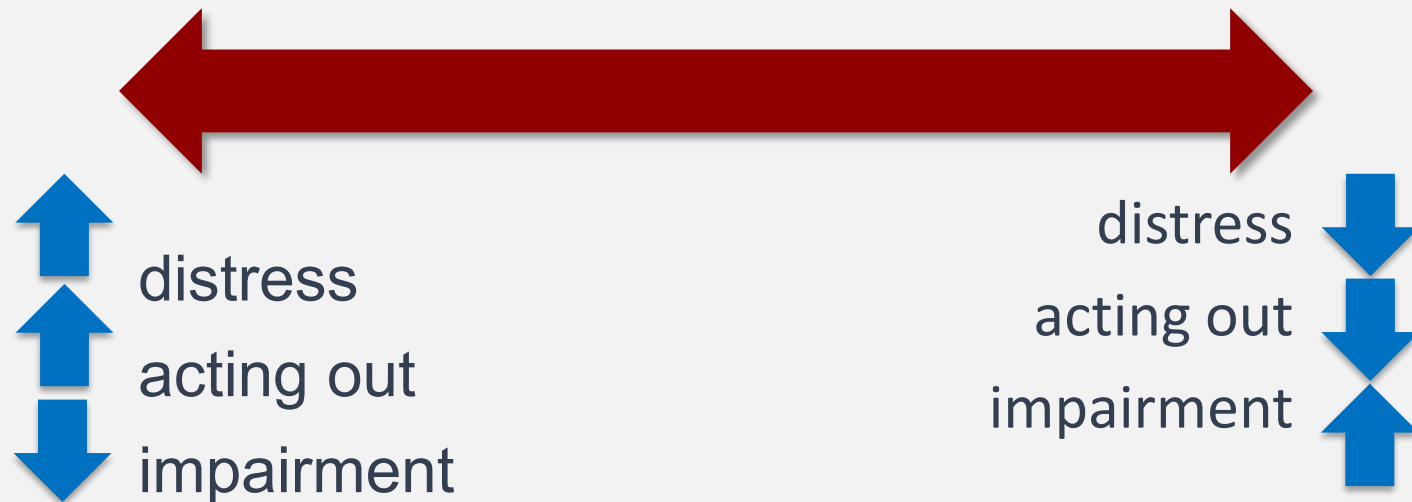
Must take into account:

- Severity of symptoms
- Co-morbid diagnosis
- Family dysfunction
- Parental psychopathology

Where are the child, parents, pediatrician, and therapist on this spectrum? (Teamwork vs. Polarization)

100% Rigid Expectations

100% Accommodations



Treatment

- For younger kids and milder symptoms, working directly with parents and school personnel WITHOUT direct intervention with child can be effective
- With teen and more severe situations, you must work with child, parents, and school staff, especially if difficulties include prolonged school absence, severe co-morbid psychiatric diagnosis, and deficits in social skills.

Behavior Interventions

- Primarily exposure-based treatments
- Focus on child's behaviors rather than intra-psychic conflict
- Emphasize treatment in the context of family and school

Behavior Interventions

- Systematic desensitization
(graded exposure to the school environment)
- Relaxation training
- Emotive imagery
- Contingency management (positive reinforcement)
- Social skills training

Cognitive Behavior Interventions

- Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)
 - Specific instructions for children to help gradually increase their exposure to the school environment
 - Children are encouraged to confront their fears and are taught how to modify negative thoughts

Medication Interventions

- ⚡ Any anxiety disorder (or other disorder) associated with school refusal should be considered severe and treated accordingly.
- ⚡ Medication strategies should ensure adequate trials at adequate doses.
 - Don't wait for medication effect to initiate behavioral interventions
 - Given the urgency, consider quick titrations to target dose

Parent - Teacher Interventions

Consultation with school personnel

- Specific recommendations to school staff to prepare for the child's return
- Make use of the strongest school-based relationships
- Use of positive reinforcement
- Academic, social, and emotional accommodations that taper (Atypical but possible 504 Plan)