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Reconnecting with school- strategies for attendance & school refusal

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After the past few years, it is hardly surprising that some students are struggling to regain their regular rhythm of being at school. In many areas, attendance is less than we would like & school refusal has risen.

Parents with children who are reluctant to attend school often feel under pressure to toughen up, increase consequences & generally do the things that usually worsen rather than improve the situation.

Solving this requires a team effort.

Low school attendance & school refusal are not a product of poor parenting. In fact, most parents have undertaken heroic battles in an attempt to have their child return to school.

Nor is it the result of uncaring teachers or 'bad' schools. Let's not fall into the trap of allocating blame & instead start implementing what works to help students believe they can be safe & successful & attend school.

Fear

Most young people I have seen who experience difficulties attending school are terrified. While their levels of adrenaline & cortisol are dramatically raised, their most common feeling is fear. They are not faking this. They are scared.

Creating change requires shifting the balance of neurochemicals in people which enables their behavioural repertoire to broaden & once they are able to act differently, they begin to think in new ways.

This is why effective change begins with safety & trust rather than with attitude change.

Trying to convince or persuade them back to school does not work. Implementing consequences or predicting dire outcomes won't make a difference. Seeing the value of school won't cut it. Pointing out that if they don't go to school, they won't pass & they won't get a job etc. etc. never works. It just increases their levels of shame & fear.

The most powerful person in any system is the one with the most options. Students with low attendance & school refusal have one option- *avoid school at all costs*. To be effective, we need more options, solutions, & more patience.

The 4 levels of school re-engagement – an overview

The 4 levels are briefly outlined & are always tailored to meet the circumstances of specific schools, students, & their families. The 4 levels won't always occur in this exact order, but they are common features of school reconnection.

Rebuilding Trust with the School

After extended absences, someone needs to become the bridge between school & home. This builds oxytocin & vasopressin.

Having someone consistent from the school visit the family home or phone regularly, builds a link. The goal is not to have someone else cajole the student into attending but to gain trust & connection. This can take time.

Parents need to be supported & included as part of the reconnection team. The student needs to be heard & feel understood. Home visits & contacts do not have to be lengthy, but they do need to be consistent.

The antidotes to fear are safety & trust. Trust develops at the rate of one relationship at a time. Effective intervention requires the same person connecting with the student & their family on an ongoing basis.

Parents can help by becoming boring & meddlesome to be around. The time for convincing is over. If the young person is staying at home, they can be asked to assist with chores, shopping & helping around the house. Even if the young person declines their parent's kind invitations, the requests should continue. The message we want from both the school & at home is that we care, & we know the young person's contribution is important.

If the young person is an enthusiastic gamer, parents should ask to be taught how to play a game or at least interrupt playing to inquire about progress in the game. Often!

If the young person is staying up all night playing games, the internet should be disconnected by 10 pm. If they claim they need a phone to wake up on time, provide them with a clock or a phone (just not their own).

The aim is not to ignite a battle at home. The aim is to make staying at home as boring as possible. It is hard to be fearful & bored at the same time.

Connect to School

Eventually the young person may decide that attending school is preferable to another day of being interrupted by 'boring' parents.

On arrival at school, they should be greeted by the one of the staff members who has had contact with them. Several options might be offered to the young person: 1) talk; 2) walk; 3) go to a classroom; or 4) join a group of other students in a designated transition space to help with reconnection to school.

Any time at school is better than no time. Half days, specific lessons- take whatever the student feels able to try. Students should always feel able to return to a one-on-one discussion or to go home if they feel the need to do so. The long-term success of these strategies relies on lowering fear & increasing trust.

Parents can help by treating return attempts in as matter-of-fact manner as possible. There should be no celebration or high drama at home. No bribery or rewards for getting back to school for a day. Being meddlesome & boring wins the day.

Reconnect to Learning

Re-engaging in school is like recapturing a rhythm of life. There will be fits & starts, setbacks & surges. It will take time.

Explain to parents that if they are to have any chance of their child supporting them in their more senior years, we need to try our best to solve this.

Start by finding out what the young person loves doing or is interested in & linking learning at school to that area.

Parents can help by completing the analysis of their young person's learning strengths at www.mylearningstrengths.com & using the results to connect existing strengths with other areas of learning & potential future career areas.

Reconnect to classroom.

Essentially poor attendance & school refusal are usually a fear of getting through the door. The hardest door to get through is the entrance to a classroom full of friends & maybe a few enemies who know you have been away.

This can feel like entering into a warzone for some young people. If we had to go into a warzone most of us would want some allies.

Most students feel a sense of shame or failure over being so scared they have been absent from school & potentially are behind in their learning. High levels of cortisol reduce their ability to articulate the reasons behind their fears.

They will only begin to feel safe in the presence of someone who keeps them safe & looks out for them, who senses if they are becoming overwhelmed & encourages them to implement an escape plan if need be.

Students may begin with classes where they have some close friends or ask a friend to accompany them to class.

Fear takes time to lessen. Students need to experience success early in their return to the classroom. If they receive (or even perceive) an early setback, you won't see them again.

Generally, people experience less fear when they have a sense of predictability, choice, & control. Certainty empowers fearful people.

As much as possible, teachers should inform them ahead of time about seating arrangements & topics that will be covered. Outline with them, a pathway to learn any information they have missed in small, achievable steps.

Elsewhere I have written about the three essential ingredients of a successful school & classroom- connect, protect & respect **(CPR)**.

Some students respond well to be asked by their teacher to do a specific task as they arrive. This combats some of the hyper-vigilance around what the other students might be thinking.

The pay-off of getting this right is nothing less than a full education & all of the advantages that brings. Take your time, be patient & know that safety & connection are your most powerful allies in improving attendance & treating school refusal.

I want to acknowledge the inspirational work of Mairissa Kourtis and express my gratitude for her contributions to our knowledge in this area.

More information

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Andrew's website

www.mylearningstrengths.com has helped over 45,000 young people in the past year discover their learning strengths.

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Learning Strengths

Books for Parents

Unlocking Your Child's Genius

Tricky Behaviours

The A to Z of Feelings (Bad Apple Press)

Book for Teachers

Neurodevelopmental Differentiation- Optimising Brain Systems To Maximise Learning (Hawker-Brownlow).

