School Refusal Behaviour
Information for Teachers and School Staff

Being out of school for a long time because of Covid-19 will have an impact on all pupils. Going back to school and adjusting to the routines involved will be challenging for all children and young people to a greater or lesser extent. For children and young people already experiencing difficulties before school closure, being out of school for such a lengthy period may exacerbate these difficulties. Some may find it difficult to separate from family members/carers and may worry about leaving people they love, particularly if they have seen these people get sick or if they have experienced a bereavement. Some may worry about having social contact or return to other worries they had about school before Covid-19.

This handout is about school refusal behaviour. It explains some of the reasons it occurs and offers suggestions for intervention which are based on psychological knowledge and good practice.

What is school refusal behaviour?
The term school refusal refers to a refusal to attend school or difficulties remaining in school for an entire day. It can result in a pupil missing school for lengthy periods of time or missing specific classes or particular times of the day. It can involve challenging behaviours in the morning as the child or young person attempts to miss school. School refusal behaviour can range from mild sporadic difficulties with school attendance to severe and persistent difficulties that require collaboration with the family/carers and multi-agency input.

What does it look like?
School refusal behaviour often involves both 'externalising' and 'internalizing' behaviours.

> **Externalising or acting-out behaviours** can include not complying with instructions, aggression, temper tantrums, running away, refusal to move, clinging to others, panic symptoms and threats of self-harm.

> **Internalizing or acting-in behaviours** can include anxiety, worry, fear, low mood, tiredness, lethargy, self-consciousness and physical bodily feelings.

What can trigger school refusal behaviour?
There might be no clear or obvious trigger for school refusal. However being out of school for a long time because of Covid-19 may be a trigger for some. Other common reasons why school refusal behaviour can start are family stress or transitions, child or parent illness, changes in classes or teachers, school-based difficulties, separation from parents/carers and extended legitimate absence from school**. If there are clear school-based causes that involve actual threats (e.g. bullying) these must be dealt with.** Sometimes it is the culmination of other factors (e.g. some anxiety about school work, a friendship break-down, a grandparent becoming sick etc.) which are overwhelming and cause a stress response that manifests as school refusal behaviour.

To plan an effective intervention it is important to understand the complex factors that contribute to school refusal behaviour.

1. **Consider the context of the school refusal behaviour**
   The child, family, school and community can all be relevant factors in school refusal.

Table 1 *Context of Behaviour*:

Child	Family	School	Community
▪ Temperamental style ▪ Anxieties about relationships with other pupils ▪ Fear of failure ▪ Low self-confidence ▪ Fear/difficulties with separation from family members ▪ Worries about family members' wellbeing ▪ Physical illness ▪ Over-dependence on parent(s) ▪ History of absenteeism ▪ Trauma ▪ Learning or developmental difficulties ▪ Gender dysphoria	▪ Recent family changes due to e.g. illness, divorce, unemployment, moving house ▪ Recent loss or separation ▪ Mental/physical health difficulties in the family ▪ High levels of family stress ▪ Difficult family interactions ▪ Parental over-involvement or under-involvement ▪ Parent(s) easily stressed by young person's anxiety/protests ▪ Parent work schedule ▪ Parenting skills ▪ Young carers	▪ Transition to new class/school ▪ Difficulties in specific subjects ▪ Difficulties with other pupils ▪ Difficulty with staff member(s) ▪ Bullying ▪ Academic demands ▪ Educational needs not catered for ▪ Examinations/tests	▪ Lack of support services ▪ Conflict, tension in neighbourhood ▪ Geographical and economic factors ▪ Cultural values

Adapted from West Sussex Educational Psychology Service: Emotionally Based School Avoidance Good practice guidance for schools and support agencies

2. **Understand the function of the school refusal behaviour for the pupil**
   Children and young people may refuse school because of the prolonged absence from school due to COVID-19 and/or for reasons involving **one or more** of the functions shown below. They may initially refuse school to avoid feeling anxious but then enjoy the attention they get at home. They may miss school for a long time and then become anxious about returning to new classes or teachers.

