



"We know what we need". The importance of relationships for school-refusing youth.

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The number of young people disengaging from education is a growing concern, and presents a critical public health problem for educators, health and mental health professionals. One type of school non-attendance is school refusal. School refusal is a reluctance and often outright refusal to go to school and can be linked to staying close to parental figures as well as displaying emotional upset and/or somatic complaints when faced with attending school.

Most intervention research for school refusal focuses on work done by clinicians and educators with little research undertaken probing the perspectives of young people which is a significant gap in our understanding of this issue. To this end a survey was developed to explore the school refusal experiences of young people linked to hospital schools.

This study included 18 young people who were identified as school refusing and attending outpatient education programs for students who had diagnosed mental health disorders. Half of the cohort also had a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder. They were aged between 11 and 14 years ($M=13.05$, $SD=1.02$) and all lived in Victoria, Australia. Seventeen of the young people were enrolled in Government schools and one was enrolled in an Independent school. All year levels from five to year nine were represented in the cohort. At the time of completing the survey, six were attending school between one and three days per week and 12 were not attending school at all. The participants had been having trouble attending school for three months to over two years ($M=12.08$ months, $SD=8.24$ months).

Results showed that all young people had warning signs for school refusal before disengagement occurred. Barriers to attending school focused on social connections including friendship difficulties and bullying, mental health needs, school organisation and school work/homework. Facilitators to returning to school included a safe school environment, having friends, a graduated return to school, teachers who understand school refusal and flexibility in how learning takes place.

The results from this study suggest that positive relationships within a safe school community support students to re-engage with schooling. Using social skills supports and social emotional learning programs may be beneficial as part of return to school interventions.