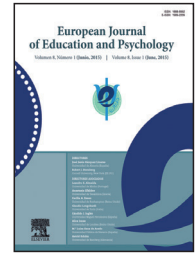


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Current status of research on school refusal



Cándido J. Inglés^a, Carolina González-Maciá^b, José M. García-Fernández^b,
María Vicent^b, M. Carmen Martínez-Monteagudo^b

^a Área de Psicología Evolutiva y de la Educación, Departamento de Psicología de la Salud,
Universidad Miguel Hernández de Elche, España

^b Área de Psicología Evolutiva y de la Educación, Departamento de Psicología Evolutiva y Didáctica,
Universidad de Alicante, España

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Abstract School refusal behavior refers to the avoidance of a child attending school and/or persistent difficulty staying in the classroom throughout the school day. Based on a review of the scientific literature, the aim of this study is to describe the current state of research on school refusal, differentiating between the findings and progress made in Spain from those achieved in the international field. For this purpose, the significance of this phenomenon, in addition to associated risk factors and variables, will be reviewed in the child and youth population. In turn, the commonly used assessment methods and most recommended treatment proposals, mainly based on cognitive behavioral therapy, are discussed. The results reveal several gaps and subjects for debate in some areas of knowledge about school refusal behavior, with differences being found between Spanish and international studies. In conclusion, future studies and challenges in this field are required.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Rechazo escolar;
Fobia escolar;
Absentismo;
Evaluación;
Tratamiento

Estado actual de la investigación sobre rechazo escolar

Resumen El comportamiento de rechazo a la escuela se refiere a la negativa de un niño a asistir al centro educativo y/o la dificultad persistente para permanecer en el aula durante toda la jornada escolar. A partir de la revisión de la literatura científica, es objeto de este trabajo describir el estado actual de la investigación sobre el rechazo escolar, diferenciando los hallazgos y avances alcanzados en España de aquellos conseguidos en el ámbito internacional. Para ello, se revisará la trascendencia de este fenómeno en población infanto-juvenil y los factores de riesgo y variables asociadas. A su vez, se discutirán los métodos de evaluación generalmente utilizados y las propuestas de tratamiento más recomendadas, basadas, principalmente, en la terapia cognitivo-conductual. Los resultados obtenidos revelan diversas lagunas y

*Corresponding author.

E-mail address: cjingles@umh.es (C.J. Inglés).

debates en algunos campos de conocimiento sobre el rechazo escolar, con diferencias en la investigación española respecto a la internacional. A modo de conclusión, se proponen futuras líneas de investigación y desafíos en este campo.

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School refusal behavior: conceptual approach

School refusal behavior refers to the child's refusal to go to school and/or persistent difficulty to remain in class for the entire school day (Kearney & Silverman, 1999), which manifests in children and adolescents from 5 to 17 years of age (Kearney, Cook, & Chapman, 2007). Therefore, school refusal covers all the cases of children who refuse to attend school. Nevertheless, at this point, authors' discrepancies emerge. On the one hand, Heyne, King, Tonge, and Cooper (2001) propose differentiating children who leave school with paternal consent and with emotional or anxious manifestations from those who "play hooky," also known as truancy. On the other hand, this differentiation does not satisfy all the researchers, so outstanding specialists in this field of study propose the construct of the behavior of school refusal to include all the cases of school absenteeism within this category (Kearney, 2007, 2008).

Given this controversy in the use of terms, concepts such as school phobia, school anxiety, or absenteeism have been used as synonyms, favoring the emergence of discussions on the conceptual delimitation of this phenomenon (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014). However, the term *school refusal* is recommended, as it takes into consideration the causal heterogeneity of the problem and is a broader and more inclusive concept, as noted by National Association of School Psychologists (NASP; Bragado, 2006; Brand & O'Conner, 2004; Kearney, 2007). In the same vein, the construct school refusal has shown its relevance in this research field during the past few years, because when performing a bibliographic search of international databases such as PsycINFO, ERIC or the *Web of Science*, we found that, during the 2010-2014 period, the number of works located with the term school refusal is twice as high as the results compared to the search strategy *school phobia*. Thus, currently, according to the NASP, the concept of school phobia has been relegated by that of school refusal.

With regard to the nosological entity of school refusal, it is noted that it is not classified as an independent diagnostic category in the international systems classification, either in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-V) of the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2013) or the tenth review of the *International Classification of Mental and Behavioral Disorders* (ICD-10) of the World Health Organization (WHO, 1992). Nevertheless, school refusal may be linked to diverse mental health disorders, such as: (a) separation anxiety disorder (SAD), (b) generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), (c) oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), (d) schooling-related events (being the target of ridicule, being criticized in class in front of classmates, being sent to the director, taking exams), or (e) depression (Kearney & Albano, 2004).

One of the features of school refusal is the heterogeneity of the affected population, both at a causal level, that is,

the reasons for their behavior, and the response behavior. Therefore, it is difficult for researchers to establish a single model of classification to determine whether a child suffers from school refusal. In turn, the DSM-V (APA, 2013) does not distinguish between the different subtypes of school refusal, making the categorization of this phenomenon even more difficult. However, over time, diverse systems have been formulated, among which is the functional model, which is the most consolidated in the study of school refusal behavior.

From this functional model, we intend to answer the question: *Why does my child not want to go to school?* This model focuses on examining the reasons of youths who suffer school refusal for not wanting to attend school. The instrument *School Refusal Assessment Scale-Revised* (SRAS-R; Kearney, 2002a) assesses school refusal behavior based on the functional model. According to this approach, there are four main reasons that justify the behavior of school refusal (Kearney & Spear, 2014):

- Avoiding the negative affect provoked by the stimuli of situations related to the school setting (e.g., "How often do you try to avoid going to school because if you go, you feel sad or depressed?" or "How often do you have negative feelings towards school (e.g., scared, nervous or sad) when you think about school on Saturday or Sunday?").
- Escaping from social aversion or evaluation situations (e.g., "If it were easier for you to make new friends, would it be easier for you to go to school?" or "How often do you avoid other people at school, in comparison with other boys/girls of your age?").
- Seeking significant others' attention (e.g., "How often would you prefer your parents to teach you at home instead of your teacher at school?" or "Would it be easier for you to go to school if your parents went with you?").
- Seeking tangible reinforcements outside of the school setting (e.g., "How often do you refuse to go to school because you want to have fun out of school?" or "Do you prefer to do things out of school more than most boys/girls of your age?").

According to Kearney and Spear (2012), the first two functions are characterized by negative reinforcement because the behavior is reinforced by the avoidance of unpleasant situations (e.g., anxiety and/or school phobia), whereas the last two functions are positively reinforced, as behavior outside of the school setting is reinforced by attention or rewards (e.g., absenteeism).

With this work, we intend to provide an exhaustive review of the current state of school refusal research. To this end, a distinction is made between the scientific advances developed both at national and international levels to date, concluding with the proposal of new challenges and emerging lines of research in the field of school refusal.

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