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# School Refusal Among Adolescents: An Exploration of Cause and Interventions

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Stacy Quam

**School Refusal Among Adolescents: An Exploration of Cause and Interventions**

A Capstone Project submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Master of Science Degree in  
Professional Development and Counselor Education at  
Winona State University

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Winona State University

College of Education  
Counselor Education Department

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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CAPSTONE PROJECT

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**School Refusal Among Adolescents: An Exploration of Cause and Interventions**

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

Stacy Quam

Has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE 695 – Capstone Project

Course Instructor in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Science Degree in

Counselor Education

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### **Abstract**

This capstone project relates to school refusal among adolescents. It was designed to research student reasoning for school refusal as well as suitable interventions for high school students. This project was initiated because of a concern for the welfare of students with attendance issues and specifically investigates the reasoning among adolescents in high school who meet at-risk criteria. This research seeks to provide professionals information about developmental theories related to school refusal. The research serves to inform their practice by identifying ways to improve student attendance through intervention. These various forms of intervention could improve the well-being of these students. This study could also improve and possibly diminish the existence of school refusal at this school.

*Keywords:* school refusal, school phobia, adolescent anxiety

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### **Introduction**

School refusal is the reluctance or refusal to go to school or to remain there. School refusal is associated with school phobia because of the increased intense anxiety associated with school (Kearney, 2008b; Thambirajah, De-Hayes, & Grandison, 2008). Predictors of excessive absenteeism include family, school, peer and individual factors (Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams, & Dalicandro, 1998; Fallis & Opotow, 2003; McShane, Walter, & Rey, 2001). School absenteeism is a diverse problem, as it happens for many reasons (Dube and Orpinas, 2009).

School refusal can have several different causes, can involve considerable emotional distress for the child and can have negative longer-term effects such as academic difficulty, dropping out and even adjustment problems in adulthood (Kearney, 2008b). The severity and effects of school refusal are interrelated and can have overwhelming effects on one another. School refusal has been studied for many years and it has been determined that there are devastating effects for students who refuse to attend school on a regular basis. Even so, it is still a phenomenon that prevents academic success. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to explore reasons and identify possible interventions for school refusal behaviors.

### **Review of Literature**

Nearly every school asserts that the major goal of classroom instruction is improvement of children's learning (Sigelman & Rider, 2015, pg. 315). Learning and development involve similar brain processes, and as such, are nearly synonymous. Development for one individual in school can occur intellectually, physically and socially throughout the course of a school day. When students refuse to go to school, their development and learning are affected. Ideally, students would make the decision to achieve academically, simply because they realize the value of a good education and that it is necessary to achievement in life. This connection is unfortunately not always made in adolescents.

A good education is a key to a fulfilling life (Brisbane, 2010, pg. 542). Specific school factors such as poor academic and social support, boredom in school and bullying have been hypothesized to be related to non-attendance (Lauchlan, 2003; Kearney & Silverman, 1996; Kearney, 2008a). While educators typically strive for a positive, supportive relationship with all students regardless of their ability, it may be difficult to make connections with all students. The relationships between teachers and students could also be directly related to school refusal and truancy (Havik, T., Bru, E., & Ertesvag, S. K., 2015, pg. 224). Supportive teacher-student relationships may protect against stress and negative emotions which could be risk factors for school refusal (Murberg & Bru, 2009).

### **Theories on School Refusal**

Major theorists such as Freud, Erikson, Watson, Skinner, Piaget, Bandura and Bronfenbrenner have done research and studies related to school refusal. They have developed their theories as to why adolescents choose not to attend or stay at school. Developmental problems stem from events that took place during infancy, childhood or adolescence. This foundational research is still used today in relation to this topic.

**Freud.** Sigmund Freud stated that individuals who refuse to attend school are quite often suffering from psychological problems, especially anxiety or depression (Kearney, 2008b; Richards & Hadwin, 2011). Their parents may also be suffering from mental illness (Bahali, Tahiroglu, Avci, & Seydaoglu, 2011). Much of his research related to a person's earliest conflicts in a family. According to Freud's structural model of personality, the psyche's three systems, the id, ego and superego, are characterized by distinct roles and varying levels of consciousness. He conceptualized the id, driven by pleasure, as primarily unconscious and the superego, embodying social constraints and moral imperatives, as both conscious and unconscious (Ryckman, 2004).

**Erickson.** Erik Erickson would theorize that a child refusing to attend school has unresolved conflicts from earlier stages of development. According to Erickson's theory, an individual goes through eight developmental stages, in each of which he must face and cope with a central psychosocial problem or crisis. An individual's resolution of each of the crisis is supposedly reflected in the alternative basic senses, or attitudes, which develop as the outcome of each crisis stage. These attitudes theoretically contribute to an individual's psychosocial effectiveness and subsequent personality development (Munley, 1975, pg. 314).

