

Clinical Toolkit

Clinical Tips: Avoidance and Bullying

If a young person is experiencing school avoidance or refusal, they should be referred to a clinician for further assessment and support promptly. School refusal and avoidance can happen for many reasons so it is important to assess maintaining factors rather than assuming bullying is the cause. When a young person presents with problems related to bullying and/or school avoidance/refusal, ideally family members and the school should be involved in both assessment and intervention

Anxiety and avoidance

When a young person presents with anxiety, asking about avoidance is very important as it can prolong and reinforce the experience of anxiety. Assessing avoidance behaviour is also important in assessing functional impairment at home, school and with peers and other relationships. This may include assessing number of missed days, decline in school grades, reduced contact with peers and reduced activities of usual interest.

Safety

When a young person presents with significant avoidance behaviour, it is important to understand what is happening for them, and if the young person is feeling unsafe (e.g. due to bullying, threats or experiences of violence) prior to attempting to reduce avoidance.

If there are safety concerns, the focus should be on understanding and addressing them, considering any immediate actions that may need to be taken (e.g.

mandatory reporting) and who needs to be involved (e.g. parents, school staff). Once safety issues have been addressed, the treating clinician should work with the young person to reduce avoidance behaviours.

Addressing bullying

The clinician should ascertain the type of bullying, i.e., physical, verbal, psychological (social exclusion, rumours, putdowns), sexual (which can be physical or verbal) or cyber, and determine if mandatory reporting is necessary. It is also important to understand who else knows about the bullying (e.g. family, friends, school staff), what as their response, and did the young person find it helpful?

Working collaboratively with the young person's school and family and friends is important in addressing bullying and school refusal/avoidance issues.

Strategies for supporting young people that have been victims of bullying:

- Reassure the young person that they've done the right thing by telling someone
- Recognise that the bullying must have been difficult to deal with
- Reiterate that no one has a right to bully them
- Encourage the young person to disclose the bullying to their parents
- For victims of cyberbullying, offer advice on online empowerment. Suggest that they do not respond to messages. If there is a need to respond, it should be done in an assertive manner, with support
- Encourage the parents of both bullies and victims to contact the school regarding support and additional counselling
- Let the young person know that keeping evidence of bullying is important and can be passed to parents, carers, the school or the police if necessary
- You can refer the young person and/or their parent or carer to helpful online resources – e.g., headspace (information for young people and for family and friends), [ehespace](#) (for both [family](#) and friends and young people to get support), [Reachout](#) and [The Alannah And Madeline Foundation](#)