Table 2: *Function(s) of Behaviour*

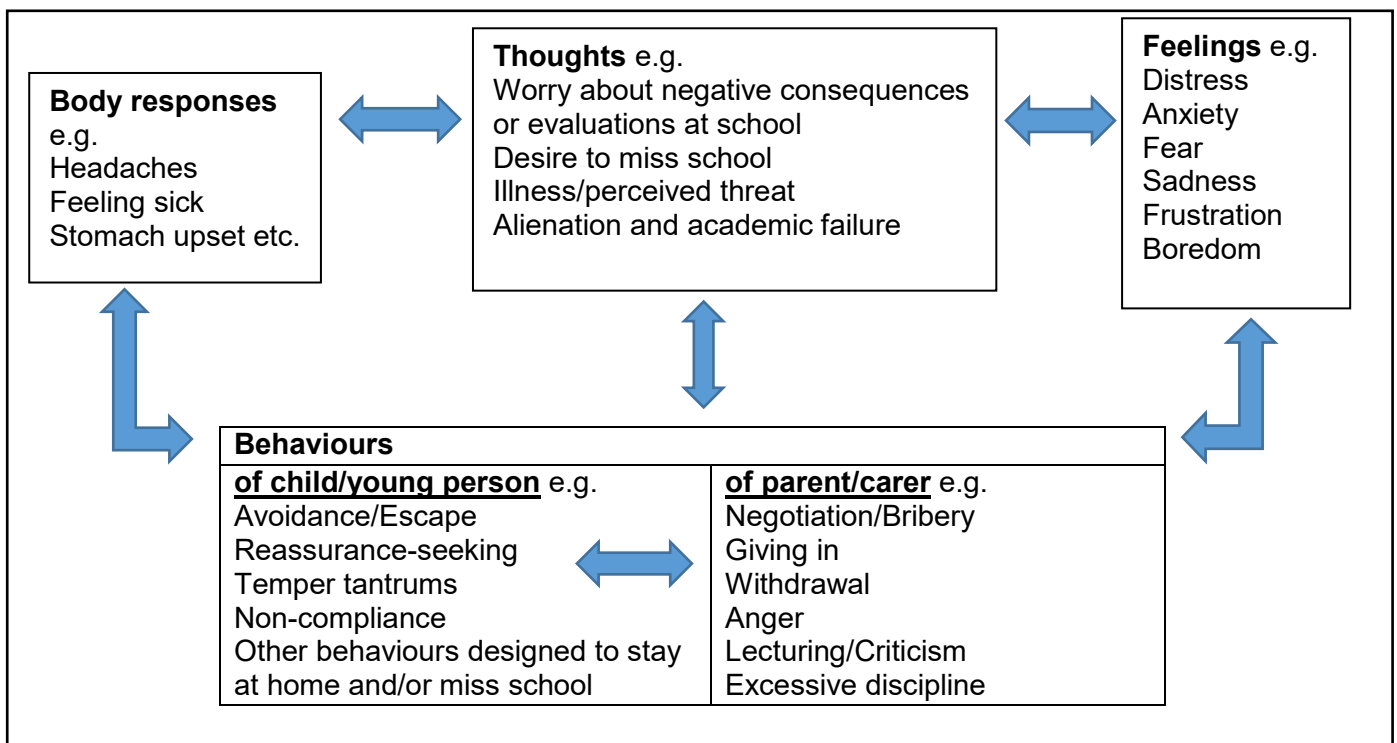| Function of Behaviour	Presentation in School	Intervention
▪ **To avoid uncomfortable feelings.** ▪ For example the pupil fears evaluation on entering classrooms, talking in front of other pupils, answering in class, going to lunch etc.	▪ Student feels a general dread, nervousness or sadness in school. ▪ They may complain of feeling unwell or report physical symptoms. ▪ Student may skip specific times in the school day by hiding in the bathroom, or may choose to sit near an	▪ Psycho-education about anxiety ▪ Teaching relaxation techniques to manage body responses and unhelpful thoughts ▪ Teaching social skills, problem-solving and coping skills ▪ Encourage practices to gradually confront feared situations. Start with most manageable situations and use techniques to support the

	exit or back of the room.	pupil to self-regulate.
▪ **To get rewards** that are more powerful than school attendance. **e.g. getting attention** from significant people or staying at home to make sure that people are safe and well and **avoid the anxiety of separating** from them. ▪ **Gaining something rewarding** outside of school and engaging in preferred activities e.g. online gaming/shopping being with friends	▪ Even in school these pupils may want to call their parents/carers, they may run out of the school, or 'act out' in the morning or during the day to get sent home. ▪ They often miss sections of the school day or the entire day.	▪ Collaborate with parents/carers to work out how they can encourage the pupil to attend school ▪ Support the parents to establish morning routines ▪ Focus on positive behaviours. ▪ Regular positive contact with parents to celebrate successes ▪ Limit rewards and attention child receives during non-attendance ▪ Help the child or young person to view school as a rewarding place that supports the pupil's values and future goals ▪ Collaborate with other agencies.

Intervention planning

School refusal behaviour can be complex. Where possible, it should be addressed by a collaborative partnership between school and parents/carers. Have conversations with the child or young person **when they and you are calm**.

Engage the young person and help them feel listened to and understood. Ask them to describe what happens in terms of **thoughts, feelings, physical bodily responses and behaviours,** for example:

Table 3 *Children/Young People's Thoughts/ Feelings/ Physical Responses/ Behaviours***:**

Body responses e.g.
Headaches
Feeling sick
Stomach upset etc.