**Watson.** John Watson believed that conditioning was the basic process involved in the development of human fears. (Powell, Digdon, Harris & Smithson, 2014, pg. 600). He investigated whether school refusal is developed as a phobia or anxiety disorder, resulting from traumatic experiences during school. He believed that fears could be learned. Fears from classical conditioning can also be unlearned if the feared stimulus is corresponding with happy emotions (Sigelman & Ryder, 2015, pg. 46).

**Skinner.** Similarly, B. F. Skinner looked at a behavioral approach, and would look at the consequences of going to school versus staying home. If the reinforcement of staying home would be greater than the reinforcement of staying at school for the adolescent, they may choose to stay home. If the consequences of staying home were more severe, the adolescent may choose to go to school (Kearney, 2008b). On the basis of operant theory of learning, (Skinner, 1953), Kearney and Silverman (1993) developed the functional model of school refusal behavior (FMSRB) in a clinical setting to understand child-motivated school refusal behavior. This model comprises assessment of negative and positive reinforcing behaviors through four functional profiles that describe why a child is not attending school. Some children may have more than one functional profile, and therefore, behaviors may be both negatively and positively reinforced (Kearney & Silverman, 1993).

**Bandura.** Albert Bandura would use his observational learning theory to link the adolescent's anxious behavior at school to learning anxious behavior from other students. Theories of behavior or punishment would also be linked to this perspective. With the existence of self-efficacy, one would also look at what the adolescent believes will occur if they do or do not attend school (Wilson & Trainin, 2007).

**Piaget.** Jean Piaget would look at home life and school like Bandura, but he would also look at the student's stage of cognitive development. If an adolescent has not reached the formal operations stage, they may not be able to think about the long-range consequences of their actions. Thus, linking attending school to success in life would not be possible at this stage (Maric, Heyne, de Heus, van Widenfelt, & Westenberg, 2012).

**Bronfenbrenner.** Urie Bronfenbrenner would look at the many environmental systems in which the child is developing to see how they all relate with each other. Problems could relate to school, family, peers or even cultural differences affecting the decision to not attend school. Bronfenbrenner would assume that it was several systems affecting school refusal (Kearney, 2008b; Lyon & Cotler, 2009; Thambirajah et al., 2008).

### **Reasoning for School Refusal**

Though theoretical ideas may still be used today in determining reasoning for school refusal, many professionals working with students today recognize the various issues surrounding the problem as well as the importance for intervention at an early stage of educational development. This study intends to explore students' expressed reasons for school refusal through interviews. The data from the interviews will be compared to current theories of school refusal to identify which, if any, of the theories seem to match the interview data.

Many factors causing school refusal have been identified, including making home a more appealing option (Heyne, Rollings, King, & Tonge, 2002; Kearney & Beasley, 1994; Lauchlan,

2003; Lyon & Cotler 2007; Kearney, 2008b). These factors include bullying or other threats to safety, separation anxiety, coping ability, difficulties with classroom routines, difficulty with peer or teacher relationships, low academic self-concept and exam pressure. Some secondary causes that have been identified include, a lack of monitoring of bathrooms, corridors, and playground areas by staff, school climate and a pupil sense of connectedness to the school community, authoritarian management styles, performance-oriented classrooms, bereavement or illness of a family member, and transition to a new educational environment. These factors may be mutually exclusive, operate simultaneously or be in complete interaction with each other (Nuttall & Woods, 2013).

Family environment and parenting practices can also be factors in school refusal. Youth who are raised in families with high conflict or have withdrawn parents have also been known to demonstrate school refusal and other attendance problems (Kearney, 2008; Kearney & Silverman, 1995). These students may be experiencing low parental supervision and in some severe cases, they may be experiencing abuse at home.

Student absenteeism and specifically school refusal behavior are a perplexing and potentially devastating set of problems faced by many school-based health professionals (Kearney & Bensaheb, 2006, pg. 3). The American Association of Family Physicians would recommend including medical providers in school intervention processes as these professionals can diagnose or rule out any underlying medical problems (Fremont, 2003). Students may display a variety of symptoms of anxiety, depression or stress, which may result in the need for a comprehensive medical or psychological evaluation. Symptoms of anxiety, depression or stress may include signs of extreme worries or fears, feeling profoundly sad, hopeless or losing interest in almost all activities (Sigelman and Rider, 2015). Treatment may include behavior interventions, educational support-therapy, parent-teacher interventions or pharmacological

treatment in conjunction with other forms of intervention. The American Psychological Association has published studies showing that there are many levels of school phobia that can be found in students. They may range from being fairly minimal in presentation and clear quickly to requiring intensive treatment (Johnson, Falstein, Szurek & Svendsen, 1941). Although school-based health professionals are commonly confronted with youth who miss school or who attempt to miss school, few recommendations are available in literature to guide their assessment and treatment of this population (Kearney & Bensaheb, 2006, pg. 3).

