



Submission

The national trend of school refusal and related matters

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The Therapy Place is a specialist paediatric occupational therapy, speech therapy and dietetics practice that helps children 0 – 18 years who are struggling with everyday life skills and communication. We are a large practice located in Vermont, Melbourne. We employ 16 therapists and complete over 200 sessions per week. Our client base is made up of those diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, ADHD, Anxiety, Down syndrome, learning difficulties and other diagnosis. Over 80% of our clients are diagnosed with ASD.

Over the past 2 years, we have assisted, and continue to assist, those children struggling with returning to school post COVID. We have been able to support some children to return to full time schooling, some to move to home schooling, some a combination of school/home and continue to work with others who are continuing to struggle to find their place within the Victorian education system.

a. the increasing number since the COVID-19 pandemic, of young people and their families who are experiencing school refusal;

While there are an increasing number of children experiencing school refusal post COVID. Over the 5 years proceeding COVID, we also noted a gradual increase in children on the ASD spectrum experiencing school refusal.

Primary school: In recent years, the adaption of shared class space has increased the noise, and sensory overload within the classroom. Children and teaching staff move around between learning spaces and groups creating a greater number of transitions for children on the ASD spectrum who dislike change. This has the most impact on those children with a diagnosis of ASD, ADHD or learning difficulties, generally affecting 3-4 students per class.

The sensitivity to the increased noise and visual input, has increased post-COVID, with children who have been in the 'quiet' at home, struggling to return to constant classroom noise for over 6.5 hours each day.

During home learning, this cohort of children struggled to maintain attention most often refusing or completing only part of the online learning requirements per day. They are academically behind their peers, at a greater level than pre-COVID.



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Being in a classroom for 5 hours per day when not understanding the tasks or being able to complete work at the same level of peers, affects self-confidence and increases anxiety. Many children within this cohort also have poor social skills. They lack meaningful friendships making them feel isolated from peers.

In general teaching staff have had limited training around how sensory processing difficulties, anxiety and learning challenges impact emotionally on children. They continue to include the children in activities, modify tasks and support children to the level that they have been instructed. However, for many children, these techniques are not helpful and work to increase, rather than decrease their anxiety.

The combination of increased sensitivity to their environment, inability to meet learning expectations and feeling socially isolated causes children to withdraw from the environment that is causing them distress. For some children, this results in a refusal to attend school or engage in learning within the school environment (shutdown). For others, is displayed by adverse behaviours.

Failure to address the deeper issues often leads to the increasing violent or anxiety induced behaviours that are becoming more apparent in Victorian classrooms.

Secondary School: Many of these same issues are relevant to older children attending secondary school. These children are also academically behind their peers and unable to establish meaningful friendships. Within the learning environment there is added pressure to take responsibility for their own learning. Most children who experience school refusal in later school years struggle with 'executive functioning'. This is the set of mental skills/organizational abilities that allow students to manage time, organise homework, remember details and find the things they need for each class. Without these skills, students have no idea where they are supposed to be, are perpetually late and unprepared for class with homework often not done.

Teachers, however well intentioned, continually ask for work that is not completed. They assign tasks that, due to their learning difficulties, they are unable to process or complete, both within the class environment and for homework. As this is repeated 5 or 6 times per day (depending on the number of subjects in each school per day), the child quickly feels singled out, behind peers academically, socially inept with limited friendship groups (are often bullied as a result) and quickly reach emotional saturation, shutting down and withdrawing from the environment which is causing them emotional harm.

In most cases, the emotional stress is so high that children will begin to try to dull the feelings or stress by withdrawing into the internet and social media world where they are not required to interact in a real social environment, avoiding the anxiety that social interaction with actual peers makes them feel. In some instances, the pressure and stress, from both school and the home environment, or the opinions of those interacted with on social media, becomes so severe that the child may try to take their own life.



b. how school refusal is affecting young people and their families and the impacts it is having on the employment and financial security of parents and carers;

Parents struggle to balance paid employment with their child's need to be home. The general reaction of families is to have the child home for some of the time and to get them back to school as soon as possible, or continue to have them engage at school in some capacity.