Thoughts e.g.
Worry about negative consequences or evaluations at school
Desire to miss school
Illness/perceived threat
Alienation and academic failure

Feelings e.g.
Distress
Anxiety
Fear
Sadness
Frustration
Boredom

Behaviours

of child/young person e.g.	**of parent/carer** e.g.
Avoidance/Escape Reassurance-seeking Temper tantrums Non-compliance Other behaviours designed to stay at home and/or miss school	Negotiation/Bribery Giving in Withdrawal Anger Lecturing/Criticism Excessive discipline

The sequence of these components can vary but can typically involve:

a) Initial physical anxiety symptoms b) Distress c) Desire to miss school d) Non-compliant behaviour e) Parental acquiescence	a) Initial specific worries about school b) Physical anxiety symptoms c) Reassurance-seeking behaviours

OR

1. Identify the **triggers** and any **behaviours that** keep the school refusal behaviour going (see table 1). Bear in mind the school refusal behaviour may be justified in some way, for example bullying. However, in many cases, the triggers for school refusal are unclear.

2. Think about the **impact of contextual factors** e.g. parents' work schedule, recent bereavement, parental separation as well as **any protective or supportive factors or strengths** there may be e.g. the child's or young person's interests at school, their support network such as particular friendships with other children and important relationships with adults within and outside school.

3. **Develop positive relationships** at school. Consider providing **structured peer support** at school e.g. through a mentor system or using a **key adult.** Use these valued relationships as rewarding positive factors to encourage and acknowledge successful attendance especially if the function of school refusal is attention from significant people.

4. **Remove any obstacles that might prevent success** if you can e.g. ensure work and activities are provided that the pupil is motivated to try and is able to do.

5. **Collaboratively generate possible solutions** to problems with the pupil and a key family member. Acknowledge their feelings and their difficulty but convey a belief that they can cope and reassure them that the school will help them to learn to do this. This develops their sense of efficacy. The more the child or young person feels part of the plan and empowered to make changes the better.

6. Develop **a consensual timeline for return to school** by identifying more positive aspects of school for the young person and begin by asking them to attend for these parts of the day. This will reconnect them with school and social interactions that take place there.

7. If separation anxiety is a relevant factor consider using **transitional objects** to represent the important people to the child or young person when they are in school e.g. have a photo in their pencil case or an object belonging to their significant person to reassure them that the person is supporting them even if they are not physically with them.

8. Teach the child or young person about anxiety and **how thoughts, feelings, body responses and school refusal behaviours can be linked** and the function of these behaviours (see the previous section and diagram).

9. Support them to notice and monitor their own feelings, thoughts, body responses and behaviours (**self-monitoring**) and help them to develop **calming or self-regulation** skills in each of these areas:

   a. Teach them emotional vocabulary to label and talk about their feelings.
   b. Help them recognise that thoughts are just thoughts and they can come and go like cars on a road or clouds in the sky. Help them to work out helpful ways of thinking about school.
   c. Provide them with strategies to help them calm their body responses.
   d. Encourage them to try difficult things rather than avoid them so that they learn to manage their anxiety and so they are exposed to situations they initially perceived as threatening and learn that the situations are not as bad as they thought they would be.

10. **Aim for early return to school**, even if only for a very short period each day and build from there. This is graded exposure and involves a graduated return to school.

11. **Enhance support and supervision** for the pupil in school from key adults and peers. Children and young people with **special educational needs** should have a suitable resourced and planned special education programme in place that is communicated to the pupil and family prior to returning to school.

12. **Establish routines** and **allow time** for preparation and transition - **be flexible**, allow for small delays. Expect some **set-backs** but do not give up.

13. Plan with the pupil and their family to **prevent relapse**. Ask parents/carers to work with you and tell you about any difficulties as soon as they occur.

14. Be **constructive in your feedback** to the pupil and their family and praise both effort and success. Support the parents/carers in developing their understanding and skills to help the young person.

15. Do not question the child or young person about the reasons for their absenteeism.

16. **Work collaboratively** with other agencies if they are involved.

Table 4 *Components of intervention*:

Components of intervention for school refusal		
Child/Young person	**Parent/caregivers**	**School**
▪ Engagement ▪ Problem solving skills ▪ Relaxation training ▪ Social skills training ▪ Focus on helpful thoughts ▪ Graduated return to school ▪ Relapse prevention	▪ Discussing concerns ▪ Problem-solving ▪ Psycho-education ▪ Practice morning routines and coping behaviours ▪ Strategies to manage parents/carers own emotions-identify unhelpful thoughts of parents/guardians ▪ Relapse prevention-review and plan	▪ Prepare behaviour management strategies for return to school ▪ Supportive member of staff to greet and help pupil settle ▪ Other pupils identified as support ▪ Curriculum/ timetabling adjustments ▪ Create positive reinforcing experiences in school ▪ Staged reintroduction to classes ▪ Monitoring attendance ▪ Maintain regular contact with family/carers ▪ Keep a record of attendance and interventions

Have hope- there may be setbacks but with the right support to develop skills and with supportive relationships in school, children and young people can successfully return to attending school full-time.