There are several assessments which could be administered to further examine mental health issues in students. *The School Refusal Assessment Scale-Revised* (SRAS-R; Kearney, 2002b) assesses the relative influence of four functional conditions of school refusal behavior. The four functional conditions assessed include the avoidance of stimuli that provoke negative emotions, the escape from aversive social and/or evaluative situations, the pursuit of attention from significant others and the pursuit of tangible reinforcement outside of school (Gonzalvez et al., 2018). *The Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale-21* (DASS-21; Lovibond and Lovibond, 1995) is a self-report questionnaire with items that measure depression, anxiety and stress. This assessment may help to clarify student reasoning for school refusal as well as other difficulties the student may be experiencing in school.

School refusal behavior is typically marked by internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Internalizing behavior problems refer to symptoms of anxiety, depression or withdrawal, while externalizing behavior problems refer to symptoms of hyperactivity, conduct problems or aggression (Goodman et al., 2010). Youth who refuse to go to school often show internalizing problems such as general and social anxiety, worry, fear, self-consciousness, depression and suicidal behavior, fatigue and somatic complaints (Kearney & Bensaheb, 2006, pg. 4). They may

also show externalizing behavior problems such as defiance and noncompliance, running away from school or home, verbal and physical aggression, temper tantrums and clinging.

### **Recommendations**

Nuttal and Woods (2013) conducted a research study, examining intervention approaches in cases of school refusal. In this research project, they identified interventions and strategies that were successful. When looking at the areas of development for a teen, one can see where these strategies work in relation to areas of development for a teen.

Development can be defined as systematic changes in the individual, occurring between conception and death; such changes can be positive, negative or neutral (Sigelman & Ryder, 2015, pg. 590). The systematic changes for students in relation to human development, fall into three broad domains, which include physical development, cognitive development and psychosocial development. Moral development can also be measured and used in identifying reasoning for decision-making in teens (Sigelman & Ryder, 2015, pg. 4).

Physical development includes the growth of the body and organs, the functioning of physiological systems including the brain, physical signs of aging, changes in motor abilities and so on. Physical reasoning for school refusal may relate to anxiety, depression and mental health concerns (Nuttal & Woods, 2013). Possible interventions may include meeting with the school counselor for individual or group counseling. It may also involve meeting with the school psychologist for tests and assessments.

Cognitive development includes changes and continuities in perception, language, learning, memory, problem solving and other mental processes (Sigelman & Rider, 2015). Cognitive reasoning for not attending school may relate to difficulty with academic content or test anxiety (Nuttal & Woods, 2013). Some interventions for these students may include

academic help, tutoring, flexible and interactive approaches to ensure the student is able to access learning.

Psychosocial development includes changes and carryover in personal and interpersonal aspects of development, such as motives, emotions, personality traits, interpersonal skills and relationships, and roles played in the family and larger society (Sigelman & Ryder, 2015).

Psychosocial developmental reasoning for not attending school may relate to difficulty with peer relationships, separation anxiety and a low academic self-concept (Nuttal & Woods, 2013).

Students struggling socially and emotionally should be identified to teachers and encourage staff members to connect with this student. Encouragement and positive interactions can be helpful in these situations as well.

Moral development involves the ability of an individual to distinguish between right and wrong and base decision-making on these views (Sigelman & Ryder, 2015). The decision to not attend school may relate to the student not having support to attend school, thus seeing the decision to refuse to go to school as right, not wrong (Nuttal & Woods, 2013). In these situations, school staff may want to encourage the student to attend school because of the overall rewards of education. They may also want to explain the possible consequences of not attending school. This may relate to examining future goals after high school, truancy and difficulty later in life.

Recommendations for all students struggling with school refusal include providing an overall positive experience (Nuttal & Woods, 2013). This may include providing opportunities for the student to make positive contributions at home as well as at school. It also may include a flexible and individualized approach to ensure the ability to access learning. Parental engagement and being sure that needs are met in the family are also of importance. These actions may help to increase feelings of safety, security and a sense of belonging. This may also affect

the student's self-confidence, self-esteem and value of self. An increase in self-confidence, self-esteem and value of self for the student may have an impact on their motivation in school as well as their aspirations to succeed.