However, the child often cannot cope with this as they have reached emotional saturation. They will often attempt to go to school, as this is the expectation of the adult they love and want to please, however cannot emotionally cope as relevant changes have not been implemented and then need to come home again. This creates an issue for the parent, never knowing when they can and cannot work. It impacts the stability of their employment and, if it continues for a long enough time, may result in a termination of employment, either voluntarily because it is too difficult to juggle or involuntary as the company cannot continue to have them missing work or underperforming due to the home environment.

The stress on the families is phenomenal, both emotionally, physically (stress responses) and financially.

c. the impacts and demands of the increasing case load on service providers and schools to support these students and their families;

Schools and support staff within schools want to help the child and do what they can to facilitate change and modify tasks and expectations. Initially the child will often need 1:1 assistance to cope in the school environment when returning to school however due to funding and staffing, it is mostly impossible for the school to provide this level of assistance.

Education staff are not trained however they usually seek for additional outside help from the Education Department psychology team or the child's own therapy team. Individual learning plan (ILP) meetings are usually held and suggestions are made. The ability of schools to implement these suggestions vary. This can be due to the school leadership, inadequate amounts of trained staff or lack of funding. Schools that are able and willing to implement the strategies, (which can require rearrangement of staffing, classrooms and funding) generally see an improvement in the situation and have a higher percentage of success in having the child return to school.

The school's ability to implement recommendations can be impacted by the child's behaviour. If the child is considered 'a risk' then this generally requires a higher ratio of staff when the child returns to school therefore, despite being willing, the school often does not have the staffing capacity to have the child there for more than a few set hours per day.

d. Suggestions for improvement:

Short term plan

1. Have a set protocol for both primary and secondary schools to follow as soon as they identify a child with school refusal/school withdrawal. The earlier this is noted the more successful the child will be in returning to school full time.



2. As it is not practical or fast enough to complete training for all school staff in Victoria, a specialist 'school refusal/school disengagement' division of the Department of Education should be established to assist schools to manage students with these concerns. This needs to be staffed by educational psychologists, psychologists and paediatric occupational therapists and should be the first point of contact for all schools.
3. A member of the 'school refusal/school disengagement team' should be assigned as the 'case manager' and contact the family, either online or via phone, to complete an interview to determine the reasons for disengagement and to establish what has been tried to help both the family and the child.
4. The case manager from the 'school refusal/school disengagement team' should contact the therapists engaged with the child, either online or via phone, to complete an interview to determine the reasons for disengagement from the treating therapists perspective and to involve a therapist known to the child in the process, to enable effective follow-up from established therapy team for ongoing support of both the school and the child/family.
5. The case manager from the 'school refusal/school disengagement team' should then meet with the child and family together, to begin to make a plan. This plan should be different for each child and be child driven. In some cases goals and plans will be made to strategically help the child return to school. In other cases, the plan may be a period of time needed for the child to work through the emotional trauma of the experience and the case officer may need to set a review appointment.
6. Following this, a plan should be presented to the school and worked through with them to make sure that it is feasible for the school to put into place. Additional, short-term, funding may be required by the Department of Education, as a 'return to school supplementary payment for child' to enable the school to adhere to the advised plan should they require extra support staff.
7. The plan should be followed as outlined, with the 'school refusal/school disengagement team' monitoring the implementation of the plan. Reviews should be set at regular intervals to review progress or adjust the plan or funding as required.

Long term plan

- School refusal/school disengagement team to write and implement an online training program for both Primary and Secondary schools on the following topics:
 - Autism and classroom learning
 - School refusal/disengagement

These online courses should be required to be completed every 12 months by school leadership and support staff, with a competition certificate provided that contributes to PD and development points.

- Two staff members at each school should be required to engage in additional specific emotional and behavioural training.



These recommendations should address the immediate and ongoing concerns and although are a small part of the bigger issues affecting education in Victoria.

Thank you for allowing us to prepare a submission and we hope our input and experience in this area will help the children and families but also provide a way to better help schools and provide a structured program of support.