**Using the System of Care Approach to Distinguish School Refusal from School Truancy**

Connie Chang, MD¹ and Aneela Khan MD²

¹ Sydney Kimmel Medical College, Thomas Jefferson University, ²Drexel University College of Medicine

---

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

To recognize the importance of taking a system of care approach to determine whether the symptoms of school avoidance are due to mental illness.

**CASE PRESENTATION**

This is a 12-year-old Caucasian girl, currently in the 7th grade, who presented to the outpatient clinic with her father for missing five days of school due to anxiety. She was on the Honor Roll and was accepted by her peers. She shared that she started having panic attacks in the 4th grade when her father underwent open heart surgery. She was previously evaluated last year for missing 30 days of school consecutively. Consequently, she initiated therapy and fluoxetine.

Her history was also significant for: a) Her brother missed 2 years of school 2 years ago; and b) her BMI was above 30 (obese). She wanted to lose weight. Additionally, she was sensitive to her dad’s joking/criticism about her weight.

To address the dysfunctional family dynamics.

---

**DIFFERENTIALS OF SCHOOL AVOIDANCE**

**SCHOOL REFUSAL**
- Child spend most time at home
- Child reports anxiety, shaking, shivering, dizziness, tachycardia, nausea, stomach pain, vomiting, hyperventilation especially in the AM before school

**SCHOOL PHOBIAS**
- Fear of exams
- School anxiety
- Bullying

**TRUANCY**
- Parents are not aware that child spend most of the time away from family, home, plays truant with others
- Child is oppositional, lies, delinquent, have aggressive behaviors, impulsive behaviors, hyperkinetic symptoms

**MIXED SYMPTOMS**
- Absence: occasionally, parents are aware, occasionally they are not
- Symptoms: externalizing and internalizing symptoms

---

**ASSESSMENT AND PLAN**

We applied a system of care approach to assess the etiology of the child. A typical panic attack lasts approximately 30 minutes, but the patient’s panic attacks were unusual in that it would last for several hours which caused the nurse to believe that she was feigning her symptoms to avoid class. The provider contacted teachers in order get a clearer picture of her panic attacks. One teacher observed that excessive noise would be a trigger for her and that she does seem to be emotionally upset when her panic attacks occur. Working with the counselor, we were able to successfully maintain her presence in the classroom until she was admitted to a PHP. Although the patient ultimately missed 30 days of school due to anxiety, we were able to get multiple disciplines to work together to help the child to successfully complete 7th grade and avoid truancy court.

**DISCUSSION**

Using the system of care approach we found that one of the difficulties was getting her mother involved. Her mother enabled her avoidance behavior by allowing her to play XBOX games, such as Fortnite, play on the computer, and watch television. Additionally, it was also difficult to get the entire family to come to family therapy sessions. Although we were successfully able to help the patient past 7th grade, it was imperative that the family get family-based services on board to address the dysfunctional family dynamics.

---

**RESOURCES**


---

*Sponsored by the Regional Council Of Eastern Pennsylvania and Southern New Jersey Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*