The role of professionals working with these students should include collaboration between parents, teachers, counselors, administrators as well as other professionals working with students. Experts recommend that schools set a standardized absence threshold and then discuss at-risk students in regular school staff meetings (Kearney, 2008). The threshold or limit may include missing 25% of total school time across two weeks or missing 10 days in any 15-week period, for example. Regular monitoring of progress or a decline, which includes grades, attendance, as well as over-all observable data relating to the student's well-being. A compilation of potential interventions that can be used by professionals is available in Appendix A.

### **Conclusion**

School refusal affects the lives of many individuals each day. Reasoning for school refusal varies from student to student. The effects of school refusal also vary, but most certainly impacts these individuals in their lives on a short and long-term basis, depending on the severity. This study looks at the individual reasoning for school refusal among students who meet at-risk criteria. After the duration of this study, intervention recommendations should be considered. These recommendations would hopefully improve the student's attendance at school.

Current research shows themes related to school refusal and developmental problems uncovered by theory. The information learned through this research project could be used to identify some of the most prominent reasons for school refusal in today's students. After interviewing students, parents and teachers and themes have emerged, it would be recommended

that school professionals look at the associations between reasoning and developmental theories. This project could help guide school professionals in various settings to reduce school refusal.

The individual and the physical and social contexts with which he interacts are inseparable parts of a larger system in which everything affects everything else (Sigelman & Ryder, 2015, pg. 51). Development in one individual depends on the multidimensional interaction of these numerous influences. Theorists all have different views on where the problem stems from in relation to school refusal. It most likely is a combination of these numerous influences.

After viewing different theories related to school refusal, three main categories of development can be identified as being the main reasoning related to school refusal, including moral, psychosocial, cognitive and physical. These interconnected areas of development all may be contributing to school refusal. Some main contributing factors may relate to family, school, peer and individual factors. These factors should be considered as intervention plans are identified.

### **Author's Note**

Throughout the duration of this study, I have been viewing from the perspective of a parent, teacher and future school counselor. My first and foremost goal is to improve the well-being of the student who is refusing to go to school. Through this study, I am confident that a connection could be made to link the reasoning for school refusal to developmental theories in every scenario. Steps could be taken by professionals to continue research to help these students through intervention methods. After steps were taken to help these students, data could show progress or lack of improvement in attendance. Some limitations may include participation by these students who have not had interest in attending school. They may also decide that this is

not a study they want to be part of. Rationale for this study is justified in many ways as this work could improve the well-being of students in this school, way beyond the worry of limitations that may be faced. This work could improve or possibly diminish the existence of school refusal in high school settings.

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### Appendix A

#### Recommendations:

School Refusal Reasoning	Intervention Recommendations
<p><b>Moral:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• no consequences for school refusal</li> <li>• no support for attending school</li> <li>• difficulties with classroom routines</li> <li>• little connection to achievement</li> </ul> <p><b>Example:</b> An example of moral development influencing school refusal behavior would be when a student states that their parents didn't graduate from high school, so they shouldn't have to either.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• avoid harsh consequences</li> <li>• discussion about the short a long-term impact of going to school</li> <li>• form better connections with services in school</li> </ul>
<p><b>Psychosocial:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• social issues</li> <li>• few connections to teachers and staff</li> <li>• separation anxiety</li> <li>• poor coping ability</li> <li>• difficulty with relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identify staff connections</li> <li>• collaborative work between professionals</li> <li>• encouragement and positive attention</li> <li>• provide experiences where student can be successful</li> </ul>

<p><b>Example:</b> An example of psychosocial development influencing school refusal behavior would be when a student states that they do not want to attend school because they don't have any friends and their teachers don't like them.</p>	
<p><b>Cognitive:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• academic difficulties</li> <li>• test anxiety</li> <li>• low academic self-concept</li> </ul> <p><b>Example:</b> An example of cognitive development influencing school refusal behavior would be when a student does not want to attend school because they struggle with reading.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• academic tutoring</li> <li>• flexible and individualized approach to ensure student is prepared and able to access learning at home and at school</li> </ul>
<p><b>Physical:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• mental health concerns</li> <li>• anxiety</li> <li>• depression</li> <li>• phobias</li> </ul> <p><b>Example:</b> An example of physical development influencing school refusal behavior would be when a student does not want to attend school because they are struggling with anxiety or depression.</p>	<p><b>Referrals:</b>  School Counselor &amp; School Psychologist  Individual Counseling &amp; Group Counseling  Administration of Tests &amp; Assessments</p> <p><b>Goals of Referrals:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• developing feelings of safety, security and sense of belonging</li> <li>• increased confidence, self-esteem and value of self</li> <li>• aspiration and motivation to attend school and achieve</li> </ul>